

Andrea Larmon, Ph.D, BCBA

Reinforcement vs Punishment

A Compassionate Guide
to Shaping Behavior



MESSAGE FROM DR. ANDREA

Dear Reader,

Let's start with something important. Something I want you to hold onto long before you reach the last page of this book:

You are not trying to control your child. You are trying to connect with them.

And that one simple shift in perspective changes everything.

As parents, caregivers, and educators, we all share the same heartfelt goal, to guide the children in our lives toward becoming kind, confident, and capable human beings. But when challenging behaviors show up and they will, because that is simply part of growing up, it can be incredibly difficult to know how to respond in a way that actually works. Do we step in firmly? Do we let it go? Do we take something away? Do we offer a reward? The questions can feel endless, and the answers are not always clear.

In these pages, we are going to explore one of the most foundational concepts in understanding child behavior — **Reinforcement and Punishment** — in a way that is simple, warm, and immediately useful in your everyday life.

Here is the heart of what we will discover together: **reinforcement is almost always the more powerful choice**. When we notice, acknowledge, and celebrate the behaviors we want to see more of, we are doing something remarkable. We are not just shaping behavior. We are building a child's confidence, strengthening our relationship with them and showing them in the most meaningful way possible that we see their efforts and we believe in who they are becoming.

Now, there are times when correction is necessary. We will talk honestly about that too. Because this book is not about perfection. It is about being thoughtful, consistent and always leading with encouragement.

Whether you are a parent searching for a gentler, more effective approach at home, a teacher looking to create a warmer and more positive classroom, or a caregiver simply trying to better understand the children in your care. These pages were written with your heart in mind.

♥ Dr. Andrea



*It is always better
to reinforce than to
punish!*

WHAT IS REINFORCEMENT?

Reinforcement is like giving your child a little boost to encourage them to do something they are requested to do! It's the "something added" that makes them want to keep doing that behavior. A good reinforcer will make your child want to repeat the behavior in the future. Reinforcement happens when something is given right after a behavior, and that makes the behavior more likely to happen again. Reinforcers are like rewards because they come after a behavior.

Behavior —> Something is added —> Behavior occurs more often in the future

Are rewards positive reinforcement? Only if they help you see more of the behaviors you want. If it makes the behavior happen more often, it's reinforcement; if not, it's not a reinforcer.

Here are some different ways you can use reinforcement with your child:

Specific Social Praise

- One of the easiest types of positive reinforcement to provide is Behavior Specific Praise or BSP. For information on how to use BSP, please see the free resources page ["BSP, what it is and how we use it"](#)

Tangibles

- iPad time
- TV time
- Specific toy
- Star/sticker charts
- Food

Preferred Activities

- Trip to playgroup
- 1:1 time with an adult
- Dance party
- Listening to music

Preferred Sensory Interactions

- Time on swing
- Water play
- Sand play
- Tickles

Attention

- Praise
- Time with a preferred person
- Laughter
- Hugs and kisses (if tolerable to the child)
- High fives
- Thumbs up
- "Dance party"

Examples of reinforcement in action:

- Your child tries all the food on their plate at dinner. You give a lot of praise and attention. The next night, they try all their food again!
- When your car makes a beeping sound until you put your seat belt on. Once you buckle your seatbelt, the beeping stops. Avoiding this beeping sound increases the likelihood of you buckling your seatbelt each time it happens. Removing the sound reinforces the buckling.
- Giving your pet a treat after they sit down. Next time you say "Rover sit!", the likelihood of them sitting is high, because they know they are getting a treat for complying.

Reinforcers work best when they happen right away. That's because the bigger the gap between what your child does and what happens, the less likely we are to see the reinforcement working.

