

6. POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

“The way positive reinforcement is carried out is more important than the amount.”

—B.F. Skinner

We all need positive reinforcement. Whether or not we are consciously aware of it, reinforcement is the reason we continue to do many things. Even as adults, we look for positive reinforcement to extend our motivation to do things.



An individual who is trying to lose weight is motivated by the friend who gives a compliment on his or her appearance.

How many of us would continue to work at our jobs if our employer stopped paying us?

Providing Manitoba students with something they value in order to increase a desired behaviour can be as simple as offering a smile or as complex as setting up a token system. Personal recognition lets students know that teachers are interested in them and how they behave, and are concerned about supporting them in making positive changes in their behaviour and learning. Positive reinforcement also helps to build positive relationships by modelling appropriate ways of interacting with others.

Choose Effective Reinforcers

Effective positive reinforcement

- is age-appropriate
- is at the student’s level of functioning
- has administrative and parental support
- is genuine

Even extravagant rewards cannot motivate students to demonstrate skills they have not learned or do not understand.

Positive reinforcement works best when given immediately after the desired behaviour, or as soon as possible. If the desired behaviour increases as a result, then the reinforcement was positive. If not, then reinforcement did not occur. Many teachers set up a monitoring system to measure whether desired behaviours are increasing.

For more information, please see Key Element 8, Gathering Data to Understand Classroom Behaviour.

Watch for unintended consequences. For example, if students engage in negative behaviour to get attention and the teacher's response provides that attention, the negative behaviour will likely increase.

Equal is not always fair.

For some students, the educator will need to approach discipline in a manner that considers the student's exceptional learning needs, including whether

- the student was able to access the information
- the student could understand the policy or rules
- the disciplinary actions used for the majority of the students are appropriate for the student

(Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006a, 18)

Specific reinforcers that work for one student or one group of students may not work for another. Finding appropriate reinforcers requires careful attention and an understanding of individual student needs. Be alert for students' interests. Typical reinforcers include extra recess time, extra computer time, caring for a class pet, or using special art supplies. Ask students, parents, last year's teachers, and other staff what might be an effective reinforcer for a particular student.

Students of any age can complete a checklist of reinforcers to identify the rewards they would like to earn. Alternatively, teachers can create a reinforcement sampler from which students can choose. A sampler menu containing a variety of reinforcers also keeps students motivated.



See **Tool 5: Elementary Reinforcer Menu** and **Tool 7: Secondary Reinforcer Menu** for sample reinforcer menus.



Also see **Section 6: Discipline Strategies and Interventions Support Materials** in *Towards Inclusion: From Challenges to Possibilities: Planning for Behaviour* (Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, 2001)

www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/specedu/documents.html

Always give the reinforcer after the desired behaviour, never before. If the desired behaviour does not occur and the reinforcer has already been given, the result can be conflict and oppositional behaviour.

Effective reinforcers

- are considerate of the age and stage of the student and individual need (i.e., some students are extremely self-conscious and do not want attention drawn to themselves)
- are provided immediately after the behaviour has occurred
- are provided frequently
- are paired with a clear verbal description of the behaviour
- are delivered with enthusiasm
- are varied enough to maintain interest
- are delivered continuously at first, and then more intermittently later on
- can happen on a fixed schedule (e.g., every time a behaviour is observed or every third time a behaviour is observed) or on a variable schedule (e.g., randomly given on the first response, then the fourth, then the second, but averaged to a predetermined number)
- fade out over time – begin combining material rewards or privileges with social reinforcement on a continuous schedule, moving toward an increasingly intermittent schedule; gradually move from artificial to more natural reinforcement

Social Reinforcement

A smile, comment, and/or compliment can go a long way toward increasing or maintaining positive student behaviour. Many students need significant amounts of social reinforcement and positive attention.

Walking around the classroom gives the teacher opportunities to socially reinforce positive behaviour (and to anticipate and proactively handle problems). Being at the door to greet students as they arrive and spending at least half the class time walking among students as they work are perhaps the easiest and most proactive approaches a teacher can take to reinforce positive classroom behaviour.

