



use positive reinforcers?

PROVIDE IT STRAIGHT AFTER THE BEHAVIOUR

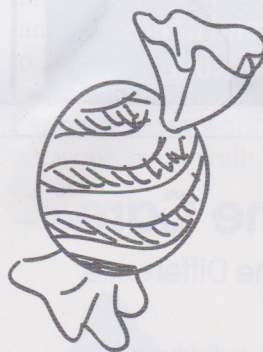
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Give a reinforcer to the person immediately after the desired behaviour. If there is even a short delay, a different behaviour may be reinforced. Make sure the reinforcer is easy to give and can be consumed quickly, or easily taken away. For example, if you're giving the person a food item, provide only a small amount.

Every day we all behave in certain ways to achieve particular outcomes. A worker turns up to work to earn their wages, a teenager cleans their room to go to a party and a child draws his mum a picture to be told he did a good job. All of these are examples of 'reinforcement'. The behaviour is reinforced by a good result, meaning that it is more likely to be repeated in the future. This is an effective behaviour management strategy for working with challenging behaviours presented by children and adults with autism.

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Positive reinforcement is a key concept in Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) which can be used to help people on the autism spectrum to learn new behaviours. A positive reinforcer is something that is added after the behaviour happens which increases the likelihood that it will happen again. Anything can be a reinforcer and what works varies from person to person.



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PREVENT BOREDOM

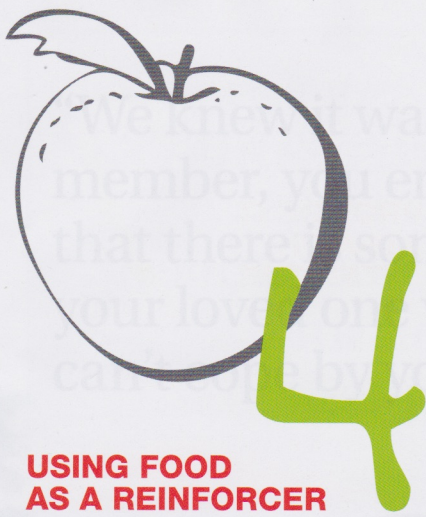
Don't let the person become bored of the reinforcer. If this happens the reinforcer will stop working. Using a variety of reinforcers will prevent this from happening. Plan reinforcement around naturally occurring events. For example, use food as a reinforcer before lunch – the person will be hungry and therefore more likely to find the food item reinforcing. It is a good idea to have a few different things in mind that can be used as reinforcers so that you can offer variety. The amount of reinforcement and the level of the person's deprivation will affect how well it works. For example if the person has free access to the reinforcer in other settings, it may stop being effective. Additionally if the person has received a lot of a particular reinforcer already during the day, they may become bored of it.

ESTABLISH WHAT WORKS

Different people prefer different things and offering items that are not reinforcing to a person will have no impact on their behaviour. There are two main types of reinforcers: primary (basic needs, eg food) and secondary (learned, eg money and praise). Make a list of the things that the person likes. Consider things that they spend time doing. The more time they spend doing something, the more likely it will serve as a good reinforcer.



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GATHER DATA

Don't rely on intuition or opinion as to whether a reinforcer is successful or not. Keep a record of whether the person is presenting the target behaviour and if it is increasing over time. If the desired behaviour is increasing then the reinforcer is being effective. If there is no change then the reinforcer needs to be changed. You can try changing the reinforcer itself, or the amount and frequency of delivery.



USING FOOD AS A REINFORCER

Sometimes it may seem that food is the only reinforcer available. However, this may just be because the person has limited experience of other items and activities. Be creative and try new things. Reinforcers can be anything, including playtime with a certain object, an activity, a sensory experience, a break or interaction with someone. Although skills teaching can be timed to take advantage of times the person is more likely to be hungry, withdrawing food is not ethical. If working with adults it is important not to withhold preferred food items as an adult has a right to access the food they want. You could try pairing foods with other reinforcers to create new secondary (learned) reinforcers. For example, delivering praise at the same time as a chocolate chip. Over time, the praise becomes reinforcing and the chocolate will no longer be needed.



FADE THE REINFORCER

When the person is first learning a new skill, the reinforcer should be given after every correct response. This is important so that the person makes a connection between the behaviour and the reinforcer. Once it starts working, you can only give the reinforcer after every other (or third or fourth) response. When teaching a new skill, it can be helpful to draw up a plan of what the skill is and when to present the reinforcer. This will make sure everyone supporting the person does it in the same way and will mean the person learns the skill faster.

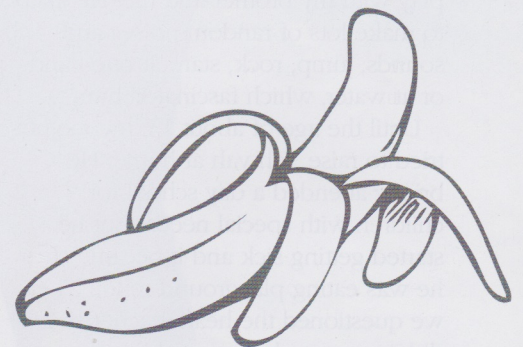


GENERALISE

Once a target behaviour is happening consistently, it's important to generalise that behaviour so that you can withdraw the reinforcer without stopping the behaviour. You can do this by making the reinforcers more natural. This means using things that others will use to reinforce the person. It is important to remember that this can take time and if the desired behaviour stops, it is okay to go back a step to contrived reinforcement. You can try generalisation again once the skill has been strengthened.

To sum up

- Using positive reinforcers requires careful consideration but it can be an effective method to help teach new behaviours and skills.
- Make sure you use reinforcers which are tailored to the person and consider their changing needs throughout the day.
- Always monitor how you're using them to make sure that they continue to be effective and are having an impact.
- Use a variety of different reinforcers and make sure that if you use food items they are paired with other forms of reinforcer so that the use of the food can be faded.



→ Recommended books and resources

- For information about strategies and techniques for behavioural interventions, visit www.autism.org.uk/behavioural-and-developmental-interventions.
- Find out more about Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) at researchautism.net/applied-behaviour-analysis-and-autism.

