

REINFORCERS AND PUNISHERS

Reinforcers: Increasing a Target Behavior

- A **reinforcer** (both positive and negative) is something that will *increase* the likelihood of a behavior. The reinforcer should always follow the behavior (i.e., a “reward”); whereas a **punisher** decreases the likelihood of a behavior.
 - A **positive reinforcer** is when something rewarding to an individual is “added.” For example, after a youth completes his or her school work, giving a tangible reward or verbal praise that the youth finds enjoyable will increase the likelihood the youth completes his or her homework in the future.

| There are four general “types” of positive reinforcers: | |
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| Material: Food, clothes, electronics, jewelry, CDs, books, cars, and recreational equipment. | Token: Money, points, vouchers, coupons, stickers. |
| Social: Attention, praise, approval, and acknowledgment from other people. This type can be verbal: “Great Job!;” written: thank you note; physical: pat on the back, smiling. | Activities: Watching TV, playing sports, listening to music, surfing the Internet, playing computer games, socializing with friends, talking on the telephone, sleeping late, going out to eat, dating, and spending time on hobbies. |

- A **negative reinforcer** is when something aversive to an individual is “subtracted.” For example, after a youth completes his or her school work, taking away one of the youth’s chores can help increase the likelihood the youth completes his or her homework in the future.
 - Many people mistakenly use the term “negative reinforcement” to refer to “punishment” (i.e., reducing a behavior). Reinforcement, whether positive over negative, always increases the target behavior. Negative reinforcement is not utilized as frequently as positive reinforcement in most intervention settings.

Schedule of Reinforcement

It is important to keep in mind that not only is choosing proper reinforcers important, but designing a **schedule of reinforcement** is just as important. A schedule of reinforcement is simply planning “when” the target behavior will be reinforced, this is very important as sporadically providing reinforcers may not increase the target behavior. The schedules of reinforcement discussed below are intended to be examples but is not a comprehensive list of all possibilities.

- **Continuous Reinforcement:** Providing a reinforcer every time the youth performs the skill.
- **Intermittent Reinforcement:** Providing a reinforcer for some, but not each time the youth performs the skill.
- **Thinning Reinforcement:** Beginning with continuous reinforcement, then gradually decreasing to intermittent reinforcement, to sparse or infrequent reinforcement.
- **Nonreinforcement in the Natural Environment:** This is done by teaching youth to use self-reinforcement, teaching skills in coping with nonreinforcement (typically used after a period of thinning reinforcement).
- **Programming for Reinforcement in the Natural Environment:** Training individuals in the youth’s life to assist in prompting skills and providing reinforcers. This might include informing parents, schools, or other institutions, of what skill is being taught, why skill is being taught, how skill is to be practiced, and encouraging those involved parties to prompt and reinforce the skills.

Reinforcer Choice and Administration Guidelines

- ✓ Clearly define what behavior is being targeted (e.g., use of a skill, doing homework, listening to parents, coming home before curfew, etc.)
- ✓ Use **natural reinforcers** whenever possible. Natural reinforcers are incentives individuals are likely to receive regardless of whether they are undergoing behavior change (smile, praise, etc.).
- ✓ Reinforcers should be **individualized**.
- ✓ Always **test and assess** whether reinforcers actually help change the target behavior.
- ✓ Keep reinforcers **potent**. Ways to do this include:
 - Use reinforcers that a client has not had recently
 - Dispense reinforcers in small amounts
 - Switching reinforcers periodically
- ✓ Use reinforcers that are less likely to lead to **satiation** (praise rather than food)
- ✓ Persons who can be used to provide reinforcers include therapists, parents, teachers, spouses, siblings, peers, children, and self.
- ✓ Ensure the client **aware** that the reinforcer is a consequence of the target behavior.
- ✓ The reinforcer is given:
 - Only **after** the target behavior is performed
 - **Immediately** after the target behavior occurs whenever possible
 - **Consistently** (per the schedule of reinforcement)
- ✓ Initially use continuous reinforcement, thinning reinforcement or moving to other schedules, as necessary.

Decreasing Target (Unwanted) Behaviors

There are three major strategies to decreasing an unwanted behavior: Differential Reinforcement, Punishers, and Aversion Therapy.

Differential Reinforcement: Indirectly reducing a maladaptive behavior by reinforcing an alternative behavior.

An example is a young client who hits himself is reinforced for using his hands to play with a puzzle.

