Positive Reinforcement...
a proactive intervention for the classroom

This Intervention Tip Sheet has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. This Tip Sheet was published by the Institute on Community Integration, College of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis and was authored by Kareen Smith of the Institute.

Introduction

Reinforcement is a stimulus which follows and is contingent upon a behavior and increases the probability of a behavior being repeated. Positive reinforcement can increase the probability of not only desirable behavior but also undesirable behavior. For example, if a student whines in order to get attention and is successful in getting it, the attention serves as positive reinforcement which increases the likelihood that the student will continue to whine.

This tip sheet describes different kinds of reinforcers which have been found to be effective in changing student behavior and a discussion of how to select and deliver appropriate and effective reinforcers. There is much literature on this topic and you are strongly encouraged to consult additional resources for a more in-depth discussion of positive reinforcement. Additionally, negative reinforcement and satiation (when a reinforcer loses its effectiveness) are also discussed.

What are different types of reinforcers?

Natural and Direct Reinforcement: This type of reinforcement results directly from the appropriate behavior. For example, interacting appropriately with peers in group activities will lead to more invitations to join such activities.

The natural reinforcement for appropriate bids for attention, help, participation, etc. is providing the attention, help and opportunity to participate. *The goal should always be to move the student to natural and intrinsic reinforcement.*

Social Reinforcers: These are reinforcers which are socially mediated by teachers, parents, other adults, and peers which express approval and praise for appropriate behavior. Comments ("Good job," "I can tell you are working really hard," "You're nice"), written approval ("Super"), and expressions of approval (nodding your head, smiling, clapping, a pat on the back) are all very effective reinforcers.

Activity Reinforcers: Activity reinforcers are very effective and positive for students. Allowing students to participate in preferred activities (such as games, computer time, etc.) is very powerful, especially if part of the reinforcement is being allowed to choose a classmate with whom to participate in the activity. This also provides social reinforcement from the partner.

Tangible Reinforcers: This category includes edibles, toys, balloons, stickers, and awards. Edibles and toys should be used with caution. Parents may have reason to object to edibles as reinforcement (for example, if a student has a weight problem) and toys can make other students envious. Awards can be in the form of certificates, displaying work, and letters home to parents commending the students progress. These are powerfully motivating reinforcers.

Token Reinforcement:
Token reinforcement involves awarding points or tokens for appropriate behavior. These rewards have little value in themselves but can be exchanged for something of value.

Isn't giving reinforcement like bribing a student?

Planned positive reinforcement is very effective in promoting desirable change in student behavior. Some teachers question whether reinforcing or rewarding students for improving their behavior is really just bribing them to do

what is desired. This is not the case. A bribe is something which is unacceptable or inappropriate (and illegal). Reinforcement is given to *bring about desirable change and to teach students to take responsibility for behavior.* Your paycheck is reinforcement for doing your job and commendations and bonuses are reinforcements for going above and beyond expectations. Without these reinforcements, how likely is it that you would exhibit the appropriate behavior of showing up at work each day?

How should I choose a reinforcer?

Reinforcers must be valued, preferred, and individualized. What may be extremely motivating for one student may be entirely useless for another. Use the following guidelines in choosing a reinforcer:

Observe the student: What kinds of activities does he or she seek out? What objects or events are presently serving to reinforce his or her behavior?

Ask the student: When designing a plan to modify behavior give the student a list of choices and ask what he or she would like to try to earn. For example, if setting up a token economy for work completed, let the student choose from a list of activities to find out which he or she is interested in earning.

Monitor: Periodically review by observation and discussion whether the reinforcer remains preferred or whether a new reinforcer is necessary.

Evaluate: Do a formal preference assessment.

How should reinforcement be delivered?

In order to make positive reinforcement, an effective intervention use the following guidelines:

1. Reinforcement must be consistently delivered, according to a planned reinforcement schedule (see "Reinforcement Schedules"). If it is not, no connection will develop between appropriate behavior and the reinforcement and the behavior will not change.

