

# Spotlight: Reinforcement

Our **Spotlight** segments are for parents seeking additional information on subject matter relevant to helping a child make progress on communication, social, and coping skills.

Reinforcement is our first spotlight topic because it is a very important component of learning for children with autism. We are not talking here about structured, formal therapy, but instead about parents reinforcing all kinds of positive behaviors in their children during the course of everyday life.

The Big Ideas:

- Reinforcement is a great in-the-moment-teaching strategy for parents who want to help their child build all kinds of skills and abilities.
- There are two types of reinforcement as a strategy: 1. a parent makes an active effort to react in a way that will increase the likelihood the child will repeat a positive behavior; 2. a parent takes advantage of situations that are inherently reinforcing (regardless of whether the parent reacts).
- While a parent cannot always drop what she or he is doing to reinforce a child's positive behavior, we encourage parents to try their best to reinforce whenever possible, especially when they are enjoying a shared activity with their child such as reading a book together.
- Parents are also encouraged to self-monitor for saying and doing things that are actually counter-productive such as the over-use of praise; stepping in too quickly with help; and unintentional reinforcement of negative behaviors.

**The more parents can coordinate with the professionals who work with the child, the more effective their reinforcement efforts will be. These professionals can guide parents on how to reinforce in an effective way. Further, when a parent reinforces the skills and behaviors that are being worked on in school or therapy, a child is much more likely to make progress.**

ABA note: While reinforcement is at the heart of ABA programming, this section is not about ABA technique. If your child does ABA, your child's ABA professional can teach you how to reinforce following ABA protocol, even in informal situations.

### **Reinforcement Strategy #1: When a child does something positive, REACT!**

The reinforcement strategy is this: when a child engages in a positive behavior, a parent makes an active effort *to react in a way that will increase the likelihood the child will repeat that positive behavior*. To illustrate this point, we compare two scenarios.

Claire is sitting at the kitchen table eating her dinner. Mom is standing nearby looking at her cell phone. Claire wants more pizza and says, "Pizza!" Claire saying "Pizza!" is a very positive behavior for her as she usually screams when she wants something.

Scenario #1: Mom immediately sets down her phone and gets Claire more pizza, while simultaneously responding enthusiastically, "Yes, you can have more pizza! Hooray! Claire said, 'Pizza!'"

Scenario #2: Mom finishes up a text. Then she gets Claire more pizza, saying, "Here you go sweetie."

In Scenario #1, Mom immediately reacts with words and action for the specific purpose of reinforcing Claire's saying "Pizza!" We are not claiming that moving forward, Claire will always make a verbal request in lieu of screaming. However, the hope is that eventually Claire will learn to replace screaming with making a verbal request when she wants something. Helping a child like Claire make progress will take time and effort by a team, but if that team includes a parent reinforcing "on the home front," the likelihood for progress is much more possible.

In Scenario #2, the way Mom acts is not bad or wrong, but she is not actively using reinforcement as a strategy. Or maybe Mom believes she is reinforcing her child's positive behavior, but she is not doing so in an effective way. (More on how to reinforce in an effective way later.) As a result, an opportunity for learning is lost.

## Reinforcement Strategy #2: Take advantage of situations that are inherently reinforcing

These are situations where even if the parent does not react, the child's positive behavior will be reinforced by what follows naturally.

Jackson has trouble following single step verbal directions. He and his dad are at the playground and it is really hot out. Dad spots a water fountain.

Dad Approach #1: Seeing a teaching opportunity, Dad lifts Jackson up and says, "*Press the button.*" Jackson presses the button and water immediately squirts up. Jackson takes a drink.

Dad Approach #2: Without saying anything Dad lifts Jackson up and Dad presses the button so Jackson can get a drink.

In Approach #1, Dad takes advantage of a reinforcement opportunity because the water squirting up reinforces Jackson's behavior of pressing the button. We are not saying that moving forward, Jackson will always follow directions especially as following verbal directions involves receptive language, attending, and more. However, for kids like Jackson, reinforcement can increase their motivation to do things like: listen carefully, pay attention, and follow directions.

While there is nothing wrong or bad with Approach #2, by doing everything for his son, Dad does not take advantage of the situation. Great learning often takes place when a child is "set up" to do things for her or himself.

