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SPEAKERS

Chris

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. I'm Chris Reeve. And I'm your host. And we are in the midst of a series on five tips to start your year off right in different areas.

I've talked about five tips for starting the year, five tips for using visuals to the max, and I'll make sure those are linked in the show notes if you missed them. And today, I'm going to focus on my five best tips for using reinforcement strategies in the classroom.

Reinforcement is one of those things that for some of you probably seems pretty basic, but it's actually a bit more nuanced. It's not cut and dry. And for some of you, it may seem like a bad word. And I hope that I can cure you of this by the end of the episode. And I have some other episodes that might help as well.

If you have tried reinforcement in your classroom before for behavior, or instruction, or both, and felt it didn't work, or you're looking for ways to navigate some of the common pitfalls, stick with me. This is your episode. And I have some free tools that I'll share later in the episode that you can download for your classroom as well. So let's get started.

First, we need to all agree on what reinforcement is because it means different things to different people. But in reality, it's a behavioral process and there really is just one definition.

So what is reinforcement? It's either giving something to someone like attention or praise, or removing something like the class gets out of homework because they met their goal for being quiet for a certain amount of time. And both of those things have to increase the frequency of behavior in the future in order for it to be reinforcement.

I did a whole episode in Episode 25 about what reinforcement is, and you can actually grab that podcast at autismclassroomresources.com/episode25. So I won't spend a lot of time on this topic today. But here's the key. If the behavior or the skill doesn't increase over time, you aren't using a reinforcer, you are not actually reinforcing the behavior. That is how we define it is by its outcome.

And that leads me to tip number one, which is make sure that you are using real reinforcers and you are using them correctly. First, we have to evaluate whether something is indeed a reinforcer. Just being something that we like doesn't mean it's going to work to reinforce behavior. And one reinforcer isn't going to reinforce every skill or behavior. I'm sorry to burst the bubble, but there is no magic reinforcer that solves all of our problems. I know I'm shattering dreams, but I gotta be honest.

So often I hear staff say, I haven't quote found his reinforcer. Okay, well, nobody has one reinforcer. And one reinforcer isn't really enough, because if it gets old, we have a problem. So even if we find a reinforcer that works really well, don't stop looking for new ones.

I talk about the myths about reinforcement, that continue to pervade education in Episode 26. And you can grab that at autismclassroomresources.com/episode26. Or you can grab the link in the show notes.

But there are a ton of myths out there about reinforcement strategies. And one of the most prevalent is that there's one magic reinforcer. That there's something that we think we're going to find that's going to transform this student.

But first, we have to identify and test our reinforcers to even find out if they are reinforcers. Reinforcers also don't have to be tangible items. They can be activities, they can be shared experiences, they can be opportunities for special privileges, and they can even be doing other kinds of work. It can be I will do this hard work, so I get this easier work afterwards.

I used to have a student whose favorite reinforcer was riding on the buffing machine with the janitor in the hallway doing his work. I had another, his learning increased exponentially if correct answers got him access to a piece of clear packing tape. Who would have thought? And another whose behavior improved when he was working towards taking the teachers recycling to the shredder.

So reinforcers are not always m&ms, but they are for me. So if you ever meet me, keep that in mind. They're not always candy. They're not always food. I will deal with the food reinforcement question in another episode.

But we need to figure out what actually works as a reinforcer for our students. It's not enough that they like something. I like ice water, but unless I'm out in a desert, I'm probably not going to change my behavior to get it.

There are lots of different ways to find and assess reinforcers. I have a blog post on selecting reinforcers that have a ton of tools you can check out for sampling reinforcers and asking about reinforcers and you can find them in autismclassroomresources.com/reinforce. And I will put that link in the show notes.

I also have some free posters that are great for reminding staff about how to use reinforcers and cover some of these things. You can grab those at the resource library at autismclassroomresources.com/posters.

So there is no one magic reinforcer. We need to make sure that what we're using truly is a reinforcer for the student. And we do that by using it and seeing if the behavior or the skill increases.

