

URL: <http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode26>

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.

Reinforcement is the underpinning of so much of what we do in special education classrooms that I think it's important that we really understand how it works, why it works, how it doesn't work, and why we want to use it, because so many of our interventions are reliant upon it.

So [last week I talked about what reinforcement is](#), how it's defined functionally. If something doesn't increase, it's not actually a reinforcer. Today, I want to talk about five misconceptions or myths about reinforcement that I sometimes hear as reasons for not using it.

Reinforcement Myth #1

Probably the most popular myth, and the one that I hear the most and probably accompanies most resistance that I get to reinforcers at times, is this idea that reinforcement will make students dependent upon it. That if we use reinforcement, students will need to have edibles or stickers or tokens or whatever in response to just doing what they should be doing every day anyway.

I think this is probably one that is populated a lot in the national media. We certainly see a lot of articles and things like that about why reinforcement is bad and we should stop reinforcing all of our students.



Behavioral Fact #1

I've got to tell you that we all use reinforcement. Reinforcement is a behavioral process. It is not something that just exists solely in the world of special education. It is something that affects all of us. We all have reinforcers. We all eat when we're hungry because it makes that hunger feeling going away and many of us like the taste of food. So that is reinforcing.

It is a natural process of our behavioral lives. So the idea that using it is something out of the ordinary is the first problem with that.

Behavioral Fact #2

The second is that we don't have any evidence that our students, if reinforcement is used correctly, that our students become dependent upon it. The way that reinforcement works, we introduce it, we use it more frequently when we're teaching new behaviors or new skills, when we want to increase those things, and then over time we fade it out. We fade it out because we recognize that reinforcement for every single correct answer is not the way the natural world works.

I said [in my last broadcast](#), your principal probably doesn't stand over your shoulder and say, "Oh, that's good reinforcing, that's good using that token system, I liked the way you praised him." That's just not the way things work.

The idea that reinforcement becomes dependent is problematic because the rest of the world just won't support it. So one of the things that we do have to make sure that we do when we're using reinforcement is we start off with pretty dense reinforcement schedules. This means we reinforce pretty often with pretty strong reinforcers. But over time we start increasing how much is required before you get reinforced. We start increasing the quality of the behavior that we're trying to reinforce. And slowly the amount of direct reinforcement that we provide fades out.

In addition, we are always pairing reinforcement with a strategy that is available more within the individual's regular environment. So for instance, we typically pair our reinforcers with praise so that we become a reinforcer. Our praise becomes meaningful.



We always want to make sure that we are looking around our environment and thinking about how is this behavior going to be maintained when we're done teaching it. Where do we need to get to be able to fade ourselves out of the picture? So reinforcers don't make students dependent on them.

Bad teaching, I guess theoretically could make someone dependent on reinforcement. But if we're doing it right, and most teachers are, we are fading it out just like we do with any other type of strategy that we use in the classroom. We start with a visual schedule and then later on we change it to a planner. Over time we start with providing graphic organizers and then we want the students to make their own graphic organizers. So we're always building towards independence. Reinforcement doesn't prevent that.

Reinforcement Myth #2

So the second myth that I hear frequently about reinforcement, and sometimes this is stated and sometimes it's not, is the idea that there is one reinforcer for everyone. I have seen teachers look for the magic reinforcer. "I can't find his reinforcer."

Okay, first of all, all of us are reinforced by multiple things. Some things are more reinforcing than others. But there is no one magic reinforcer for a student, for an adult, for anyone. There might be one that's his favorite or the strongest, but there isn't just one secret thing.

As behavioral analysts, I sometimes think that teachers think that I'm keeping these things under wraps. I'm not going to tell you his favorite reinforcer. Of course I'm going to tell you his favorite reinforcer. I want him to learn with you, and but we have to make sure that we are varying the reinforcers. So that when he gets tired of that super special magic reinforcer, he still continues to learn because there are other reinforcers we can put in its place.

Just like fading with Myth 1. That's a really critical component of teaching with reinforcement is the idea that we need lots of reinforcers. And we need to be creating new reinforcers, because things are going to get old. He's going to get tired of some of the things, and they're not going to work as a reinforcers anymore.



Sometimes reinforcers aren't a thing

One of the biggest things that I will use as a reinforcer, sometimes, is novelty and surprise. It's not a thing. It's not even an activity. It's a way you present it. And I talked a little bit about that in the last episode. But it's important that we recognize that it's ABA, it's applied behavior analysis. Reinforcement comes from applied behavior analysis. Reinforcement is a strategy. It is a behavioral process. It's not a bubble bath. It's not going to make all your problems go away.

So when I hear people say, "Well, he really had this reinforcer, but now it doesn't work anymore." They kind of give up on this idea of reinforcement. That just tells us we better go find more. We better go come up with more things to find as reinforcing, as reinforcers, because that's just not going to work. So there is no one magic reinforcer. I wish there were. I wish I could say, "This child will work for this for the rest of his life." But I've yet to actually have the child who does that.