**Note:** What if when Dad directed Jackson to press the button, Jackson did not press the button? That's okay: the situation is still a teaching one if Jackson's dad knows how to prompt him. **Be sure to talk to your child's team about the best way to prompt your child.**

More e.g.'s where the result of a child's positive behavior is in-and-of-itself reinforcing:

- Telling a child to press the button of a jack-in-the-box.  
Result of following direction → fun pop up
- Telling a child to blow a bubble wand.  
Result of following a direction → bubbles
- Telling a child to look in a drugstore bag in which there is a candy bar.  
Result of following direction → a surprise treat
- Pointing to a cute puppy.  
Result of looking where parent is pointing → seeing a cute puppy

**Reinforcement can be used as a strategy to encourage all kinds of behaviors.**

Below are examples of “reinforce-able” positive behaviors. Many of these behaviors will fall under more than one category. During the course of daily life, try to make an effort to reinforce positive behaviors, especially those that are hard for your child or that are identified as priorities by your child's team. (Your child's individualized education plan (IEP) is a great source for target behaviors.) Keep in regular contact with your child's team on your efforts and to trouble shoot.

Verbal/Communication behaviors

- examples: answering a question with a “yes” or “no”
- saying “hi” and “bye”
- making a request
- spontaneously commenting
- pointing or making eye contact to communicate something

Focus/Attending behaviors

- examples: staying seated
- being quiet when someone else is speaking
- looking and listening
- following a direction
- looking where someone is pointing

Social behaviors

- examples: waiting appropriately to take a turn
- giving up a toy so someone else can take a turn
- looking to where someone is pointing
- saying “please” and “thank you”

Coping behaviors

- examples: accepting “No” for an answer
- handling a situation that is disappointing or frustrating
- dealing with an overload of sensory stimuli; e.g., a crowded store

### **Example of a parent using both types of reinforcement**

Noah often does not come when called, and has a really hard time staying seated and focusing on something being shown to him by an adult. Dad sits on the sofa near where Noah is playing on the floor, holds up his tablet displaying the cover of an e-book, *Thinking about Thinking*, and says, “**Hey Noah, come sit and look *this doggy*.**” Curious, Noah comes over and sits next to Dad. When he sees the MooBoo dog logo, he smiles. Dad immediately begins reading *Thinking about Thinking*. At the end of the first page, Noah is still engaged and is still seated. Dad reacts to Noah’s positive behavior by saying, “*Hey Noah, I like how you are sitting quietly and looking at the book with Dad. High 5!*” Dad makes a dramatic, comical expression and says, “*Let’s see what’s on the next page.*” Noah laughs. Dad keeps the interaction going for as long as Noah is engaged.

Let’s break down the reinforcement that takes place in this example:

1. Parent sets up an inherently reinforcing situation: Noah loves dogs. Dad takes advantage of this to get Noah to come over. He knows that Noah’s positive behavior of coming when called will be reinforced by seeing the cute MooBoo dog logo.
2. Parent reacts: Dad reacts to Noah’s positive behavior of staying seated by praising Noah and giving him a High 5.

This interaction also illustrates how light, casual, and even fun in-the-moment teaching can be.

Yep, we know this example is a plug for our product! But of course, a parent can take advantage of anything that a kiddo would be interested in, be it a video on a cell phone, a book in a doctor's office, or something else.

## Making reinforcement as effective as possible

Here are some suggestions for making reinforcement efforts as effective as possible.

### 1. Your reaction should be quick and specific to the desired behavior.

Positive Behavior	→	Parent Reaction (Reinforcement)
Child says, "Hi."	→	Parent <u>quickly</u> responds and praises, "Hi, Jack! Good job saying 'Hi'!" + gives a high 5
Child points at a cat.	→	Parent <u>immediately</u> looks at the cat + responds, "I see the cat!" + tickles the child.
Child makes eye contact.	→	Parent <u>quickly</u> responds with, "Caleb is looking at Dad! I see Caleb! Peek a Boo!" while maintaining eye contact
Child presses "Yes" on her assistive technology device in response to parent's question, "Go home?"	→	Parent <u>immediately</u> prepares for leaving + responds, "Ruby says, 'Yes!' Let's go home!" (Parent does not linger, they leave right away.)
Child pushes button on water fountain after parent says, "Push the button."	→	<u>As</u> water squirts up, Parent praises, "Wow, great job pressing the button. Jackson, you get to drink because you pressed the button." Dad's praise enhances the inherent reinforcement of water squirting up.

Responding as quickly as possible is very important because you want your child to connect the positive response to the desirable behavior.

The contrasting Claire/pizza scenarios from pg. 19 illustrate this point. In Scenario #1, Claire is way more likely to understand that Mom gives her more pizza because Claire said, “Pizza.” However, in Scenario #2, even though Claire eventually gets more pizza, what Mom did right after Claire saying “Pizza,” was to continue to look at her cell phone. Further when she does give Claire more pizza, she makes no mention of Claire having said, “Pizza.”

