



## AUTISM CLASSROOM RESOURCES PODCAST, EPISODE 25 REINFORCEMENT

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Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. I'm your host, Dr. Christine Reeve for more than 20 years. I've worn lots of hats in special education, but my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research-based practices in a practical way in your classroom to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources podcast, and I am Chris Reeve. I am your host. And today we are going to talk about reinforcement. And I know that reinforcement sounds like a really basic topic and many of you probably feel like, ah, I got that. I don't need this. But before you go, I just want to let you know that it's actually a little bit more complicated than we always realized, and it isn't as simple as just giving a student something or using a working for board. There are some ways that we can make it more effective and also keep our students from becoming too dependent on it because eventually we do want to fade it out.

Today I'm going to talk about what it is, some of the basic understandings. I'm going to talk about how you can best use it in your classroom, why we want to use it in our classroom, and then some strategies that will help you make it the most effective that it can be because reinforcement really is the basis of a lot of our interventions in a classroom, whether they're behavioral or instructional. And if we're not doing it right, then we aren't really building the skills or reducing the behaviors the way that we want to be doing that. Let's get started.



## What is Reinforcement?

Let's start with what reinforcement is. Reinforcement is a behavioral principle that comes out of ABA. There's tons of research that show that it's effective. It's essentially when a behavior or skill increases when it's followed by a specific item, activity or any kind of event. And if it is followed by that event and over time you see the behavior or the skill increase, then you have a reinforcer.

It's important to remember that reinforcement is not simply a token. It isn't just something that we give to a student. It isn't just something that we say, "Hey, give me a high five." All of those things have potential to be reinforcers, but if the behavior doesn't increase or the skill doesn't increase that those things follow, then it's not serving as a reinforcer. It's important to remember that reinforcement is a concept that is defined by its function rather than its form.

## Reinforcement Must Be Defined Functionally

I have lots of kids that I could give tokens to and never see a skill increase, because tokens are not reinforcing for them because no one has taken the time to associate the token with the reinforcers. There are a lot of reasons why we use reinforcement in the classroom. One of them that I think is the most important is because when we pair ourselves with things that the student likes and will work for, then we take on some of those reinforcing properties, and ultimately that's what we want. We want to be reinforcing for our students. We want them to come to work time. We want them to follow what we do because we want them to be concerned about what our response will be. That's essentially building that reinforcement component for us.



## Positive and Negative Reinforcement


Now, there's two kinds of reinforcement, and I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this, but positive reinforcement means we're giving something. Negative reinforcement means something is being taken away. For instance, I could be working with a child and if I'm really having a hard time finding good reinforcers for him, I might use what's called negative reinforcement, which is not punishment, which is whenever he gets the right answer I say, "Great!" And I take the work away. And I say, "Go play," or, "Go enjoy yourself," and he gets the work removed. Having the work removed may serve to increase those correct responses. If that's the case, then we're using negative reinforcement. We're taking something away, but the behavior or the skill is still increasing. Always remember that if you're using reinforcement, if the thing that it follows is not increasing, we're not using reinforcement.

## People Are Reinforced By Different Things

Next up, it's really important to recognize that, I know this is going to be just such a shock for everyone, we all don't like the same things, and we all don't work for the same things, and we all aren't reinforced by the same things. I know, that's like amazing. We really have to go and figure that out, and for most of you that are working in special ed, if you work with students with autism or other severe disabilities, many times their reinforcers are not the typical, give me a high five, here is a token, those kinds of things.

## Identifying Reinforcers

And we really have to go deep and try to figure out what kinds of things might be reinforcing. It might be getting out of work might be reinforcing. There's a couple things that we can do. And in the blog post I will put a link to some strategies and some tools that you can use to do preference assessments where we ask what is reinforcing of the family or the student



themselves and other ways that we can observe that a student is actually engaging with activities that have the potential to increase the behavior. Just keep in mind that when you go looking for those reinforcers, if you actually put them into practice and you don't see the skill or the behavior increase, they're not a reinforcer. They're just something that they like. Just keep that in mind and I'll try to stop hammering it over the head.


