

# REINFORCEMENT

## GOAL

Understand how reinforcement is different from motivation. Learn why reinforcement is important and how to use it effectively with your child.

## BACKGROUND

Reinforcement is closely related to motivation except that it follows a behavior. Just like you, your child must be motivated to perform a task and that behavior must be followed by reinforcement if you want it to continue.

The concept of reinforcement applies to everyone, not just your child.

## WHAT IS REINFORCEMENT?

Reinforcement strengthens behavior. Think about why you do some of the things you do. In the lesson on motivation, we talked about how you go to work to earn a paycheck, but there are other behaviors you engage in because of the reinforcers you receive.

When your phone rings, do you pick up the call? The answer depends on your reinforcement history. If, in the past, good things have resulted from answering the phone, then you're likely to pick up the call. You might pick up the call if you see it's a friend calling because talking to your friend is reinforcing. If you see it's a telemarketer, will you pick up? Maybe not because it's unlikely that doing so will result in something positive.

# USING REINFORCEMENT

## **Positive association**

Teaching your child new skills involves making an association between a specific behavior and something positive occurring. This is the basics of reinforcement. Some behaviors have naturally occurring results. For example, washing your hands results in having clean hands. Clean hands are motivating for some people, but not for everyone. Some children need a little extra reinforcement to make the task valuable.

## **What motivates your child?**

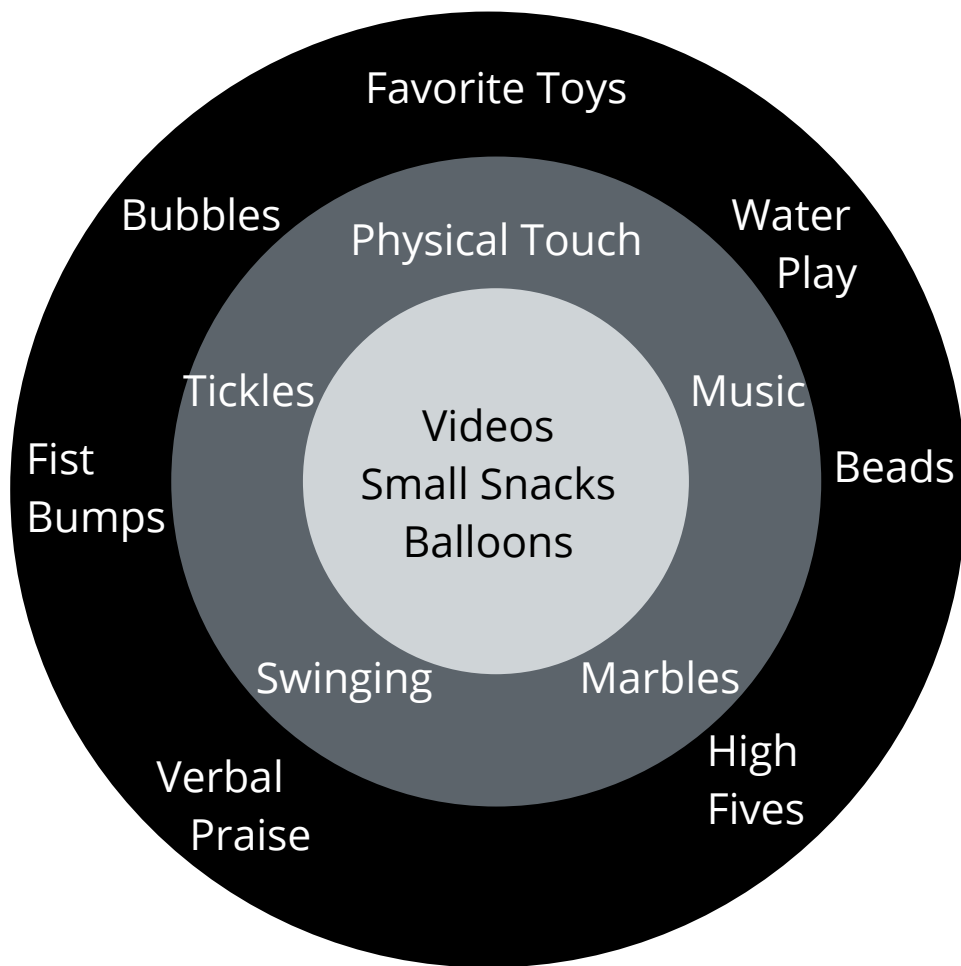
When planning for reinforcement for your child, you must first determine what motivates your child to perform different tasks. Some children are highly motivated by a feeling of accomplishment for having completed a task such as peddling a tricycle or making a basket. When asked to complete a task that's more difficult such as reading a book, some children need something more to stay motivated.

## **Finding reinforcers**

Think about those items or activities that your child seems most interested in. These are all potential reinforcers. How about bubbles, tickles, swinging, balloons, beads, favorite toys, music, videos, water play, small snacks, high fives, verbal praise, fist bumps, physical touch, or marbles? Do any of these things motivate your child? Are there other things he enjoys?

## **LIST POTENTIAL REINFORCERS FOR YOUR CHILD**





## CHOOSING THE REINFORCER

**Consider the following when selecting which reinforcer to use from your list.**

Once you have a list, think about how motivating each item is. In this example, the most motivating items are listed in the inner circle with the items that are usually motivating in the middle circle and the ones that are sometimes motivating in the outer circle. The items in the outer circle will be used for easy tasks or throughout the day for things your child already knows how to do. The most reinforcing items on the list will be saved for your child's most difficult tasks.

Next, you need to think about how often he needs reinforcers. When teaching your child new skills, it's often best to provide reinforcement following each attempt your child makes. When your child needs help performing the skill, use a reinforcer in the middle or outer circles, but when he performs the new skill on his own, use a reinforcer in the inner circle.

# HOW MUCH REINFORCEMENT?

## **Match the difficulty of the task**

The amount of reinforcement should match your child's perception of the difficulty of the task. If your child sees the task as difficult, give her more reinforcement for completing the task. Keep in mind that what your child sees as difficult isn't necessarily what you see as difficult.

"More" reinforcement could mean more of the specific item such as more water beads or it could mean a longer amount of time with a preferred activity such as bubbles or it might also mean that you give her something she likes more than the other possible reinforcers.

## **Limiting access**

Keep in mind that if your child has free or frequent access to a preferred item or activity she's unlikely to find that item or activity motivating. Imagine going up to your child while she's swinging and saying "when you clean up your toys, you can swing!" She's not likely to want to rush inside and clean up.

This reinforcer will be much more motivating if she's not already swinging.

## **Using reinforcement**

Give your child access to the promised reinforcer as soon after the behavior as possible to make sure she associates the reinforcer with the behavior and you reinforce the right behavior. Picture this common situation:

You tell your child she earned swinging for cleaning up her toys, then while on your way to the swing you answer a call on your cell phone. While you're talking on the phone she starts throwing rocks. You end your call and help her up on the swing. What behavior have you reinforced? Probably throwing rocks. Do your best to give a reinforcer as quickly after a behavior as possible.

This might seem like a lot to remember, but it gets easier with practice. Keep these things in mind. Choose a reinforcer that will motivate your child to complete the task you want to reinforce then give her the reinforcer as quickly as you can after she completes the task. Those are the most important pieces. You will get better at providing reinforcement over time.