Positive reinforcement

> "The single most dynamic influence on the brain's chemistry may be positive feedback, which is essential for the development of a good self-concept ..."
>
> – Robert Sylwester, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of Oregon

We all need positive reinforcement. Whether or not we are consciously aware of it, reinforcement is the reason we continue to do many things.

Providing students with something they value in order to increase a desired behaviour can be as simple as offering a smile or as complex as setting up a token system. Personal recognition lets students know that teachers are interested in them and how they behave, and are concerned about supporting them in making positive changes in their behaviour and learning. Positive reinforcement also helps to build positive relationships by modelling appropriate ways of interacting with others.

Choose effective reinforcers

Effective positive reinforcement:

- is age-appropriate
- is at the student's level of functioning
- has administrative and parental support
- is genuine.

Even extravagant rewards cannot motivate students to demonstrate skills they have not learned or do not understand.

Positive reinforcement works best when given immediately after the desired behaviour, or as soon as possible. If the desired behaviour increases as a result, then the reinforcement was positive. If not, then reinforcement did not occur. Many teachers set up a monitoring system to measure whether desired behaviours are increasing.

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

Specific reinforcers that work for one student or one group of students may not work for another. Finding appropriate reinforcers requires careful attention and an understanding of individual student needs. Be alert for students' interests. Typical reinforcers include extra recess time, extra computer time, caring for a class pet or using special art supplies. Ask students, parents, last year's teachers and other staff what might be an effective reinforcer for a particular student.

Have students complete a checklist of reinforcers to identify the rewards they would like to earn, or create a reinforcement sampler from which students can choose. A sampler menu containing a variety of reinforcers also keeps students motivated.

Always give the reinforcer after the desired behaviour, never before. If the desired behaviour does not occur and the reinforcer has already been given, the result can be conflict and oppositional behaviour.

Effective reinforcers:

- are provided immediately after the behaviour has occurred

- are provided frequently

- are paired with a clear verbal description of the behaviour

- are delivered with enthusiasm

- are varied enough to maintain interest

- are delivered continuously at first, and then more intermittently later on

- can happen on a fixed schedule; e.g., every time a behaviour is observed, or on a variable schedule; e.g., every third time a behaviour is observed

- fade out over time; that is, begin combining material rewards or privileges with social reinforcement and eventually replace material rewards and privileges with social reinforcement such as praise.

Social reinforcement
A smile, comment and/or compliment can go a long way toward increasing or maintaining positive student behaviour. Many students need significant amounts of social reinforcement and positive attention.

Walking around the classroom gives the teacher opportunities to socially reinforce positive behaviour (and to anticipate and proactively handle problems). Being at the door to greet students as they arrive and spending at least half the class time walking among students as they work is perhaps the easiest and most proactive approach a teacher can take to reinforce positive classroom behaviour.

Tangible reinforcement

Many inexpensive, tangible reinforcers are available, including puzzle books, portable board games, sidewalk chalk, playing cards and squishy balls.

Build anticipation

Many reinforcement strategies build motivation (and possibly excitement) around an expected behaviour. When students know what reinforcement they can expect if they demonstrate a particular behaviour, the desired behaviour is likely to occur more quickly and more often.

Anticipation strategies come before the behaviour occurs and serve to increase or maintain that behaviour.

- Tell students what types of behaviour you are looking for.

- Tell them what will happen if they demonstrate this behaviour.

- When they demonstrate the behaviour, give them immediate positive feedback and the reinforcer.

Develop self-management skills

Once a student is doing a consistently good job of demonstrating appropriate behaviour with teacher support, it is time to develop the student's self-management skills. In this process, the teacher initially provides direction and then gradually turns the lead over to the student.

Explain exactly what behaviour the student will monitor and how progress will be assessed; for example, by counting and recording the incidents of positive behaviour. Students may find examples helpful, and they will likely require some guided practice. One method of monitoring is to have students put a plus mark on a chart each time they demonstrate a desired behaviour. They can start monitoring for short periods such as 15-minute intervals and gradually increase the monitoring time to 30 and then 60 minutes, or to one class period.

Randomly check the student's accuracy and build in rewards for accurate counting and recording. For example, at the outset try giving bonus rewards when the teacher's record matches the student's.

Give students ample opportunities to practise self-management, and continually provide positive, corrective feedback.

Self-reinforcement can also be part of an increasingly independent behaviour support program. For example, after comparing their behaviour results with the teacher's, students could give themselves one extra minute of computer time for each "cooperates with others" behaviour recorded.

Self-management skills make students less dependent on the teacher and better able to actively improve their own performance, both in the classroom and in other parts of their lives.