Using Positive Reinforcement

- **Positive reinforcement should be:**
  - age-appropriate
  - genuine
  - given immediately after the targeted behaviour
  - at the student's level of functioning
  - supported by administration and parents
  - be used systematically

- **Pay attention to student interests.** Ask students, parents, last year's teachers and other staff what might be an effective reinforcement for a particular student. Typical reinforcements may include access to motivating computer activities or working with a special friend.

- **Personalize reinforcement.** Specific reinforcements that work for one student or one group of students may not work for another. Brainstorm ideas with a class or an individual student to see what type of reinforcement would be meaningful to them.

- **Social reinforcements are powerful tools.** A smile, compliment, positive phone call or comment can go a long way towards increasing and/or maintaining positive behaviors.

- **Build anticipation around an expected behaviour and reinforcement.** When students know what reinforcement they can expect when they demonstrate a particular behaviour, the targeted behaviour is likely to occur more quickly and more often.

- **Use natural opportunities to provide positive reinforcement.** Look for opportunities throughout the school day to socially reinforce positive behaviours and to anticipate and proactively handle problems.

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- **Effective reinforcements are delivered continuously at first, and then more intermittently later on.** They can happen on a fixed schedule (e.g., every time a particular behaviour is observed) or on a variable schedule (e.g., every third time the behaviour is observed) or intermittently on a schedule that is unpredictable to the students.

- **Variable intermittent reinforcement helps to sustain positive behaviour over a longer period of time.** When students don't know when they will be reinforced, their expectation levels remain high, thus increasing the chances that the positive behaviour will continue. For example, consider reinforcing students every few days or weeks for completing class assignments by allowing students who are caught up on their work to play a game during class. The timing is decided by you and the students don't know when it will occur.

- **Fade the reinforcement out over time.** Begin combining material rewards or privileges with social reinforcement and eventually replace material rewards with social reinforcement such as praise.

- **Use monitoring systems** to determine the effectiveness of the reinforcement. If the target behaviour increases as a result, then the reinforcement was positive. If not then the reinforcement was not effective.

- **Pay attention to unintended consequences.** For example, if students engage in negative behaviour to get attention and the teacher's response provides that attention, negative behaviour will likely increase.

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