Build Anticipation

Positive reinforcement builds motivation (and possibly excitement) around an expected behaviour. When students know what reinforcement they can expect if they demonstrate a particular behaviour, the desired behaviour is likely to occur more quickly and more often.

Anticipation strategies come before the behaviour occurs and serve to increase or maintain that behaviour.

- Tell students what types of behaviour you are looking for.
- Tell them what will happen if they demonstrate this behaviour.

- When they demonstrate the behaviour, give them immediate positive feedback and the reinforcer.

Some schools have successfully built anticipation related to positive reinforcement when developing their school-based positive behaviour support and intervention using The Principal's 200 Club and Mystery Motivator strategy (Jenson et al., 2006).



In *The Tough Kid: Principal's Briefcase* by Jenson et al., the authors propose establishing a "Principal's 200 Club," which works on the principle of "Catch Them Being Good." All staff participate in recognizing students by giving them 200 Club Tickets as they are successfully following the expectations/ demonstrating the target behaviour of the school. Students use the tickets to put their names on randomly chosen squares on a 15 x 15 grid. When the grid has a row, column, or diagonal of 15 winning names, the lucky students get to come down to the office to receive the Mystery Motivator.

The Mystery Motivator is, as its name implies, a mystery to all the students up until the winners are declared. It is a large envelope with a question mark drawn on the outside and posted in a very visible, inaccessible spot in the school. Inside the envelope, the positive reinforcement is written, indicating what the winning 15 will receive. It can be as elaborate or as simple as you want to make it. The secret of success for the mystery motivator is when students don't know what it will be. They can't say "Oh, I already have one of those" or "Who wants to have lunch with the principal anyways!" It builds anticipation because of the unknown.

Interdependent Group Contingencies

Interdependent group contingency programs require an entire group of students to reach a designated goal in order to receive reinforcement. There are several advantages to using interdependent group contingencies, making them an appealing option for teachers. They have been found to be cost-effective, time efficient, and easy to implement. In whole-group contingency programs, either none or all of the students meet the goal and receive reinforcement. This makes it less complicated procedurally and, at the same time, allows for more activities to become available for reinforcement. In any type of interdependent contingency program, cooperation and encouragement are more likely to occur because it is in everyone's best interests to meet the goal.



A Manitoba teacher shares these interdependent contingency techniques, which have been used successfully in the classroom:

(1) 30 Days of No Blue Cards = Field Trip or Class Afternoon Party: I had a card chart in the classroom with each person's name. If one of the five classroom rules were violated, a card was flipped under that student's name. Yellow card = warning, red card = 15 minutes after school, and blue card = 30 minutes after school and a call home to parents. I tallied each day that no blue card was flipped on the board, and we continued to do this until 30 days were reached. Then the class got to plan a field trip. We reached 30 days three times throughout the year.

(2) PARTNER POINTS: The students were seated in partner groups, which changed at the beginning of each month. Each partner group was awarded points for a variety of things. The group with the most points at the end of the month received a prize (games, books, gift certificates). I made the prizes very motivating and this technique maintained its usefulness throughout the year! This technique was most beneficial in promoting smooth transitions between subjects, keeping students on task during work time, and keeping the classroom/desks organized. Many of the teachers in our school (who believe in group seating versus rows in the classroom) use this tool with MUCH success.

The PIZZA PARTY was used specifically for homework checks and work completion. I set the number of checks (50), put students into homework groups on the chart, and then summarized the number of homework checks each group had at the end of the set period of time. This system of grouping them on the chart instead of doing it individually encouraged students to help their teammates hand in the work, find it, remind each other that things are due, etc. Any student who got all the checks (even from a different group) were also invited to the pizza party.



The "Good Behaviour Game" is an evidence-based classroom management strategy that rewards youth for not engaging in aggressive and disruptive behaviours. Students are formed into teams, which are proportionately mixed by gender and behaviour. Each team receives a check mark whenever a team member exhibits disruptive behaviour, and a point for every period of time without (or with few) disruptive behaviours. Initially, the team with the most points at the end of each game period and week receives a tangible or activity incentive. Later, teams receive more abstract rewards.