

Questions and Answers Teachers and Parents Ask About Using Reinforcement

- **Why should I reinforce a child for something he should be doing anyway?**

If the student is not doing what should be done, how then are you going to get the student started? Obviously if the individual is already performing successfully and is finding natural satisfactions, no further rewards are necessary. If not, rewards may be helpful. It seems strange that adults sometimes expect a student to work under conditions that the adult himself would not tolerate. For many students, doing well now for payment in the distant future (e.g. praise from parents on a report card, getting into college, mastering multiplication, etc.) is too far away to be motivating. Developing an ability to delay gratification takes maturity and a positive learning history.

- **I shouldn't have to bribe the student to get him or her to do what should be done!**

There are several points you will need to make:

- a) Webster's Dictionary defines "bribe" as accepting remuneration (a reward or payment) for doing something *illegal*.
 - b) Would you continue teaching or working at your job if they stopped paying for it? What if you were only paid every three years?
 - c) Do you appreciate receiving positive comments, recognition, a "thank-you," etc.?
 - d) Rewards should be viewed as a temporary expedient. As the student starts obtaining natural self-satisfaction, other rewards can be gradually removed as they become unnecessary.
- **"Won't the other students in the class become upset and behave negatively if some students are receiving special reinforcers?" (This is the most common concern expressed by teachers at all grade levels.)**

Because each group is different, there is no single answer or solution to this question. Surprisingly, more often than not, once a special reinforcement program has been designed for a single individual, the whole group improves.

Peers appear relieved at times and often cheer the success of their fellow student. It may be that a student's behavior has been punished so often or reinforced so infrequently that peers are pleased that the individual is now receiving rewards and that the group is becoming more pleasant.

Sometimes classmates or siblings in a family ask, "How come he or she gets special privileges?" There are several ways of dealing with this situation. It can be pointed out that the individual is receiving the reinforcers (special privileges, objects, or activities) for making progress. It is also possible to invite others to design programs for themselves in areas in which they feel they need to improve. That is, they can *not* have special rewards for doing something they already do well, but they *can* have special rewards for higher achievement in something they have not been very successful at doing. The emphasis is placed on *improvement over previous* performance. Students gradually come to understand that the emphasis is *not* on what one individual is doing in comparison with what some other individual is doing. Once the adult's "rule" is understood by the student to be "all persons are entitled to all of our support to help them improve a necessary skill," students redefine what is "fair" from "everyone gets exactly the same" to "everyone is equally entitled to special help." Both teachers and parents with several children can assist this shift by either offering group discussions on the concepts or by conducting personalized conferences with any student who expresses concern.

Sample Teacher/Student Dialogue

"John needs special help staying on task for twenty minutes. You don't have that problem, but I notice you have difficulty maintaining your quality of work (or you talk too much to your neighbor, or you aren't trying your best, and so forth.) If you would like a special program to help you with this, leave me a note anytime and I will schedule a meeting with you, talk to your parents as I did with John, and we can get your individual program going."

Sample Parent/Child Dialogue

"John needs our special help and encouragement to complete his homework efficiently. You don't seem to need as much support as John in that area, Nick. However, I notice you haven't been as conscientious about your chores lately as you have in the past. If you would like to work with me on designing a program for you on this, let's do it. In this family, we all want to be helping each other improve."

Reinforcement Continuum

REINFORCEMENT

INTRINSIC

"How I feel about myself for earning the certificate I am awarded."

Examples: self-praise, self-"satisfaction"

PRAISE

"What my teacher says, what my peers say, when I get a certificate."

Examples: from adults, parents, teachers, staff, peers

SOCIAL STATUS AND RECOGNITION

"I get out of class earlier than my peers to get the certificate; I am recognized as a certificate earner."

Examples: peers or adults

PRIVILEGES

"Whoever has earned a certificate gets first choice of free time activities."

Examples: choice-making, sense of "power"

CONTINGENT ACCESS

"First I earn the certificate, then I can use the new computer program I want."

Examples: Premack Principle: (If-Then, 1st __, then __), activities, free time

CLOSURE

*"The certificate is earned after completing the 10 steps on my chart.
I like finishing the chart."*

Examples: completing a set, finishing a list has compulsive features

TANGIBLES

"I get to choose from the tangible awards box when I get a certificate."

Examples: money, stickers, camera, etc.

PRIMARY — EDIBLES, PHYSIOLOGICAL RESPONSES

"Going on stage to get the certificate is extremely exciting because of the elevator ride to the award room"

Examples: food, natural/synthetic stimulants, repetitive behaviors, massage, pacing, rocking, nail-biting, self-stimulation