Reinforcement Myth #3

So number three, the third myth I hear a lot from teachers is "I'm using reinforcement, but the behavior isn't increasing." Okay, in our last episode, I talked about the fact if something, if a behavior that the reinforcer is following doesn't increase, it's not a reinforcer. Reinforcement is defined functionally. It's not a thing. It's not an item. It's not a token. It's not a chip. It's not an activity. It's not praise. It's not high fives. It is something that follows a behavior and causes it to increase. Ergo, if the behavior that this thing is following does not increase, then that thing is not working as a reinforcer for that behavior. It might work for something else, but we have to go look again for something else.

We have to keep looking for reinforcers

So again, we have to be those secret undercover detectives to go figure this out and it is an ongoing process. It isn't something that we say, "Well now, I know his list of reinforcers." Reinforcers change.

I'm still waiting for the day that I get up in the morning and go, "Yay, I'm going to go to the gym." People tell me that that can be reinforcing. I don't

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see it, but someday I might do it enough that it might become a reinforcer for me to get that endorphin high. I know it was true for bike riding for me for a long time. I loved to go out and ride my bike because it made me feel good. So I'm still waiting for that to kick in. S

o it's really important that we recognize that we have to continue to look for reinforcers because they're going to get old, they're going to get bored, they're going to grow out of them. Something's going to break.

Make Sure You Have Varieties of Reinforcers

There's lots of different things that can happen. So we need as many as we can find under our belt to use. And then over time, we need to fade it out and switch them off to token systems; switch them off to praise. Pair them with other things so that we can gradually fade those more concrete things out, because they're not going to work forever.

Reinforcement Myth #4

Myth number four is one I hear from a lot of what I consider to be old school teachers. Praise should be enough. He should just work because I praise him. Okay, I got to tell you right now, I'm not finding that very reinforcing. It's not making me want to come back in your classroom.

So this idea that this is the way the rest of the world works and this kid should do it this way? Throw that out the window in special education because that makes no sense. That's why they're in special education. Because everything that works for everyone else isn't working for him. That's why he needs more explicit instruction. That's why he needs more concrete reinforcement. That's why he needs reinforcement that is highlighted and offered more frequently at the beginning of instruction. Whereas other kids work for teacher praise.

If you're not interested or can't identify social nuances in your world, the teacher smiling at you is going to be lost on you. So it's not even going to be in your world to be a reinforcer.

So do we want to get to the point where the teacher being proud of you and then essentially you being proud of you and you feeling good about yourself



as your reinforcer as a student? Absolutely. But again, it goes back to that fading process. That is a process that we as teachers have to take control of, and that we as teachers have to be responsible for. And then we have to fade those reinforcers, pair them with more natural things from the environment so that our students will begin to work for praise. But we can't start with something that's not working.

Reinforcement Myth #5

Number five is one I kind of make up for myself. The fifth myth is that reinforcement only works with students. Reinforcement works for everybody. Reinforcement will work with your staff, and I talk about that when I talk about staff training at the beginning of the podcast series. It works for families, it works for the secretary, it works for your students. It works for everybody.

Reinforcement is behavioral principle. Do not think that just because we are planning reinforcers, this is something that only works for our students because we are planning out the reinforcers. Your students are reinforcing you or not every day. That's that right answer that they got. Watching their eyes light up when they begin to understand something. That's reinforcing for most of us.

Child effects

In fact, there's a drawback to that because sometimes what that means is that we end up giving more of the things that the student understands and not presenting as many instructional tasks that are hard for them. Because we get reinforced more with the things that they're good at. And we don't get reinforced as much with the things that are hard for them. So think about that. That's a term called child effects, and I'll probably talk about that at another time in one of these episodes.

So just remember, reinforcement is something that occurs for everybody. It's a natural behavioral process. There is no one magic reinforcer. We do have a responsibility to fade our reinforcers. We have a responsibility to continue to look for powerful reinforcers for our students. In no way will reinforcement make students dependent on them for learning. And reinforcement doesn't only apply to your students.



Share Your Thoughts on Reinforcement Myths

So I'd love to hear your thoughts about reinforcement. I've had some great discussions on Instagram and on Facebook recently about what your most amusing reinforcers are and that of course is not to make fun of anybody. We all have funny reinforcers and so we've had some really good ones from Q-tips to carrying a hand mixer around. So come and join in those conversations.

You can join our free Facebook group at specialeducatorsconnection.com and I'll put a link to that in the show notes. We have a whole workshop on reinforcement in the [Special Educator Academy](#) if you'd like to learn more about how to use it as well as a ton of quick wins and other types of instruction that focus on how we use reinforcement in a variety of both academic and behavioral skill building.

I want to thank you so much for spending time with me and taking the time to listen to this broadcast. I'd love it if you'd hop over to iTunes and share a review or a rating there or on your favorite app. Share the podcast with your friends.