

THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVATION WHEN TEACHING NEW SKILLS

GOAL

Understand how motivation and reinforcement impact the acquisition of new skills. Learn what a reinforcer is and why it's important to your child's success.

BACKGROUND

Think about why you do some of the things you do. Why do you go to work each day? Is it for the love of your job? Even if you do love aspects of your job, it's a rare individual who loves his job so much that he would do it without receiving a paycheck.

Your child also needs a paycheck when you want him to do something he wouldn't choose to do on his own. He won't go to the bank to cash it, you have to use a currency that's valuable to him. It's unlikely that money holds the same value for your child as it does for you. She probably prefers something a bit more tangible such as a video, toy, game or a favorite snack.

YOUR CHILD NEEDS A PAYCHECK THAT'S MEANINGFUL TO HIM

What would you do if you showed up to work one day and your boss told you he decided that this week, instead of your usual pay, he would give you apples. Apples are a healthy snack and as they say "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." And besides, if you stay healthy, you can work more. How long would you continue to show up at work? If you're honest, you probably wouldn't let him finish the last sentence before you walked out the door.

Your child feels the same way when you try to encourage him to learn a new skill, offering him praise or a sticker in return. Those things, although great for some, are not his currency. You have to find the items, activities, and interactions that drive him to want to do what you're teaching him to do. In ABA we call these reinforcers.

GIVING YOUR CHILD WHAT HE WANTS

Parents commonly give their children the things they know they want. This happens for a variety of reasons:

- ✓ They want their kids to be happy and even see it as their job to make them happy. This starts in infancy. When the baby cries, parents feed, change and comfort their child. As the baby grows into a toddler then a preschooler, there's no point where the parent receives some sort of sign saying it's time to put their child to work.
- ✓ When the kids have what they want, everyone is happy.
- ✓ Parents work hard and need a break. If the kids have what they want, they are usually occupied and the parents can catch their breath.

All this becomes even more true and profound when their child has a disability such as autism.

- ✓ Many parents don't know for sure what their child is capable of so they hesitate to place demands and give free access to what their child enjoys.
- ✓ Their child's responses become even more dramatic if they don't have what they want.
- ✓ They feel guilty that their child is struggling and want to do whatever they can to make life easier for them.

All of these things perpetuate parents doing more for their child than is necessary and allowing their child to have what he wants. This does not make them bad parents, just unsupported.

To teach a child to complete a task, engage in an activity or even communicate, what's the one thing that child needs more than anything else?

Motivation!

IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVATION


REINFORCERS

What motivates your child?

Without motivation, your child has no reason to do anything other than what he already does. This makes him no different than you or I.

Once you find those reinforcers, you have to guard them carefully. Think of it this way: If you had a money tree in your back yard that produced a million dollars a day, would you go to work tomorrow? What if your boss offered to pay you a million dollars a day? What if he added praise on top of that? You might choose to do parts of your job you enjoy and find fulfilling, but you're not going to do everything he wants you to do.

WHAT MOTIVATES YOUR CHILD?



FREE ACCESS

Does your child have free access to reinforcers?

When your child has free access to the reinforcers he values the most, he has that money tree in his back yard. There is no reason for him to go to work. He will get what he wants whether he completes his "job" or not.

FINDING EFFECTIVE REINFORCERS

Choice has been identified as an successful way to find effective reinforcers. Watch your child and see how she reacts to different reinforcers you offer her. Reinforcers are likely to change in their effectiveness over time. Their effectiveness can also be influenced by:

- ✓ Other activities going on around them (i.e. siblings watching TV, a dog running around the yard, etc.)
- ✓ Time of day (i.e. before or after a meal, just before bedtime, etc.)
- ✓ Amount of effort already expended in the day (i.e. just getting home from school or therapy)

Keep these factors in mind when deciding what to offer your child as a reinforcer. Offer her a choice between 2 different items (i.e. strawberries and a video). If she can speak, she might tell you what she wants. If she can't speak, watch for her to reach for the item she wants.

WHAT MIGHT IMPACT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR REINFORCERS?

