

# Prizes, and Stickers, and Praise, Oh My!

## Helping Parents Understand How to Promote Positive Behavior

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When parents bring a child’s behavioral issues to the attention of the practitioner, it is common for the discussion to begin with discipline strategies such as time-out and other consequences. Although guidance on this topic is important, a dialogue about what the parent is doing to reinforce the child’s desirable behaviors may be a more effective place to start with respect to successful behavior management. When a parent can skillfully encourage a child’s positive behaviors, the negative behaviors (and the need for time-outs and lost privileges) can decrease substantially over time. In fact, teaching parents how to use reinforcement is a key initial component in the most successful, empirically-based, parent training programs—including those for defiant children (see Barkley & Benton, 1998; Forehand & Long, 2002; Kazdin, 2005; Shriver & Allen, 2008). In this article we suggest 4 fundamental questions to ask parents to determine not only if they are appropriately reinforcing their child’s desirable behaviors, but to also assess whether negative behaviors are also being inadvertently rewarded<sup>2</sup> and maintained during daily interactions. Table 1 provides a summary of the key issues related to each question.

**Table 1. Key Questions for Successful Reinforcement**

<p><b>Appropriate Behaviors?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desirable to the parent?</li> <li>• Important to social functioning?</li> <li>• In the child’s control?</li> <li>• In the child’s repertoire?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Undesirable Behaviors?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Undesirable to the parent?</li> <li>• Interfere with social functioning?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Appropriate Reinforcers?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meaningful to the child?</li> <li>• Contingent on the behavior?</li> <li>• Reasonable for the behavior?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Optimal Schedule?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early enough to establish connection between behavior and reinforcer?</li> <li>• Often enough to establish behavior?</li> <li>• Consistent enough to maintain behavior?</li> </ul>

### Are You Reinforcing the Appropriate Behaviors?

Most parents would not have a difficult time identifying the positive behaviors they reinforce for their child. They might list behaviors such as listening, sharing, and picking up toys as desirable behaviors reinforced with praise, hugs, high fives, stickers, or privileges. Thus, the simple answer to this question may be, “Of course, I reinforce any behavior I want to see more often!” In reality, there are some desirable behaviors that will not improve simply because the parent offers a reward. Perhaps the most grievous examples we see in our clinic is parents offering to give a constipated child a toy for having a bowel movement in the toilet, or offering a child with nocturnal enuresis a new game for her video system if she can go one month without wetting the bed. Reinforcement can do many things but it cannot cure encopresis or enuresis. When the focus of the reinforcement is changed to cooperating with the steps needed to improve a problem issue, however, it can be a powerful motivator for positive behavior. For example, a child with encopresis can be reinforced for eating high fiber foods, engaging in vigorous exercise, and for taking his medication. Each of these treatment components increases the likelihood that the child will eventually have a comfortable bowel movement in the toilet. By reinforcing the healthy behaviors surrounding elimination instead of only offering a reward when the child produces a bowel movement in the toilet, the child is much more likely to be motivated, positive, and successful.



Parents may also find that their reinforcement strategies are ineffective when the behavior they are trying to acknowledge is “appropriate” but is too advanced for the child’s current level of functioning. The issue here is not one of attempting to reinforce a behavior that is out of the child’s control, but one that is not in the child’s repertoire just yet. For example, a child who frequently throws

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2. For the purposes of this article, the words “reinforce” and “reward” are used interchangeably.

his blocks across the room when they fall over will unlikely be able to control his frustration just because his mother tells him he will get a cookie for “playing nicely with his blocks”. In this situation, the child will behave more positively if he is encouraged to develop better self-calming strategies, reinforced for practicing them, and reinforced for using them even to the smallest extent when he is frustrated in the future. This example illustrates the fact that reinforcers are rarely given in a vacuum. For most behaviors, children need to see the appropriate behavior modeled by others and to have frequent support and encouragement for developmentally-appropriate accomplishments. Other forms of reinforcement may be useful to solidify some behaviors but many are mastered by simply being in a supportive environment where positive behaviors are noticed and acknowledged.