2. Reinforcement must be delivered immediately. Students should know when they can expect reinforcement. If you wait until the end of the day to reinforce a student for remaining in her seat during second period, the effect of reinforcement is reduced if not lost. If it is impossible to deliver reinforcement immediately, verbal reinforcement should be given and the student should be told when he or she can expect to receive other reinforcement. In this way, a contingency between behavior and reinforcement will be strengthened or maintained.

3. Improvement should be reinforced. Do not wait until the student's behavior is perfect to deliver reinforcement. You should recognize improvement and let the student know that you recognize the effort.

4. Do <u>not</u> give reinforcement because you feel sorry for a student. If a student does not achieve the required criterion, delivering reinforcement will only teach the student that rewards are readily available regardless of behavior and may even lead to an escalation of the behavior. Rather, recognize that you know the student is disappointed but that they will have the opportunity to try again tomorrow. **Reinforcement must be contingent on behavior.**

5. Whenever possible, pair any reinforcement with social reinforcement. If your reinforcement plan is letting students participate in preferred activities, make sure to give some sort of social reinforcement, such as telling the student, "You really did an excellent job today. You should be really proud of yourself" or let the student choose another student for the activity.

6. Make sure that social reinforcers are not ambiguous. They should be sincere, clear, and identify the specific behavior for which they are being delivered.

7. Reinforcement should be age-appropriate. Expecting a high school student to change his behavior by rewarding him with stickers is likely to be ineffective and insulting to the student.

What is negative reinforcement?

Negative reinforcement is often, mistakenly, equated with punishment. Punishment is the application of aversive stimuli in order to reduce the chance of a behavior being repeated. Negative reinforcement is the removal of aversive stimuli in order to increase the probability of a behavior being repeated.

For example, reinforcing students for using class time to do math work appropriately by removing five story problems from the math homework negatively reinforces appropriate behavior by removing the undesirable stimuli of a longer homework assignment.

Negative reinforcement can be very effective, especially to create an environment which feels safe to a student. It is often more naturally occurring than, for example, tangible reinforcers. As with the other reinforcement categories, it is important to pair negative with social reinforcement.

What is satiation and how should it be handled?

Satiation is the term used to describe the situation of a reinforcer losing its effectiveness. For example, if a student is receiving jellybeans as reinforcement, it is likely that after a period of time he or she will tire of them and no longer find them desirable. Satiation can also occur if too much reinforcement is being delivered. Earning up to ten minutes of computer time a day may serve as reinforcement for a long period of time, while being given the opportunity to earn an hour of computer time, for example, may quickly lead to satiation.

When satiation begins, the rate at which the desired behavior is displayed tapers off until it halts. This is very common with edible reinforcers. Reinforcement in the form of activities, social opportunities, and learning activities tend to be more immune to satiation.

Zirpoli and Melloy (1993, p. 160) make the following recommendations to prevent satiation:

- Varying the reinforcer or using a different reinforcer for each target behavior.
- Monitoring the amount of reinforcement delivered and using only enough to maintain the target behavior.
- Avoiding edible reinforcers (if you must use edibles, vary and apply minimally).
- Moving from a constant to an intermittent schedule of reinforcement as soon as possible (see "Schedules of Reinforcement").
- Moving from primary to secondary reinforcers as soon as possible.

Furthermore, any type of reinforcement schedule or system should include ongoing, systematic assessment of the reinforcement effectiveness through observation. Another option is incorporating a menu of potential reinforcers and allowing the student to choose his or her reinforcement.

It is likely that satiation will eventually occur with any type of reinforcement. If systematic assessment is diligently carried out, however, one can maintain the behavior modification plan by changing reinforcers before satiation occurs and by delivering reinforcement on varying schedules.

Finally, in designing a positive reinforcement plan, it is very important to move from less natural reinforcement (tokens, tangibles) to more natural reinforcement (social reinforcement, direct, and natural reinforcement).

References

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