My second tip is what you are teaching and which reinforcer to use are connected. We don't just randomly throw reinforcers into things. The more problematic or difficult the task is, the longer the learning history. It's defined typically by how likely the student is to try to avoid it or engage in negative behavior when presented with it. Or you're simply not seeing an increase when you use things following the skill, the more powerful reinforcer needs to be. As those other characteristics of the task decrease, so as I get better at something, the top tier reinforcers can decrease and be replaced with more ordinary things.

Nobody wants a student to grow up to have to have m&ms given to him every time he gives a right answer to someone. That is not the goal of reinforcement. The goal is to shift our students from reinforcing things that are reinforcing today to more naturally occurring reinforcers in our environment.

So if I'm teaching a kid to put on his coat, I might have to start by giving him a tickle as a preschooler before he puts the coat on, when he gets the coat on, or letting him immediately go outside as a reinforcer. But over time, I want the reinforcer for putting on my coat to be, I'm cold or going somewhere where it's cold. We want that to be the element that is reinforcing it.

So this is how we reinforce reinforcers so they don't stick around permanently. As the task gets easier, the level of reinforcement decreases in both power as well as frequency. But that doesn't mean that we need to restrict access to all the students reinforcers.

One of the things that I hear a lot of times that people have been told is you can't use this item or activity for anything else. It can only be for instruction, or it can only be for this activity. And in some situations that makes some sense, because you know, that is sometimes true. If you have a student that you really struggle with finding high power reinforcers for then you might need to restrict access to them to the hardest tasks or find an activity that might boost its power as a reinforcer.

Certainly using it too often can make things lose strength as a reinforcer. But we also don't want to take away everything that the student loves, in the name of reinforcement. Because let's face it, I'm not going to like living in a world that doesn't have chocolate and sushi and new clothes, because those are some of my reinforcers. If I had to perform something in order to get any of those all the time, eventually I get frustrated.

We want to make sure that we're using this idea that we want to keep reinforcers powerful without stripping down the environment for this individual. So we want to vary our reinforcement frequently, so we want to have a whole bank of them that we can use. And we want to make sure that we are fading them over time as skills or tasks get easier, and that we're preserving those that have a more powerful impact on our teaching, we want to make sure we use those for the tasks that require them the most. So we want to vary it and adjust according to the activity.

Number three, is that reinforcers are more than the item or the activity that you are providing. Reinforcers actually can be increased in their power exponentially by how we sell them. So we know that reinforcers can be things like activities, but it's more than even just that activity or that item, we actually have the power to make a reinforcer more or less reinforcing.

So think about how you can shake up your reinforcement repertoire. So one of the things that might boost the appeal of reinforcers are things that become a surprise. So maybe the student doesn't know what they're working for and you have written the name of the activities and the items of his reinforcers and you've put them in envelopes. And so you have him pick an envelope and he pulls out a piece of paper that tells him what he gets to do. You could do the same thing with popsicle sticks or drawing straws, You could use a spinner.

I had a student who loved unwrapping presents. So for a while there, in order to really get started with some of our really difficult programs, we wrapped up his reinforcers. We eventually got to the point where we had holiday like boxes that he just had to take the top off, but he loved that surprise.

So I often will do things where I hide the thing that they're going to get. And they have to know that maybe they have a menu and they can see what it might be. So if you have a student who's like I

maybe they have a menu and they can see what it might be so if you have a student who likes, I only like like four things, and you're gonna give me something I don't like I don't know when it's going to be, give him a menu of the four things he could have. And then maybe the surprise, which of the four are going to be the ones he gets.

So you can boost it and make it more exciting. Include yourself in it as it makes sense for the student. And look for things about this student when you're finding your reinforcers that are the things he likes to do during in the classroom.

He likes to be the center of attention, okay, maybe give him a job where he's the center of attention. He likes to help the teacher. Give him a job helping the teacher. Those are things that we don't think of frequently enough. We tend to think of them as something that's easy to provide. And we can move the student towards using token systems or point systems to help with that so that we're not always having to give one of those four things after every single instance.

