

Using Reinforcement Effectively



Make it Powerful

Reinforcement must mean something to the person earning it

- Reinforcement can be very powerful. It increases the likelihood of a behavior happening again.
- Select reinforcers by observing and noting what the student likes and dislikes. Complete a reinforcement assessment or see what the student navigates to naturally.
- Offer 2-5 choices of toys, foods, or activities, etc. and allow the student to make a selection.
- Assess the likes and dislikes of the student frequently, as reinforcers may change over time.
- Ensure the reinforcer is an item the student wants. A powerful reinforcer is one the student is motivated to work for.



Make it Earned

Use reinforcement conditionally—only after a desired behavior occurs

- Identify a specific, desired behavior to reinforce. Choose behaviors that the student can be successful at (skills learned during teaching time, play time, and routines) or the identified replacement behavior.
- Select a desired behavior that cannot occur at the same time as the off-task behavior (competing behavior).
- Do not wait until the behavior starts to occur to take out the reinforcer. Have the reinforcer ready before the behavior occurs.
- Break down more difficult replacement behaviors into smaller steps so the student can be successful gradually. At first, you may expect the student to do only part of the target behavior.
- Reinforce good attempts, even if you had to help the student.



Make it Immediate

Provide reinforcement immediately and with consistency

- Identify how often to provide reinforcement (each step of a routine, after the entire routine, etc.).
- For new behaviors, provide reinforcement each time the student is successful.
- Reinforcement is most effective when offered up front, instead of after the off-task behavior occurs. Use “first, then” language to offer reinforcement for the expected behavior. For example, “First stand up, then cookie.”
- Provide the reinforcer within 3-5 seconds of the desired behavior. The student may not understand the connection if there is too much time between the desired behavior and reinforcement.
- Be prepared by having reinforcers and tokens easily available.



Make it Sustainable

Maintain the reinforcer value and fade reinforcement over time

- Reinforcers given too frequently can lose their reinforcing value. If possible, restrict access to the reinforcer during other times of the day so the student stays motivated to work for the reinforcer.
- Offer choices, even if the student selects the same item.
- Pair reinforcement with specific verbal praise—tell the student what it is they are doing right (e.g. “Good sitting!”).
- Pair reinforcement with a visual cue. Use a visual to show the student what they are working for. If you're using a token board, place a visual of the expected behavior on the board.
- As the student learns new behaviors, gradually raise your expectations. Fade reinforcement over time, but continue to provide social praise!
- **NOTE:** Pair the token with a social reward so that the student connects the token with verbal praise. Gradually fade the token so the student learns that social praise is a positive thing.