



## Self-regulation Guide to REINFORCEMENT

### WHAT IS IT?

Reinforcement is providing something positive (i.e., attention, praise, reward) after a child or group of children engage in a specific behavior which makes the behavior more likely to happen again.

### WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

A group of children take turns to use the seesaw during recess. Their teacher gives each of them a sticker and says: “Great job taking turns using the seesaw so that everyone could play!”

A child offers to share his snack with another child. The teacher uses labeled praise by saying: “That was so nice of you to share your snack! I bet your friend is feeling very happy.”

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Most children enjoy adult attention and acknowledgment. When a teacher consistently gives attention to, praises, or rewards the behaviors that support child success in the classroom, the teacher is seeing and appreciating a child’s behavior. This helps children learn which behaviors are expected in their classroom community and increases children’s self-esteem by drawing attention to what they are doing *well* (as opposed to the times when they have difficulty meeting expectations).

## Types of Reinforcement

There are many different ways to acknowledge children’s positive behavior.

- ☒ **Labeled Praise:** Drawing attention to positive behavior using specific, verbal praise.  
*“You are working together taking turns so that all of you can use the swing!”*  
Instead of “Good job, friends!”
- ☒ **Tokens/Rewards:** Using small, tangible rewards to indicate recognition of children’s efforts.  
*Children are given stickers every time the teacher notices sharing or turn-taking.*
- ☒ **Special Attention:** Giving physical attention (e.g., high-five), special recognition, or a special role to acknowledge positive behavior.  
*A child who the teacher notices has been helping peers is acknowledged as the “Star Student” at the end of each week.*
- ☒ **Differential Attention:** Choosing not to focus on mild undesired behavior (e.g., whining) and directing attention back to the child when that behavior is no longer displayed.  
*A child refuses to join in an activity with his classmates. As soon as the child walks over and stands by the group, his teacher approaches, smiles, and pats him on the back.*
- ☒ **Reinforcement System:** A more formal way of reinforcing behaviors when children need additional support or encouragement.  
*A teacher gives a child who has difficulty staying on-task a sticker every time she finishes an activity with less than 3 reminders. Once she has 5 stickers, a positive note is sent home.*



## TIPS FOR USING REINFORCEMENT

### 1. Rules of thumb

- ☑ Catch the behavior in the moment!  
Notice and reinforce behavior that will help children be successful in the classroom and foster a collaborative community (e.g., listening to directions, sharing materials).
- ☑ Be intentional in selecting which reinforcers to use.  
Not *all* children like the same things. (e.g., shy children may be less reinforced by attention). Consider their unique interests, preferences, and background when deciding what will/will not work as reinforcers.
- ☑ Distribute reinforcement equitably across children.  
Critically reflect on how your own cultural lens and biases (e.g., racial, disability, linguistic, gender) influence which children you choose to use reinforcement with.
- ☑ Consistency is key!  
Children learn what is expected of them when your response is predictable.

### 2. When using labeled praise, tokens/rewards, or special attention...

- ☑ Clearly identify what it is (i.e., positive behavior) that you are seeing and appreciating.  
“You are asking them nicely to join in the play” instead of “Good job!”
- ☑ Give *immediately* after the positive behavior is displayed.
- ☑ Focus on effort and progress, not the “perfect” display of behavior.  
For a child who typically does not use kind words with peers, reinforce times when they say something kind (*even* if they don’t do so on their own or it occurs after prompting).

### 3. When giving differential attention...

- ☑ Decide what mild behavior you want to reduce (e.g., whining).
- ☑ Anticipate when the child may display the targeted negative behavior.
- ☑ Choose not to acknowledge this behavior (e.g., walk away, turn your back, attend to another child).
- ☑ Reinforce the child by attending *as soon as* they display a neutral or positive behavior.

### 4. When using a reinforcement system...

- ☑ Choose a type of system you want to use.
- ☑ Identify target positive behaviors and how often you want to reinforce these behaviors. You can also ask the student what they want to work for.
- ☑ Make sure goals are attainable and match the individual child’s abilities, development, and needs.
- ☑ Keep language simple and use visuals to help remind students what they are working for.

## RESOURCES THAT SUPPORT USING REINFORCEMENT

**Recommendations and Considerations  
for Positive Descriptive Feedback**

[Available as PDF](#)

NCPMI ©

**Starters for Giving Positive Feedback  
and Encouragement**

[Available as PDF](#)

NCPMI ©

**Reinforcement**  
[ECE Resource Hub](#)  
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