

# Positive Reinforcement

Most of us have heard the term “**positive reinforcement.**” Positive reinforcement is *anything that is added following a behavior that increases the likelihood of that same behavior happening again in the future.*

Every day, I go to work. At the end of the week, I earn a paycheck. My paycheck makes it very likely that I’m going to go back to my office the following week. It *positively reinforces* my work behavior. In fact, that kind of positive reinforcement is very important to me. As much as I love my job, I probably wouldn’t keep going to work if my paychecks stopped coming.

Research tells us that positive reinforcement is just as important for learners with disabilities as my paycheck is to me. In fact, it is *the most effective* way to help learners gain new skills and behaviors.

However, my paycheck is only one kind of positive reinforcement I gain for completing my work. Let’s take a look at the four types of positive reinforcement and some examples of each.

## Tangible Reinforcement

My paycheck is a *tangible* reinforcer – a desirable item

- A learner finishes an addition worksheet and receives a sticker
- A learner completes a toileting routine and uses the toilet, then receives a piece of candy

Things to Remember:

- The smaller the item the better, so they can be given more often without the learner getting tired of them.
- These will work best if the learner can **only** get them by *earning* them.

## Activity Based Reinforcement

Earning money at my job allows me to do fun activities that I enjoy, like eating at restaurants or going to a movie

- A learner finishes their reading lesson and gets to play outside
- A learner stays at the table during their math lesson and gets to play a video game after

Things to Remember:

- Since activities usually can’t be given *during* work like a tangible can, learners either need to be able to *wait* for their reward or earn tokens *toward* their reward.

## Social Reinforcement

Getting positive feedback from my colleagues and supervisors in the office makes me want to do my best work.

- A learner follows the direction to sit at the table and the caregiver gives them a high five
- A learner answers a question correctly and their caregiver says, “That’s right! Good job!”

Things to Remember:

- Praise works best if it is specific and related to the behavior - “Good sitting!”

## Natural Reinforcement

I love my job, which makes it reinforcing to me all on its own. Sometimes reinforcement is naturally built into an activity.

- A learner says “ball” and their caregiver hands them the ball.
- A learner who loves puzzles gets to place each letter into a board puzzle after naming it. Completing the puzzle is very reinforcing.

Things to Remember:

- Something that is naturally reinforcing to one person may not be to another.

## Steps to Effective Positive Reinforcement

Effective positive reinforcement is

1. **Immediate** – Give the reinforcer as soon after the learner demonstrates the desired behavior as possible, especially if the behavior is new or challenging for your learner.
2. **Contingent** – The learner should only get their “reward” if they demonstrate the desired behavior.
3. **Variable** – Using a variety of reinforcers will help keep your learner from getting “bored” or “tired” of them. Giving your learner a **choice** of reinforcers will make them even more powerful.
4. **Individualized** – People are unique and have their own preferences. A reinforcer will only work if it is something **your** learner really wants and is willing to work for.

## Tips to Remember

- Social reinforcement (praise) is both one of the easiest types of reinforcement to give... and the easiest to forget! Even if you are using a tangible or activity-based reinforcer, always **pair with praise!**
- If your learner is working for a reinforcer at the end of a lesson or activity, using a **first/then** visual or **token economy** can help keep them focused and “earning.” (See our tip sheet on visual supports for more information.)
- Positive reinforcement *is not a bribe*. What’s the difference?
  - A bribe is something offered to a person *after* they’ve started engaging in a disruptive behavior, in order to get them to stop – “*If you stop crying, you can watch YouTube.*”
  - Positive reinforcement is determined *before* instruction begins and can *only* be earned if the learner demonstrates a desired behavior – “*First finish reading, then you can watch YouTube.*”
- Reinforcers will be most effective if the learner can *only* access them by engaging in the desired behavior. If I can eat chocolate chip cookies whenever I want, I’m less likely to do something I don’t want to do to earn them.
- Be thoughtful about what behavior you are trying to reinforce and where your learner’s abilities are right now.
  - Some learners might only earn a reinforcer for finishing an entire activity, while others might need one after every question.
  - Some might earn a reinforcer only for correct answers, while others might earn a reinforcer just for attempting to answer.
  - If just sitting at the table is challenging for your learner, start by reinforcing that!