How to use reinforcement:

1. Pick a behavior you want to increase.
2. Choose a reinforcer or reinforcers that you know you have readily available AND that you know your child is motivated by/likes to receive.
 - a. It is helpful to have a list of different reinforcers that you will use. If we use the same reinforcer all the time, the child may tire of it. For example, I LOVE dark chocolate, but if you give it to me every time I comply with the task or demand you have made, I will definitely get sick of dark chocolate. When that happens, dark chocolate is no longer a reinforcer for me.
 - b. If you're using something other than praise, make sure you also provide BSP (behavioral support) along with the reinforcer. This way, you can slowly reduce the other reinforcers and just give BSP for the behavior you want.
3. Tell your child what you expect them to do.
 - a. "Andrea, please sit at the table for dinner".
 - b. "No hitting"
 - c. "Calm body"
4. Give a reinforcer with BSP when they do what you ask.
 - a. "Thank you for sitting." or immediately provide food, "you earned iPad time as soon as you finish your dinner."
 - b. "Thank you for being safe," or provide an edible treat as soon as they stop, or a sticker/star immediately after they stop.
 - c. "I love your calm body," or provide an edible treat as soon as they stop, or a sticker/star immediately after they stop.
5. As your child's desired behavior increases, you can begin to fade out the reinforcers that have accompanied BSP.

WHAT IS PUNISHMENT?

Punishment = the thing that you want/ decreases the behavior.

Punishment is used when there is behavior you want to decrease or stop from happening. So, this is what we call a “punisher”—it’s something you add after a behavior that discourages them from doing it again. The idea is that it should make your child want to stop doing that behavior in the future.

But here’s the thing: if you use a punisher, it might just push your child to do the undesired behavior more often in the future. Basically, a punisher is a consequence because it happens right after a behavior.

Behavior-->Something is added-->behavior occurs less often in the future.

Just a heads-up: punishment is usually a last resort when all other ways to encourage good behavior have run out of steam. It’s always best to use it alongside reinforcement. Reinforcement is for the behavior you want, and punishment is for the one you don’t.

Also, keep in mind that punishment can sometimes make the behavior worse or lead to other behaviors to avoid it. This could include running away, getting physically aggressive, or crying, yelling, or screaming.

Here are some examples of different types of punishment that you might be trying but aren’t seeing the results you want:

Response Cost

- When your child does something you don’t like, you take something away from them. Things like removing access to a preferred item (iPad, TV, or recess).

Reprimand

- This is the most common way to punish. It’s usually a loud, verbal statement with some body language (arms crossed, pointing, a mad face, or puffed-out chest).
- It’s popular, but not always effective. Why? Reprimands repeated too often may lead to the child habituating to the reprimand and blocking it out. Think about how Charlie Brown’s teacher sounded to the students. That’s pretty much what they hear.

Negative Practice

- When you require your child to continuously repeat the behavior for a certain period of time.
- Imagine your child dashing to the car in a parking lot. You would have them run back and forth to the car continuously for 3 minutes. The idea is that running to the car might become less appealing, though it usually doesn't work that way.

Response Blocking

- This technique is mainly used for kids who engage in Self-Injurious Behaviors (SIB). Since their actions can be dangerous, this type of punishment doesn't need to exhaust all the positive reinforcement options before it's used.
- If your child bangs their head, gently block them from doing so with a hand or a padded cushion. If they bite themselves, you might want to have them wear arm protectors to keep their mouths away from their skin.
- While this is happening, they are also reinforced for having safe behaviors during a specific time period, which is paired with BSP.

Overcorrection

- This method aims to decrease the frequency of an unwanted behavior by making amends for any damage caused and encouraging the correct behavior whenever the target behavior happens.
- For example, if a child spills their drink on the floor, they'll need to clean it up, along with the entire table and chairs. If a child runs down a hallway, they are made to walk back and forth in the hallway a certain number of times every time they do it.

Time out

- This approach is used to reduce the frequency of an undesired behavior by removing a person or reinforcing situation (like social attention) when the behavior occurs.
- This could involve sending your child to their bedroom for a certain period of time for an undesired behavior.
- Alternatively, you can use a time-out right where you are by taking away all attention and access to their favorite things for a specific time.

MEASURING PROGRESS

The surprising effects of punishment

The behavior isn't getting better, which means the punishment isn't working.

- The child keeps doing the unwanted behavior even after trying the punishment procedure several times.

The punishment is happening to the adult, not the parent.

- You take away an item or activity, and the child becomes belligerent, demanding attention, and physically aggressive towards you. In reality, the removal is punishing you.

The main idea here is that it's always better to reinforce than to punish. If you have to punish, make sure you do it carefully and consistently, while also reinforcing good behavior.

If you'd like to learn more about using reinforcement instead of punishment at home or school, please fill out the Get in Touch form on our website, and we'll get in touch to chat.