Four major approaches:

- **Incompatible:** Reinforcing a positive behavior that will be opposite the unwanted behavior. For example, if the unwanted target behavior is temper tantrums, the parents would only provide reinforcers (attention, candy, etc.) for calm behavior.
- **Competing:** Reinforcing a positive behavior that makes it difficult to engage in the unwanted target behavior at the same time. For example, if the target behavior is “wandering around the classroom,” the teacher may reinforce the behavior of “completing math problems” (while it is not impossible to complete math problems while wandering the classroom, it does make it considerably more difficult).
- **Other Behaviors:** If a behavior is seriously maladaptive, it may be necessary to reinforce any other behavior to decrease maladaptive behavior. For example, a child who threw objects at other people could be reinforced for throwing objects at anything but a person.
- **Low Frequency:** The client is reinforced for performing the unwanted behavior less frequently.

Consequential Reinforcement: Directly reducing an unwanted behavior by changing its consequences by either eliminating the reinforcement for the unwanted behavior (explained below) or by making the consequences of the behavior undesirable (punishers).

➤ Eliminating the reinforcement of unwanted behavior, Extinction and Time-Out:

- **Extinction:** The process of eliminating an unwanted target behavior by withdrawing or withholding reinforcers of that behavior. For example, a child’s temper tantrums may be reinforced by receiving a parent’s attention. Having temper tantrums will extinguish when the parents ignore (withhold the reinforcer of “giving attention”) the child while the child has a temper tantrum.

- **Time Out:** Temporarily withdrawing a client’s access to reinforcers immediately after the client performs the unwanted target behavior. Example: Parents have their child stand in the corner for a couple of minutes following misbehavior.

Guidelines for time out:

- o The youth should be aware of the reason for the time out and its duration.
- o The duration of time out should be brief (one minute for each year, e.g. 5 years = 5 minutes).
- o No reinforcers should be present or introduced during the time-out period, (reminder that a parent’s or counselor’s attention may be a reinforcer).
- o Time out should be terminated only when the specified time has elapsed and child is behaving appropriately.
- o Time out should not allow clients to escape or avoid situations they find unpleasant, including responsibilities.

Punishers: Creating consequences for an unwanted target behavior include: Response Cost, Overcorrection, and Physically Aversive Consequences. Punishers are also known as consequences. A **punisher** is opposite of a reinforcer in that it is something that will **decrease** the likelihood of an unwanted target behavior.

- **Response Cost:** A client’s access to a valued item or privilege is removed as a consequence of performing a maladaptive behavior. For example, when the unwanted target behavior is performed the youth loses the privilege of surfing the internet.
- **Overcorrection:** The client corrects the harmful effects of an unwanted behavior (restitution) and then intensively practices a wanted behavior (positive practice). For example, a youth kicks holes in walls when frustrated. For restitution, the youth fixes the holes. For positive practice the youth then practices an alternative method of expressing frustration.
- **Physically Aversive Consequences:** Stimuli that result in unpleasant physical sensations, including pain (USED INFREQUENTLY) occurs after an unwanted behavior. For example, mild electric shock following the unwanted target behavior.

Aversion Therapy: Directly reducing an unwanted behavior by pairing the behavior with any stimulus that the client finds aversive (unpleasant, distasteful, or painful).

Aversive stimuli are used:

- While the client is engaging in behavior.
- Primarily for substance abuse and paraphilias or sexually deviant behaviors.
- Guidelines for Aversion Therapy
- Only considered after it is clear that alternatives are not possible or would be ineffective or inefficient.
- If a physically aversive procedure is used, a physician should be consulted to be sure that it will be medically safe for the client.
- The client or the client’s legal guardian must be aware of the nature of the treatment and agree to it using informed consent procedures.
- The procedures should be implemented only by a competent professional.
- Aversive techniques should be used along with procedures that simultaneously increase wanted behaviors.
- Clear-cut measures of the target behavior should be collected during and after the intervention to document whether it is being effective.

Token Economy

A token economy is a system to motivate individuals to perform desirable behaviors, by providing reinforcers, and to refrain from performing undesirable behaviors, by providing punishers. Examples include tokens and money.

Four Basic Elements

- A list of behaviors and the number of tokens that individuals can earn (reinforcer) or lose (punisher) for performing each.
- A list of backup reinforcers (what the individual trade or buy with their tokens) and the token cost of each.
- The type of token (example include: poker chips, metal washers, specially designed paper currency, stars on a chart, money, and points).
- Specific procedures and rules for operation of the token economy (example: when individuals can exchange tokens for backup reinforcers).

Four Principles

- The criteria for earning or losing tokens must be clearly defined.
- Ensure the youth are aware of and understand the criteria.
- Award or take away the tokens as soon as possible after the target behavior is performed.
- Pair earning credits with social reinforcers such as smiles, pats on the back and praise.

Reference:

Spiegler, M. D. & Guevremont, D. C. (2003) *Contemporary Behavior Therapy*. 4th Edition. Wadsworth.