Tip: Your child’s SLP can give you guidance on what is the right wording for your responses and praise.

## 2. React to the desired behavior in a way that is enjoyable to your child.

This is probably obvious, but you want your child to enjoy your reaction to her/his positive behavior. No two kids are the same, so what one child enjoys, another might find too loud or intense. The next page has a list of suggestions.

We realize that for some kids it can be hard to figure out what will be reinforcing or to come up with new, fresh ways (try not to reinforce the same way all the time). In really tough cases, ask your child’s team to help you identify new ways to reinforce your child. A reinforcement questionnaire or inventory might help (they should know what that is).

*What about undesirable or negative behavior? How should parents react to that?*

There are times when ignoring -- if possible -- an undesirable behavior can be a very effective parenting strategy. However, most parents would agree that dealing with challenging behaviors is way more complicated than simply ignoring a child. Talk to your child’s team about what to say and do when your child behaves in a negative way.

We are big fans of after-the-moment teaching to help kids understand the negative effects of negative behaviors (see our separate *Tips* for examples). Additionally, direct teaching of desirable, positive behaviors coupled with reinforcement when a child engages in these should be part of a plan to replace negative behaviors with positive ones. A true school-home collaboration can really make a difference!

**What is a “reinforcer”?** For our purposes, a reinforcer is something a parent says, does, or uses to reinforce a desired behavior.

**Reinforcers (non-tangible):**

- Praise (See p. 28, “MooBoo’s Perspective on Praise”)
- High 5
- Hug
- Quick tickle
- Silly blow (making a silly sound by blowing on the belly, neck or arm)
- Make a funny face, or tell child you will copy her/his funny face
- Spinning a child around
- Swinging a child through your legs
- Lifting a child up high when she/he jumps
- Quick game of peek-a-boo
- Quick knock-knock joke
- Quick clapping game
- Quick jump up and down
- Quick run to somewhere close and back

**Low Key Reinforcers (non-tangible):**

- Gentle hug, arm squeeze (for a child who likes pressure)
- Soft stroking or very light tickle on arm, hand, or face
- Gentle blowing in a child’s face, or with a small, handheld fan
- Silent cheer in a setting where you can’t be loud, or for kid who dislikes loud cheering

**Reinforcers (tangible):**

- Small piece of candy
- Small cracker
- Sip of fruit punch
- Sticker
- Blowing bubbles
- Time with a special toy, book, fidget spinner, video or app game, etc.
- Apps that make an appealing sound (e.g., cheer, honk, animal sound) that a parent can play immediately following a desirable behavior



### **MooBoo's perspective on using candy or other tangible as a reinforcer:**

While tangible reinforcers such as candy can be very effective, adults need to exercise caution using them, or save them for teaching “high stakes” behaviors.

An example of using a tangible reinforcer is a parent quickly giving a child an M&M® after the child follows a verbal direction to “sit down.” Using something tangible to reinforce desired behavior can be very effective.

However, tangible reinforcers can sometimes be problematic. We do not want children to become dependent on food reinforcers so that only candy or other food is effective. Obviously, there are health concerns with junk food. Additionally, even if the tangible reinforcer is not a food item, what if you run out or forget it when you are away from home, say at the playground? You have way more flexibility with non-tangibles. Last, using tangible reinforcers gets tricky when there are other siblings or peers. They will surely want candy or a sticker as well!

Please do not think we are saying food and other tangible reinforcers are bad or wrong. We believe at times they can be extremely effective. They can be especially helpful with certain “high stakes” behaviors such as potty training and staying in bed at night. For these behaviors, the process for learning can be hard and take longer which is why you want to use something really effective. By the way, for high stakes behaviors especially ones that have to do with safety, we recommend you collaborate with your child’s team on developing a comprehensive, planned-out approach (that includes a token or other reinforcement system) that’s implemented at home and in school.

If you are using a tangible reinforcer, ideally your child should only receive that particular tangible when the child engages in a desired behavior. Additionally, keep in mind that if you use the same reinforcer constantly, it will lose its “power.” Switch your reinforcer periodically, and definitely if you notice your child has lost enthusiasm for it. (This is true for tangible and intangible ones.)

### **3. Generally (during the course of daily life) try hard to be self-aware of how you react (or not) to your child.**

Parents sometimes unintentionally reinforce negative behaviors. The classic example of this is when a child swears and an adult laughs. Now you have a kid who will swear again to get a laugh. Oops! Another example is when a parent gives a screaming child candy to quiet her. Unfortunately, the parent's reaction of giving candy reinforces the screaming behavior. Nobody is perfect. Nobody! Try (and we know this can be hard) to think before you react to negative behavior.

