



AUTISM CLASSROOM RESOURCES PODCAST, EPISODE 27 HOW TO USE POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

URL: <http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode27>


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.

In Episode 27, I am talking about making positive reinforcement systems to use positive reinforcement in the classroom. If you have listened or read the blog at any point, you know I love a good system. Systems make the classroom run with much less thought and decision making throughout the day. And that allows us to focus on the actual instruction we need to do. So today I've got some guidelines for using reinforcement in the classroom and 3 ways to do it that are actually do-able for you.

USING POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

As I've talked about in the last couple of episodes, we use positive reinforcement in a variety of ways from teaching skills to increasing positive behavior. When it comes to behavior management (and classroom management), positive reinforcement is both **an antecedent strategy /preventive strategy** as well as a teaching tool **for replacement skills**.

Generally, we use reinforcement systems to teach new skills to replace challenging behavior like **raising their hand to gain attention**. That's positive reinforcement at work—we give them attention when they




raise their hand. And over time raising their hand increases (if it is truly reinforcement). We also can teach students to ask for a break. That's negative reinforcement-we took something away and the asking for a break increased. It talk more about this in episodes 16 and 17 of the podcast when I talk about replacement behaviors and skills to increase in behavior support plans. You'll find those links in the show notes on the website at <http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode16> and episode17

In addition to wanting to use positive reinforcement to teach replacement behaviors as part of behavior support plans, we also want to use it more generally in our classroom management plans. We do this because, if we use positive reinforcement systems consistently for appropriate behaviors, we reduce the likelihood that challenging behaviors will be exhibited

RESEARCH ON POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

For **general classroom management** we want to reinforce appropriate behavior across the classroom about 5 times for every redirection or correction that we make (Flora, 2000). We also have a good research literature that tells us that classrooms typically do not reach that ratio and that increasing praise can improve students' behavior (Flora, 2000).

Rawson (1992) found that increasing positive feedback to boys at-risk for not making academic achievement and behavior problems increased academic intrinsic motivation for academics. It didn't just increase their positive behavior and on-task behavior. It actually increased their desire to learn. Makes sense when you consider that we know that pairing ourselves with concrete reinforcement can make us more



reinforcing to students. And causes the students to want to work with us more than they did before.

When teachers who teach students with emotional and behavior disorders increase their rate of behavior-specific praise (praise that specifically points out the behavior they are praising-like “I love the way you just problem solved that situation with your friend), they had students with higher rates of on-task behavior ([Sutherland, Wehby & Copeland, 2000](#)).


[Hart and Risley \(1995\)](#) studied parent-child interactions and found that parenting styles or “feedback tone” as they called it that had 5 approvals for every correction or criticism was highly related to accomplishments and vocabulary growth.

[Cook et al. \(2016\)](#) looked at a small group study (6 participants)—general education teachers. The control group were characterized as having high negative to positive ratio of interactions with students—more correction than praise. The intervention group was taught to time themselves on a varying interval of 5 minutes to deliver positive statements or gestures to individual students or the whole class. They also had them do self-monitoring to make them more aware of their own behavior of doing this. Students in the intervention group had better behavior and more time spent engaged academically than those in the control group.

So, we know that we need to reinforce more...but how do we do that?

SYSTEMS FOR INCREASING REINFORCEMENT USE

Teachers don't have just one job. Have you ever met a teacher who felt he/she just had to do well in one thing? I haven't. Just thinking of everything that a teacher needs to do throughout the day is




exhausting. But I don't need to tell YOU that (unless you aren't a teacher). However, that doesn't mean that it doesn't mean to be said.

Trying to keep track of everything that is happening in a successful classroom and keep all the students engaged is a monumental task. When I am running a classroom, I find it easiest when I automate as many of the tasks as I possibly can. The more I can do that, the less time I have to spend remembering, and the more engaged I can be with the students—which is always my ultimate goal (you know, prevents challenging behavior, increases skills effectively...for those reasons).

So, how can we use positive reinforcement in a way that makes OUR lives easier? Trying to remember to reinforce a student regularly for something like sitting in his chair, which we kind of expect all of our students to do, is not always high on our list when we are also trying to figure out whether we are addressing an IEP goal, what Sally's performance was to record the data, the kind of prompt we just gave Dante, why Emile is out of his seat and where is Megan? Oh right she's in the bathroom. And that's just a 1 minute analysis of what is going through your brain while teaching. So to make sure that we can get our reinforcement in, create a system. Here are some systems that might be helpful.

I. Use a Timer

If you are reinforcing appropriate behavior over a period of time for a specific time, you can pair the reinforcer system with a timer. There are a number of timers, apps and watch apps that vibrate so they don't disturb the class that you can use. You can often look for them under gym apps or timers because they are used for interval training in exercise.




Set the timer for a set period of time based on how long the student can behave appropriately. Start by determining how long a student goes before engaging in a negative behavior. Then set the timer for slightly less than that time.

For instance, if you are teaching a student to sit in a chair, time how long he sits independently without problems. If he can sit for 1 minute successfully but at 1:05 minutes he starts to fall out of his chair, start by setting the timer for 1 minute. That way he starts successful and once he is sitting regularly for that time, set it for 1:05 and gradually increase it.

