# Positive reinforcement

> "The most powerful tool for changing behaviour will come from increasing positive interactions for appropriate behaviour."
>
> – Randall Sprick, *Discipline in the Secondary Classroom*

Reinforcement is a positive or negative consequence of behaviour. When used effectively, reinforcement makes behaviour more appropriate—negative behaviour is reduced or eliminated, and positive behaviour increases and is maintained.

For every correction students receive for doing something wrong, they should receive at least four positive messages about what they are doing right. Positive feelings contribute to an individual's willingness to change his or her behaviour.

Some school staff do this naturally, but others may need to take a systematic approach to increasing their positive reinforcement of students. Formal systems such as monthly recognition awards or positive office referrals are just as much about changing staff behaviour as they are about changing student behaviour.

## A school-wide approach

An effective school-wide approach to positive behaviour support uses increased opportunities for positive reinforcement to encourage students to behave in positive ways. The biggest factor in the success of a positive reinforcement system is consistency among the adults in the school.

The more attention many adults pay to a certain kind of behaviour (whether positive or negative), the more that behaviour is likely to increase. For example, if students are misbehaving and teachers constantly reprimand them, they may actually engage in even more negative behaviour. Noticing and reinforcing students who are behaving safely, responsibly and respectfully increases the frequency of desirable behaviours.

To make a reinforcement system effective, implement it across the entire school community and provide all students with access to positive feedback, especially students who have behaviour disabilities.

Effective school-wide reinforcement systems:

- include all students

- use recognition and rewards that students want and value

- use public recognition to highlight role models for other students

- recognize school staff, including lunchroom supervisors and bus drivers, volunteers and community partners

- increase reinforcement before and during the times that are most difficult for students (e.g., just before holidays, after a traumatic community event).

Positive reinforcement can take many forms. It can be:

- verbal (e.g., statements, descriptive feedback)

- nonverbal (e.g., smile, thumbs up)

- privileges (e.g., seating choice, free time, additional recess time, first in line for school lunch)

- rewards (e.g., stickers or other tangibles)

- incentives (e.g., tokens, tickets for a draw)

- individual preferred activities (e.g., computer use, time in a special area or doing a preferred job).

To determine whether a consequence is positive, observe whether the desired behaviour is maintained or increases. This is the only way to tell.

Something that reinforces the behaviour of one student or group of students may have a neutral or negative effect on others. Always consider the developmental level and personal preferences of the individual student or group of students.

## Identifying meaningful reinforcements

Reinforcement can only be measured in terms of changes in behaviour. If students are not excited or fail to respond to a reward, it is not providing true reinforcement and it is likely time to choose a different one. Varying the reinforcements also increases their value.

Many schools hand out "gotcha" slips to students and teachers who are caught demonstrating positive behaviour. Especially during the early stages of implementation, these "gotcha" moments help to create a visible record of the behavioural expectation and provide a model for other students. When the visible effects of positive behaviour become more apparent, these kinds of tangible reinforcements can be phased out.

Tangible reinforcement systems are designed to not only change student behaviour but also provide opportunities to influence and change adult behaviour. When they have a certain number of rewards to deliver each day, adults have increased opportunities to (and a context for) increasing their positive interactions with students. They begin providing specific verbal praise for positive behaviour more often.

Another kind of reinforcement is an activity or privilege; for example, giving students extra free time or more time for a favourite activity. School-wide privileges might include earning extra minutes of recess.

Authentic social praise is an effective natural reinforcer that helps to increase positive behaviour and minimize inappropriate behaviour. For example, adults might nod, smile, laugh, high-five or shake hands; engage in casual conversation; and/or offer assistance.

All reinforcers should include clear descriptions of the behaviour being reinforced. For example, "You finished all your work on time."

*Tool 3: Positive Behaviour Referral Form* in Appendix A is a sample template for acknowledging positive behaviour.

## Considering the potential of public recognition

Research has shown that public and authentic delivery of positive reinforcement has a powerful modelling effect. When students see their peers being recognized for positive behaviour, they are motivated to display the same behaviour. As students get older, however, public recognition may not work for some students who prefer private feedback.

## Involving parents

Many students are powerfully reinforced by positive communication with parents. Look for opportunities to share good news with parents about how their children are demonstrating positive behaviour at school. The most effective positive communication strategies are preplanned and applied systematically and consistently across the school community.

A number of schools set targets, asking school staff to make a specific number of positive parent contacts per week or month—by phone, by e-mail, in writing or face to face. Staff are encouraged to record and track their contacts and tell their colleagues about the strategies they use and responses they receive.

