

## **POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT: OVERVIEW**

### **What is positive reinforcement?**

Positive reinforcement is anything that occurs after a behavior that increases the likelihood that the behavior will reoccur. Many teachers do not believe in positive reinforcement because they do not want to reward students for just doing what is expected. This attitude is unfortunate. Positive reinforcement naturally occurs in everyone's daily lives from infants to the oldest adult. For example, when people obey traffic laws and don't get a ticket, they are rewarded by not having to take the driver's test when their license is due. People go to work every day, show up on time, work hard and are rewarded by a paycheck. A person who is kind to others is rewarded by kindness offered back to them. The list could go on and on. All of these "rewards" increase the chance that people will continue to choose these positive behaviors. That is positive reinforcement.

### **Why is it important to use positive reinforcement in the classroom?**

Techniques based on positive reinforcement are often perceived to threaten individuals' freedom as autonomous human beings (Maag, 2001b). Society expects that all people should be intrinsically motivated to behave. Reinforcement is sometimes viewed as externally applied to an individual and therefore as coercive in nature. Punishment is much more widely accepted although it is also externally applied. Punishment is much more widely used for several reasons. It is quickly and easily administered, terminates behavior quickly (although usually only temporarily), and can be reinforcing to the teacher (e.g. when the problem student is removed) (Maag, 2001b). However, although punishment works for a majority of students, it is ineffective for students with chronic behavioral difficulties. On the other hand, if we can properly match reinforcements to our students, positive reinforcement is much more effective way of improving the overall behavior of all students in the classroom. Educators are urged to use only interventions and techniques that have a research base supporting it. Therefore, teachers should all be using positive reinforcement as it has a solid support in the literature.

### **What characteristics does an effective group positive reinforcement include?**

1) Find what is reinforcing.

The trick to effective positive reinforcement is finding what is truly reinforcing to students. Positive reinforcement is only positive reinforcement if it increases the likelihood that the behavior occurs again. What is reinforcing to one group of students may not be reinforcing to another. Primary aged elementary children are often reinforced by special attention from the adults in their school. With intermediate students, peer attention is usually more positively reinforcing. In junior high and high school, activities involving peers, early outs, no homework, and writing notes are typically reinforcing. Teachers can determine what is positively reinforcing to their students by simply watching what activities students choose when they have free access

to do whatever they want or what they do a lot of. For example, if students talk to their friends or write notes, teachers may choose to let them earn time to do that. Many publications have pre-written reinforcement surveys that students can fill out or teacher's can make up your own. In addition, teachers could ask their students what activities would be reinforcing. Students should always have a bank of reinforcers to choose from as they will often satiate on reinforcers or find different things reinforcing from day to day.

2) Make the reinforcements inexpensive and easy.

Many teachers feel budget constraints and pressure to meet all academic requirements. Reinforcers need to be inexpensive, easily dispensed, and require little time. Reinforcers do not have to be things. Many times access to desired activities such as computer time, free assignment coupons, or chat time with a friend can be very powerful reinforcers.

3) Control access to reinforcers.

Teachers should control the access to all reinforcers. If students have access to them without earning it, they will lose their effectiveness as behavior change agents.

## **References**

Maag, J.W. (2001b). Rewarded by punishment: Reflections on the disuse of positive reinforcement in schools. *Exceptional Children*, 67 (2), 173-86.

## **Additional Recommended Resources**

Utah State Office of Education: Least Restrictive Behavioral Interventions (LRBI ). *Token Economy*. Retrieved from the internet January 3, 2005 at <http://www.usu.edu/teachall/text/behavior/LRBIpdfs/Token.pdf> .

Maag, J.W. (1999) *Behavior Management: From theoretical implications to practical applications*. San Diego: Singular Press.

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Rhode, G., Jensen, W., & Reavis, H.K. (1996). *The tough kid book: Practical classroom management strategies*. Longmont, Colorado: Sopris West.