He gets reinforced if he sits appropriately in his chair for the specified period of time. If he doesn't you can wait until the next interval is over to reinforce if he is appropriate or you can reset the timer as soon as he is not appropriate. Over time you can also start varying the time on the timer so that you are reinforcing for different periods of time to make it less predictable (which then makes reinforcement easier to fade over time).

2. Use a Timer with a Group

Another way, if you are using reinforcement for a group of students proactively, is to use the timer to remind you praise or reinforce one of them. Set the timer for every 2 or 3 minutes-or 4 or 5 depending on the skills of the students. Every time it vibrates, pick a student who is engaging in appropriate behavior and praise him/her or reinforce some other way (pat on the back, note on his/her desk, a token, an edible). Doesn't take much time, doesn't have to intrude on instruction and keeps you reinforcing appropriate behavior. BaBam!



3. Token systems

Token systems are another good way to automate reinforcement as well-in part because the students will remind you if you forget. Token systems and point systems can be structured in several different ways. If you are using them for increasing appropriate behavior, you can set them up on a timer or reinforce at the end of activities on your schedule. At the end of each activity (or the start of the next activity so you can include the transition), review the rules and give each student who followed the established targeted rules (all or select ones) a token. Or you may have this student needs to follow one rule that one needs to follow, two to differentiate, get their token.

If you're interested in hearing more about those, in the Special Educator Academy we actually have quick wins on how to use different token systems. We have one on working for boards in instruction for reinforcement and another on how to use point and token systems for behavioral instruction. So they're really quick videos with some tools to implement that after you watch them. So they're just a really good, useful tool.

So that formalizes it into your daily classroom schedule. And I use visual rules with that. I talk about that in [episode 17](#) when I talk about preventive strategies and I'll put a link to that in the show notes as well.

Get everyone on board

But sometimes it can be hard to get everyone in the class on board with this focus. It's important that the reinforcement isn't just coming from one person, say the teacher. Students will behave better if everyone in their classroom is noticing and reinforcing their positive behavior. otherwise, they learn to behave when the reinforcer is around but not when that person isn't there.



Solutions:

1. Give Information

Share Episode 26 with the other members of the classroom where I talk about the myths of reinforcement and the problems of just expecting appropriate behavior. If you need more research behind it and think that will help, just email me and let me know and I'll pull it together for you.

2. Use Reinforcement with Tea


Use the 5:1 principle with the other members of the classroom. We have research that shows that it isn't just effective with students. It's effective in marriage therapy and in staff supervision and instruction as well. So, try praising and reinforcing the staff for noticing the positives that students are doing. If your praise is reinforcing (and if it's not pair yourself with something that is), you'll see their reinforcement of the students increase. Make sure to use 5 more positives for every correction to make it work.

3. Have a Staff Contest

Set up a trial period and have the staff compete to see who can change a behavior fastest or have them track a behavior with a student and use reinforcement to increase it. Graph the data and share it with them so they can see the outcome. This is a good hands-on way to help them see the benefits of their hard work and hopefully will be reinforcing for them in seeing the students' success.

Another way to do it would be to put a marble in a jar (or some other marker you can use) each time you hear staff reinforcing students. Keep track between staff members and give a prize (like

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bringing them coffee of their choice on Friday morning) to the winner. Or make it a group contingency where you buy lunch or give them a break or some other reinforcer collectively when the whole group meets a certain criteria, like filling the marble jar.

4. Shape Praise Gradually


Finally, there is also research that shows that we don't really know what that magic ratio is. People talk about the 5:1 ratio, but there's actually some articles and I'll put the references in the notes that say it's really more of a linear progression. The more praise that you give, the more positive behavior you see the more students are on task and that there is no place where it kind of morphs into this magical ratio. So given that, I use 5:1 because I always hope that if we aim for five to one, we'll get maybe just a little less than that.

But another way to go about it is, if change is really hard for your staff or yourself, then you could set it up so that you're only working on doing one-to-one reinforcers. So you're giving one positive for every correction. Then go to two, and then go to three. So you could shape your own reinforcement of the students by just increasing slowly the number of positives that are required. That may be an easier way to ease into this, and make that kind of change in your classroom with everything else going on.

REINFORCEMENT WORKS FOR EVERYONE

So remember overall that reinforcement works and it's not just for the students. I love it when ABA and teaching instructions come full circle and we realize that they affect our behavior, not just the students' behavior. And we can see how it affects everybody.

If you are looking for token systems or punch cards, I will put links to that in the blog, um, that you can find them in my store. We also have some free punch cards in the free resource library so that link will be



in this post as well. Just scroll down to the resources section of the post.

If you are interested in learning more about reinforcement and how to effectively use it in the classroom, we have a workshop, quick wins and we have a whole course on behavioral problem solving in the Special Educator Academy and that's one of the best places to find me to help, problem solve and come up with ideas. I hang out in our community at least twice a day if not more. And we have office hours every Sunday night. [Click here if you are interested in more information about the Special Educator Academy.](#)

You can find all of the notes and the links to the token systems, the resource library in the Academy, in the blog post that goes with this episode, which will be [AutismClassroomResources.com/episode27](https://autismclassroomresources.com/episode27) and I'll make sure that that's in the show notes with the app as well.

Thank you so much for tuning in and for listening to the podcast. If you find it useful, share it with others, share it with other teachers that you think will be helpful. Share it on social media. Thank you for spending this time with me on this episode and I hope I'll see you again next week when I'll be talking more about classroom management.

References

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