And that leads me to number four, start your year with more reinforcement frequency, more frequent reinforcement, higher level more powerful reinforcers, then you think you're going to need. I reinforce a ton of things at the start of the year that I wouldn't reinforce later. Sometimes because it's a new skill, sometimes because I want to get the student excited about the class, and sometimes it's because I need to test it what I thought was a reinforcer is still a reinforcer by taking data on when to use it. And that's one of our primary reinforcement strategies that we need to use, is make sure that we're really increasing those behaviors.

But I often will do that as well, just to make it easier for them to get back into the routine of things. And then I'll fade the reinforcers out for lining up or raising your hand or things like that. Once we have a routine under our belt, for instance, I can stop giving the tokens at the end of every activity. As our students make progress, we adjust our use of reinforcement.

So for things that are going to stay routine, like following the schedule, I might decrease how often I give the reinforcer or use a less valued reinforcer. And I can fade out reinforcement in that way over time.

For other skills where the difficulty keeps increasing as skills are mastered, then I'm going to probably need to keep the reinforcement level high and that's okay, because it's not going to be for every single thing. But I always want to start my year with a lot more frequent reinforcement to get everybody back into the groove and then we can fade it out.

And that brings me to number five, which is we want to increase the reinforcement when there is a lot of change or there is a disruption to the routine. Disruptions and change all make tasks harder for all of us.

Think about how hard it is to get up on the first day of school. Going back into the routine after a whole summer off is hard. And as the requirements for what they do increase and the reinforcement needs to increase too. You can always fade reinforcement back. Many kids will just drop it on their own. But you can also consistently systematically reinforce less frequently, require more things to be done before they get it, giving this extra reinforcer if there's a problem.

Certainly the beginning of school is an example of this. But it might also be a student who was out with an illness and came back, or it might be a student who's having problems, his parents are getting divorced so his behaviors really rocky. Those are times that it's okay to boost up our level of reinforcement.

So times, for instance, when there's a disruption in the schedule, that may be something that makes other tasks harder to do and might result in problem behavior. So I might reinforce asking for a break more frequently than I usually do to compensate for those situations. On days, when things are clicking along in a typical routine, I'll change it back. When his family situation gets resolved and settles down, we can switch it back. It's not a forever change. And it does not equal a student regressing.

This is what I hear a lot that I don't want to increase or change what we're doing because I don't want him to regress. He won't, he'll go back to where he was most likely, or you'll fade the reinforcement out and he'll be successful just like he was before. It's essentially changing your reinforcement strategy to match the students' environment and context. So we want to make sure that we are being flexible.

Those are my five best tips about reinforcement. I have a lot to say about reinforcement beyond these. We actually have a whole month theme this month in the Special Educator Academy how this.

First you want to make sure that what you're using is really a reinforcer. That it's defined by its outcome. Second, adjust your reinforcers and reinforcer levels to the situation. Three, a big part of reinforcement is in how we sell it. So how we use them matters, how we present them, keeping them fresh, all those kinds of things. Start the year off with more reinforcement than you think you need and then fade it systematically. That gets you off to an easier start with fewer problem behaviors. And then you can start to fade that reinforcer into the background. And five, increase reinforcement when the context changes, something happens, and there's a disruption and that's an okay thing to do. It is not making their behavior regress. It's actually changing your reinforcement strategy to meet their needs.

So I hope you'll join me next week when I talk about my five best tips for behavior and classroom management. You can download your reinforcer posters at autismclassroomresources.com/posters.

And you can definitely come join us in the Special Educator Academy. If you are looking for more resources on using reinforcement and classroom management in general. They're part of our August theme in Special Educator Academy we have a whole workshop on reinforcement use and a ton of downloadable tools for identifying reinforcement. So come join us there at specialeducatoracademy.com.

If you listen to this podcast, it would mean the world to me if you went to Apple podcasts and left a review. I would love to know your thoughts about it. I hope you'll be back next week, and I'll talk to you soon.

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