

UNM CDD/NMPED Educator Voices Podcast

Classroom Essentials - Reinforcement

1. The primary way we teach is through the use of **reinforcement** to increase the likelihood of an identified behavior occurring the next time a given set of circumstances occur. While reinforcement is what we use to teach (and the way we all learn); reinforcement is happening all the time and comes from all kinds of sources – not just you, as the teacher. Think about other kids, other adults and all the things that might happen in the total environment. We often make the mistake of thinking that something is, or should be reinforcing because we think it is or other kids like it.

2. The only way you can know something is a “reinforcer” is through its function on a behavior. A reinforcer maintains or increases the future occurrence of the behavior that it is linked to. For example: If you give a piece of candy following the completion of work, it may seem to be likely that the student will complete work the next time. However, the candy is only reinforcing if it directly results in maintaining or increasing work. Keep in mind that reinforcement may be coming from other sources. You may be giving candy but the other kids are giving attention for other behaviors. Even the act of presenting the candy may provide reinforcing attention (as opposed to have a jar of candy that is readily accessible). The reinforcement from attention may be the more powerful than the candy and is actually maintaining the behavior. Some things to remember:

- A reward may be something nice to have but it may not be a reinforcer. The student may say “thanks” for the candy but may not complete work the next time. It was a reward, not a reinforcer.
- Teachers may use a lot of rewards and not get the desired results. A reinforcer is best individualized to the student and used when the student is motivated to earn the reinforcer.
 - For example: There’s pizza for lunch! Student loves pizza! Student does not like to wash hands, but you have to wash hands before lunch. Student washes hands and gets pizza. What do you think would happen if you offered student a sticker if he washed hands? What do you think would happen if you told student to wash hands at “hygiene” time just for practice?

It’s very easy to reinforce a behavior you don’t really want to reinforce! All behaviors occur for a reason (serve a function). Those functions are getting something (**tangible**), getting out of something (**escape**), getting **attention**, and getting sensory input that is fun or feels good (**automatic**).

Some examples:

- Student throws his work on the floor and yells when it’s time to work. Teacher sends student to the office! Oh no - Student just got reinforced for not doing work! **Escape**

- When student bangs her head on the desk, teacher gives “deep pressure” input! Oh no – Student just got reinforced for banging her head on the desk! **Automatic**
- Whenever students speak out without raising hands, teacher stops lesson, asks them to raise hands and wait to be called on. Oh no – students have just been reinforced for speaking out of turn! **Attention**
- Student hits other kids when they are playing with things that she wants to play with. Other kids give her what she wants so they don’t get hit. Oh no – Student just got reinforced by getting what she wanted. (**Tangible**)

Some things to remember about reinforcers:

- Nothing works forever (except maybe money!)
- A reward may not necessarily be reinforcing for a particular student (i.e. may not affect behavior)
- Reinforcers must be individualized – not all kids like the same things! It’s easy to get stuck in a reinforcement “rut” expecting the same things to continue to work for a long time and for lots of kids. That might very decrease the effectiveness of the reinforcer – the student stops responding and the teacher throws out the intervention that might have worked well given a tweak in the reinforcer.
- **We all behave for reinforcement!**