### **Are You Reinforcing Undesirable Behaviors?**

A useful conversation topic for the practitioner, and one that may be more perplexing for the parent, is how the parent is unwittingly reinforcing undesirable behavior. Some common behaviors that are inadvertently reinforced by parent behavior are whining, arguing, picky eating, and stalling. The typical cycle of reinforcement for such behaviors may go as follows:



**Parent:** “Jimmy, please pick up your toys so we can start bath time.”

**Jimmy:** “But Mom, I didn’t even get these toys out! Why should I have to put them away?”

**Parent** (while Jimmy plays with toys): “Now Jimmy, you know how important it is to take good care of your toys and pick them up so they don’t get broken or end up with missing pieces.”

**Jimmy:** “Annie never has to pick up anything, you always want me to do everything!”

**Parent** (while Jimmy plays with toys): “Annie is all ready asleep and she picked up the toys last night.”

**Jimmy:** “But Mom...”

**Parent:** “Stop arguing with me Jimmy and just go upstairs. I will just pick up this stuff myself!”

As this example demonstrates, Jimmy’s distraction tactic of arguing was reinforced by the extra time he got to play with his toys, getting out of picking up his toys, the attention he got from his mother, and possibly even delaying an unwanted bath. His mother may report she was just helping Jimmy understand the importance of being tidy without recognizing that her attention and verbalizing was perpetuating the undesirable behavior of arguing. In fact, many parents rely (unsuccessfully) on such verbalizations and discussions to change the behavior of their young child (Blum, Williams, Friman, & Christophersen, 1995). They then feel frustrated when, after the conversation, the child’s behavior does not improve. The practitioner can help parents understand that children under the age of at least 7 years old typically have difficulty operationalizing such a discussion, and ultimately the attention accompanying the conversation may be reinforcing the less desirable behavior as well.

### **Are You Choosing the Optimal Reinforcers?**

In addition to helping parents understand what behaviors they are reinforcing, some discussion of the reinforcers themselves is in order. The most basic definition of reinforcement is an item, event, or activity that results in an increase in behavior. One telltale sign that a parent does not understand the concept of reinforcement is when he reports that a child will not work for a particular “reinforcer”. A comment such as, “I keep telling Sara she will get stickers for making her bed but she still refuses to do it” suggests that stickers are not truly a reinforcer for Sara. By definition, if the child will not perform in order to acquire a reinforcer, then it is not a reinforcer for that child. The reason may be as simple as Sara not liking stickers or more complicated by the fact that Sara has learned that her parents don’t follow through with giving her stickers in a frequent, consistent, or positive way. One effective strategy for determining what is reinforcing to a child is to observe his behavior over a period of time and note which items, events, or activities he will already work to obtain. Of course, most children are eager to also suggest ideas for reinforcers that are meaningful to them. Preschoolers are often as motivated by putting a sticker on a chart hung on the refrigerator for all to see as they are by some item earned for completing it. Reinforcers such as praise, hugs, game time with a parent, baking cookies, or dancing in the living room are free and typically readily available and motivating to a young child, and may actually be stronger reinforcers than costly rewards. Parents should be encouraged to engage their child in the selection of a reinforcement menu, staying mindful of the powerful impact of parental time and attention.

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A slightly different consideration to the meaningfulness of a reinforcer relates to its availability. If a child can obtain the item, activity, or event freely and not necessarily contingent upon a desirable behavior, it will lose its effectiveness as a reinforcer. For example, if a child is home alone for 2 hours playing videogames before his mother gets home, a reward of time to play videogames for getting homework done is not likely to be the most powerful reinforcer she can use. This reinforcer-behavior relationship applies most readily when discussing a tangible reward. Of course, reinforcers like parental attention and affection should not be withheld just because a child is not performing some predetermined positive behavior such as doing chores. In fact, the “time-in” that parents give their child just for being a part of the family is as essential for encouraging desirable behavior as is the reinforcement for performing prosocial tasks (Christophersen, 2005; Christophersen & Mortweet, 2003).