Additionally, self-monitor for over-doing praise or giving treats as reinforcement. Kids are vulnerable to becoming dependent on this kind of response. More on over-doing praise on the next page.

Last, while in certain situations not reacting is a good teaching tool (ignoring negative behavior or holding off on giving help to foster problem-solving), please watch yourself for tuning out *too much* when you are with your child. It's pretty easy to get drawn into one's cell phone or other device! But when you are on it you might be inadvertently discouraging your child from being social with you. Therefore, be careful about your own “screen time” and when possible: say “hi” back to your child; answer a child’s question; respond to a child’s observation or comment on something; point and look to where a child is pointing; smile back; take whatever it is your child is handing to you; and give something in response to a request.

### **4. Be careful about promising in advance a reward for positive behavior.**

Reinforcement is not exactly the same thing as a reward. Reinforcement is a reaction or response. By reward we mean when a parent promises in advance to give a child something (like candy) if a child will engage in a desirable behavior.

While the promise of a reward can be motivating, be very careful about making promises. The promise of “*If you do X, I will give you Y,*” might backfire. Some smart kiddos, and/or their siblings will begin to bargain, or worse, blackmail you! Additionally, if you promise “X” but then cannot or do not deliver “X,” then your child might conclude your promises are not reliable, which will lessen her/his motivation the next time you make a promise.

Notwithstanding the pitfalls of promising a reward, a carefully structured reward system, such as a token system, can be very effective. We love token systems! Talk to your child’s team if you are interested in trying one with your child.

## **MooBoo's perspective on praise:**

### **1. If your child responds positively to praise:**

Describe exactly what your child did to earn your praise. So instead of a generic "Good job," you would say, "Good job coming to Daddy!" We love specific, descriptive praise because:

- a) it helps a child to comprehend and connect her/his positive behavior to the praise (otherwise, the child might not realize exactly what she/he did to earn the praise);
- b) it helps with building language skills because a parent is describing out loud what the child is doing.

Careful! There are risks of over-doing praise: 1. it might become less meaningful/kids might tune it out; 2. some kids might be vulnerable to becoming overly adult dependent or doing things solely to please.

Do not forget the power of inherent or naturally occurring reinforcement, that happens as a result of the positive behavior. For example, a boy asks a girl, "Can I have a turn with the shovel?" The girl gives the boy the shovel. The boy's asking nicely is reinforced by the girl giving him a turn, regardless of whether a grown-up praises or in some other way reinforces the positive behavior.

### **2. If your child does not respond positively to energetic praise:**

Neutrally describe out loud the desirable behavior while you reinforce it. For example, when Zack says, "More juice please," Mom immediately pours more juice while responding in a casual, neutral tone of voice, "Yes, you can have more juice. Zack said, 'more juice please,' so Mommy gets Zack more juice." As with descriptive praise, neutral describing is very important to help the child connect the desired behavior to the reinforcer, as well as a strategy to build language.

Tip: If possible, have someone discreetly videotape as you interact with and attempt to reinforce your child. Have your child's professionals review the video to give you feedback and suggestions.

### Parents can be reinforced (and discouraged) too.

Parents, did you know *you* can be reinforced by your child's successes? Reinforcement is a two-way street. Think about a situation where because of your time and effort, you see positive progress in your child. That is a really good feeling. The result is that you are more likely to continue with efforts to foster progress in your child. Same thing with if you figure out how to connect positively with a stimmy or solitary child with autism. It feels wonderful to connect, even if briefly, and the end result is that you the parent are reinforced to keep trying to connect.

However, we all strike out on efforts to teach and interact with our kiddos with autism. Sometimes it can feel downright discouraging and mustering the motivation to keep trying is hard. Please don't give up! *If you feel that despite your reinforcement efforts your child is not making progress, time to talk to your child's team.*

### A final word on reinforcement

**We understand that parents of kids with autism are extremely busy or need a break. However, with all those unstructured hours in a day – mealtime, in the car, getting dressed, playtime, and so on -- there is plenty of opportunity for parents to plug in here and there some brief in-the-moment teaching including reinforcement.**

**Even more important, we also understand that parents are not, nor should they be, actual therapists. It's okay to “just be a parent.” We do strongly believe, however, in the power of parents to foster progress in their kids. If you take the time to learn some ways to help your child, you truly will make a difference!**



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