## Characteristics of Reinforcers

There are also a number of things that we want to think about when we use reinforcers. Reinforcers are not just the item. We always pair an item or an activity or an event that is working as a reinforcer with something from us, praise, high five, a token. We always want to associate it with something that doesn't require us to take 10 minutes and watch a video, because eventually, I don't want to take 10 minutes after every correct skill to watch a video, but it might be where I start. And then over time when I associate myself with that video, I may become more reinforcing, and we can work for something involving me that may be shorter.

Eventually, I could pair tokens with getting that item and eventually I might be able to use a token board instead of watching a video for 10 minutes. It's also important that we're using enough reinforcement to drive behavior, to increase the skill, but that we're not using it so much that it loses its power.

## Reinforcers Get Old

Another life-shattering idea. Reinforcers get old. Reinforcers, people get tired of them, they stop working, and it doesn't mean that they'll stop working forever, but it does mean that we want to hold some of our reinforcers back for those really hard skills so the powerful reinforcers are needed for the skills that are the most difficult to increase, but also that we want to vary up our reinforcers so that they don't get old. And it can be a variation of the event or the item, so I have a ton of windup toys or a ton




of sticky things. And we can also change the way that we present things so we can make reinforcers more interesting and sometimes more reinforcing by the way that we present them.

## Mix It Up in Instruction

If I can present it as a surprise. I've put things in envelopes and had students have to open them up to find out what their reinforcer is and I've chosen from their list of reinforcers. I use all different kinds of containers and I put the reinforcers in them, so they choose one and it's a surprise. I might put something in my pocket and say, "I've got a surprise for you. Guess what it's going to be? Going to have to wait and see." And that's going to make it more interesting. A lot of how we sell it becomes a piece of it too. It isn't the item itself. And if you can make yourself part of the reinforcing experience, so if you are required to blow the bubbles to the preschooler because he can't do it himself, you take on some of those positive characteristics and eventually if you can make the reinforcement more engaging because you're part of it, then you have a really good way to make yourself reinforcing and slowly start to fade those more concrete activity or item reinforcers out.

## Competing Reinforcement

It's also important to recognize when we're dealing with behavior that many times we're dealing with competing reinforcers. So if I'm just saying, "Hey, here's a penny. Here's a penny for the penny board. Here's a penny for the penny board." And his peers are laughing hysterically whenever he engages in this negative behavior, then he may have a really big reinforcer for the negative behavior that I'm going to have to compete with. A really good example of that is a student who engages in behavior to get people's attention. If you've got a kid who comes in and he engages in this crazy talk because people respond to him, then I need to make sure that my response




to his appropriate way of asking for attention, of raising his hand, calling my name, gets that big reaction from the whole class as well, That I have to make sure that my reinforcers can compete with the reinforcers that exist.

I also want to make sure that I'm using them in a way that increases their value because I didn't just have a whole bunch of them. If I just gave you a whole bag of pretzels, you're probably not going to want very many more pretzels. And so if I can make sure that I do my instruction before snack instead of after snack, that may make my reinforcers more powerful. It's also very important that we use our reinforcers to reinforce specific behaviors that we have clearly defined.

## Reinforce Specific Behaviors

You don't want to reinforce a student just for being there, just for getting to the end of work time unless persistence and participation or remaining in a seat is what you are focusing on. If those are the skills, recognize that that's what you're reinforcing and you're not focusing on whether or not he gets correct answers. But if you're trying to increase the number of math problems that he gets correct, then you're going to need to make sure that you're only giving the reinforcer for correct answers and not for just, "Oh, we got to the end of math time. Here's your reinforcer."

Because then we run the risk of, it doesn't matter what answer I give you because once we get to the end of 15 minutes, I get it anyway. Now he may not think that or be able to articulate that to you, but that is how human behavior is working. We want to recognize that. We also want to make sure that we are reinforcing the behavior or the skill and using what we call behavior specific reinforcement. I like the way you're sitting. Rather than reinforcing the child, we want to make sure that we're reinforcing, "I like the



way you're staying in your seat," rather than "You're a good boy." You're a good boy doesn't give me any information. So if we can use behavior specific praise and focus our reinforcement on specifically the thing that we're trying to increase, we're going to see better effects over time.