A discussion of appropriate reinforcers would not be complete without an assessment of how reasonable the reinforcers are with respect to the behavior being rewarded by the parent. All too often, when parents think about reinforcers, they think about something they can purchase or someplace they can go with their child. They offer large rewards for small behaviors and then have problems following through consistently when the time or money for that reward is unavailable. A reinforcer that is contingent on payday versus behavior is less likely to produce the desired behavior sought after by the parent.

Another important distinction for some parents may be that of reinforcing versus bribing. A parent may suggest that offering a reward for a behavior is just “bribery” and not an acceptable option for behavior management. For parents expressing this concern, the difference between reinforcement and bribery is that bribery is reinforcing someone for doing something that they should not do, typically something that is illegal, immoral, or unethical. Most parents would agree that they are rarely, if ever, interested in using bribery in the truest sense of the word. If a parent is interested, there have been literally hundreds of articles in peer reviewed journals supporting the efficacy and practicality of using reinforcers to motivate children. Many of the recommended readings at the end of this article articulate those findings quite succinctly and help parents put them into action.

### **Are You Using the Optimal Reinforcement Schedule?**

This question pertains to the issues of how early, often, and consistently the parent is reinforcing the desired behavior. At least initially, children typically do much better if they are reinforced for EVERY time that they engage in a targeted behavior. Only after they are consistently working in order to gain access to that reinforcer can they be expected to work hard in order to obtain a reward some of the time. For example, reinforcing a child during and immediately after cooperating with teeth brushing each night will be more effective in establishing that behavior than asking her to perform the same task for an entire week in order to earn the reward. By offering reinforcement early and often, the parent also has an increased likelihood of being more consistent. It can be easy to forget the sticker on the chart, the money in the jar, or to play that extra game of Candy Land when the child has to wait too long to earn such reinforcers. The most effective path to establishing and increasing desirable behavior is to error on the side of frequency and consistency.

Once the desired behavior is established at an acceptable level, which can take quite some time depending on the behavior and the child, the parent can slowly taper the reinforcement to a less frequent schedule. Reinforcement can be offered intermittently as long as it is still provided at a rate that maintains the desirable behavior. Such a “schedule of reinforcement” is the most effective in maintaining any type of behavior. So how does a parent know how much to reinforce or when to taper reinforcement? Quite often, the problem is that parents stop providing reinforcement, encouragement, and support before the behavior is well established in their child’s repertoire, which results in the child losing their motivation to continue. Thus, the child’s behavior can be the most productive guide to answer that question. If a child was performing the desired behavior well and then decreases her efforts, some type of increased reinforcement should be reinstated. If the child continues to perform the behavior to the parent’s satisfaction, the level of positive feedback or reinforcement is typically adequate. As with many issues in childrearing, some trial and error is inevitable and should be discussed with the parents as a normal and expected part of mastering behavior management.

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## Conclusion

The concerns of parents regarding their child's negative behaviors may be most effectively addressed by assessing the powerful management strategy of reinforcement. A thorough discussion of what types of behaviors can and should be reinforced is required. Parents may learn their lack of success in encouraging a desirable behavior stems from unrealistic expectations. They may also realize they are indeed reinforcing the very behaviors they wish to eliminate! Reinforcement can only be successful if parents choose reinforcers that are meaningful to the child, including those that the child cannot earn without demonstrating the desired behavior. A discussion of what constitutes a reasonable reinforcer may also be in order for parents who are trying to reward too little with too much. For parents who are concerned about "bribing" their child, the practitioner can aid in their understanding of how reinforcement works, as well as its very necessary use to help in the development of a child's prosocial skills. Finally, even the most enticing reinforcement must be delivered on a schedule that helps a child develop and maintain desirable behaviors. A discussion of how early, often, and consistently reinforcement is needed to manage behavior will mostly reoccur at follow-up appointments as the child masters some behaviors and displays more challenging ones. The many nuances of reinforcement discussed briefly in this article demonstrate just how complicated this seemingly straightforward concept can be for parents. A more in-depth discussion of reinforcement, as well as other behavior management strategies is available for practitioners and parents in the recommended readings listed below.

## References and Recommended Readings

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