Students should be aware of staff contacts with their parents. Or, if possible, have them present and participating when the contacts are made. Students should be able to state why teachers have called home.

Just as students have individual feedback preferences, parents also have varying comfort levels regarding contact with school staff.

## Increasing reinforcement before difficult times

During certain times of the year, for example, just before holidays, students are more likely to be stressed or engage in problem behaviour. To prevent problems during these times, schools can increase the amount of supervision and positive reinforcement, and revisit skills and expectations with "booster lessons." This is a form of precorrection.

## Reinforcing adults

School staff can benefit from reinforcement of their efforts to improve relationships and build a positive school culture. As well, students often enjoy having their teacher win public recognition. The core team and school administrator can look for systemic and meaningful ways to let school staff know that their individual actions and commitment are contributing to positive behaviour in the school.

We took the 4:1 ratio of four positive statements for every one negative statement quite literally. We had green and red cards printed, with 16 green cards and four red ones in each packet.

The green cards were reinforcement for positive student behaviour. When staff members saw a student doing something positive, they gave the student a green card and commented on the behaviour. All of the green cards were put up on a bulletin board called "Doing good." After one month, students could take the cards home to share with their parents.

The red cards were given to students when they demonstrated an inappropriate behaviour. Information about this red card incident was entered into a spreadsheet, which could be sorted by a number of fields. Each month the data was brought back to staff to look at the types of incidents and the number of students involved.

Using the green cards helped staff increase the amount of reinforcement they gave for positive behaviour. The red cards, combined with the spreadsheet, allowed us to more accurately target specific behaviours that needed improvement as well as specific students. For example, the first month of data showed that many students were coming in late from recess. We reduced the problem by asking teachers to walk out to areas where students were most likely to linger and walk back to the school with them.

– Principal, rural junior high school

## Addressing concerns about rewards

Many educators are concerned about methods of positive reinforcement and potential unintended consequences. Consider how your school can address the following concerns about positive reinforcement.

### What you always wanted to know about praise and rewards[7]

1. *Shouldn't students of this age already know what is expected of them and how to behave?*
   Not necessarily. Behavioural expectations vary widely from one family, community or situation to another. So some students may arrive at school without a clear understanding of appropriate behaviour at school. Peers and the media send conflicting messages about behaviour (for example, in music videos and TV shows). As a result, some students are genuinely confused about what positive behaviour in a school setting really is.

2. *Praising feels unnatural. Won't students think it is phony?*
   The more a teacher practises giving praise, the more natural it will feel. Praise given for positive behaviour is not phony. Students who receive praise will tend to praise others too, so praise won't seem phony to them.

3. *Isn't praise manipulative and coercive?*
   The purpose of praise is to reinforce and increase positive behaviour. This is done with the student's knowledge. Praise helps to clearly describe expectations so that students can successfully meet them. Helping children succeed is a positive thing to do.

   Behaviour that is acknowledged is more likely to occur again. Don't take any positive behaviour for granted or it may decline, regardless of the student's age.

4. *Isn't giving a reward like bribing students to do what you want?*
   A bribe is often delivered before a behaviour occurs to coerce someone to do something hurtful, immoral or illegal. Positive reinforcement is given after a behaviour occurs.

5. *Won't students come to depend on tangible rewards? Don't extrinsic rewards decrease intrinsic motivation?*
   To strengthen internal motivation, accompany tangible rewards with social reinforcement. As positive behaviour becomes more entrenched, you can gradually phase out extrinsic rewards.

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7. Adapted with permission from Sopris West Educational Services. *Best Behavior: Building Positive Behavior Support in Schools* by Jeff Sprague © 2005, p. 62. Adapted by J. C. Rusby from Carolyn Webster-Stratton and Martin Herbert, *Troubled Families—Problem Children* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), pp. 251–261.

6. *Shouldn't rewards be saved for special achievements?*
   Handing out rewards sparingly gives students the message that everyday behaviour and effort doesn't count. Recognize and reward small steps on the way to achievement (for example, completing an assignment).

7. *How can schools afford all these rewards?*
   You can provide inexpensive tangible rewards and then phase them out gradually as students learn the desired behaviour. Use privileges as rewards as well; for example, going to lunch first or getting extra recess time.

8. *Do students in middle school and high school still need rewards?*
   People of all ages, including adults, need recognition, praise and rewards for their efforts. Young people need rewards, particularly during the difficult transition to adolescence.