## Reinforcement Should be Individualized

Next up, when we're using especially a classroom management system, we want to make sure that we're individualizing reinforcement because not everybody likes the same thing. And we've talked about that. You want to make sure that you're using the reinforcers for this student, which may or may not be the same as reinforcers for that student. You want to make sure that your systems have enough flexibility that you can use what is reinforcing and actually increases the behavior for that individual student. And finally, we want to make sure that we're reinforcing regularly, consistently, and frequently when we start with a new skill.

## Move Toward Fading Reinforcers

When we start teaching a new skill, we use powerful reinforcers. We use them for longer periods of time and we want to make sure that we're reinforcing every single correct response or every single appropriate replacement behavior. But over time we want to start to spread that out because I'm pretty sure that your principal doesn't stand in your classroom and say, "I like the way you gave him praise. I like the way you differentiated that skill. I like the way you presented that trial. I like the way you took that data." They don't. That's not what the real world looks like and we want our students to get there as well.

In order to do that, once you start to see those skills start to increase and it starts to take off a little bit, then we start spreading the reinforcement out. We can do that by using a token system where we're pairing a penny



every time we give a reinforcer and then we're just shifting over to using the pennies. We can do it where we're reinforcing every other response or we're doing out of three responses and we're randomly choosing this one. The next one, we wait to, we do another one. But we want to make sure that we are spreading those reinforcers out so that A, they don't get old, they don't get stale, and B, you're making your learning more resilient.

## Intermittent Reinforcement


When you get reinforced for something every single time, we lose that skill more frequently. Think about a slot machine. If you go and play a slot machine, it doesn't pay off every time, but they pay off just enough to keep you there. And so you find oftentimes it's hard to pull yourself away because that slot machine is paying off intermittently. And so it's maintaining that behavior much more strongly than if you were sitting at a slot machine and boom, you've got a jackpot! Boom, you got a jackpot! Boom, you got a jackpot! Boom, you got a jackpot! And now we go for 10 minutes with no jackpot. At some point in that 10 minutes, I'm probably going to wander away because I'm going to figure out, eh, the machine went cold or something's wrong. And so that intermittent reinforcement keeps us coming back.

## Like a Slot Machine

And it's important to recognize that when we want to increase the behavior and make it stronger, but it's also important to remember that when we want to decrease behavior that we might be the jackpot. If we're reinforcing it even on an intermittent schedule, we're making it worse. We're making it stronger because now he just keeps doing it until someone finally reacts.

And I talked a little bit about that in one of our earlier podcasts in terms of responding to challenging behavior, and I'll put that link in our blog post as





well. Just to kind of sum up, if your behavior, your skill that you're targeting is not increasing, you're not using a reinforcer or your reinforcement isn't working. We want to make sure that we use powerful reinforcers, that we are individualizing for each student, we're using the things that we'll be reinforcing for them, pairing ourselves with reinforcement so that we can fade the reinforcers out, making sure that we are reinforcing specific behaviors that we have targeted and not just general participation, that we are varying our reinforcers so they don't get old and selling them so that they are more engaging, and that we are starting by reinforcing every single time and then fading our reinforcement out by spreading it out in an intermittent way.

I hope that gives you some ideas of things to think about. There are some tools for finding reinforcers in the blog post. Go to [AutismClassroomResources.com/episode25](https://autismclassroomresources.com/episode25), and there you'll find a link to join our community with our free resource library that has 30 video clips that are all less than five minutes, some of which are on using reinforcement for behavior that can be helpful as well as links to preference assessments and some tips for reinforcement. Thank you so much for spending this time with me for this episode. I hope you'll be back next week when I'll be talking about the myths of reinforcement and hopefully busting them up a little bit.