

Finding Reinforcers

To use positive reinforcement effectively, we need to know what is reinforcing to our kids. That seems pretty obvious right? We need to know what we can use as rewards and as reinforcers to increase those desired behaviors that we're looking for. Our whole purpose here, our whole goal is to have a problem behavior, look at it, replace it with something else, and build up that replacement and that problem behavior disappear at the same time. Right? We've talked about target behaviors and positive reinforcement. And that's what we're doing. We're building up the good stuff instead of focusing on that problem and punishment and anger and all kinds of other problems that could happen from just focusing on negativity.

Positive reinforcement, it is ridiculous to me. But there's a lot of studies published-research, studies and papers that people studied whether high quality reinforcers and rewards were more effective than things that people don't really like. And it's like yes. Clearly. If you offer me something that I really like as a reward for doing hard things, I'm going to do the hard thing. If you offer me something I only kind of sort of like, am I going to do all the hard things? Maybe not. Not if I don't have to. I might not do them as quickly or as well or without complaining. Duh. Why do we have to have research to tell us this? We know. Use good stuff. Use good rewards and good reinforcers.

What does that mean? Do I have to spend all my money going to the store and buying toys? Do I need to buy lots of candy? I'm trying to teach my kids to eat healthy. I'm trying to eat healthy. I don't want candy in my house. No. Maybe. Maybe you need a little bit of that here and there. But the idea is to find something that's reinforcing for your child. In ABA, in ABA therapy and practice in classrooms and schools and private practice, we start with a preference assessment. We assess what kids prefer, what reinforcers do they like, how much do they like them. Hopefully in a good ABA program this is happening regularly because our tastes change, our kids' tastes change. If you offer them the same reward for a long time, they're going to get bored of it and they're going to want something different.

At home, as parents, do we need to print out a form and do an official assessment? No. But we do need to really notice and pay attention and think about what would be a good reward. And depending on if you have little kids or older kids or some of each, how you're going to do this, it might look a little bit different. What do your kids like to do? What do they choose to do? You give them free time in your game room, wherever the toys are stored, in their room. What do they go do? What do they gravitate to? I know my child goes through phases of being really into one type of toy and then being into another type of toy next week. Really into another type of toy. She has a specific interest at that time.

I can use that and I can give her extra time engaging that specific interest. I can show her different ways to use that. I can find other things that have to do with that. If she's into doing the Little People with horses, well, why don't I print out some coloring pages of Little People horse things that you can find for free on the internet? Things like this. Use what they're doing. Now if I just send her off to play and ignored her completely, which of course has to happen every once. While you're making dinner you can't be in there going, "Oh, what are you playing with?" But, paying attention and realizing what they're into right now.

You can watch. You can observe them. See what they play with at other people's homes. Any outing you go on, you go to a museum or a play place of some sort, what do they choose to do when they're just given the freedom to choose? With older kids, same thing. When they have free time, what do they do? Are they on their phone all the time? Okay, well what are they doing on their phone? Are they texting their friends? Are they on Facebook? Are they on YouTube or I don't even know what kids are in to, older kids are in to these days? What are they doing on their phone that you can use as a reward and as a reinforcer?

You can ask your kids, "What would you like to earn?" My own child, we were going through some bedtime struggles. I know that is shocking that a toddler or a preschooler would have a hard time going to bed, right? They just march them little selves off to sleep at night. No. We were having bedtime struggles as it comes in phases of things are easy and then something suddenly for some reason it's hard again. And we trying and all kinds of different reward systems and they were working a little bit. We'd have a couple of good nights or we'd have less tears at bedtime. Or we'd have less coming out but it wasn't back to where it should be, where bedtime was smooth and easy and pleasant.

Finally I was like, "What do you want to earn?" I had a prize bag of toys from the dollar spot at Target. I know you're shocked that I shop at Target. All moms of preschoolers are hanging out at the dollar spot. I had a prize bag of that. We had candy in a treat box she could pick from. She could choose different outings if she earned all her stickers on her sticker chart. All kinds of different things that play. None of those are free. Okay, all those things that I'm offering, none of them were free. They were all a little bit more involved, took more effort on my part. They weren't working. She wasn't able to earn them or when she did, we would still have that problem behavior the next night. It was not technically reinforcing.

And I was like, "What do you want? What do you want to earn?" And she said, "I really want to have a breakfast picnic." And I was like, "Okay, what does that mean? What is it that you want?" I'm thinking, oh great, now I have to go to the park at breakfast. We need to get up and get dressed. And she wanted to get the picnic blanket out of the closet and put it on the living room floor and eat a frozen waffle after it'd been toasted. A toasted waffle. That was the easiest solution. I never would have come up with that. "Would you like to get the picnic blanket out of the closet?" She would have been like, "What?"

But for some reason that was in her mind and that was months ago and we still have breakfast picnics on a regular basis because who's cares if you eat on the floor on a picnic

blanket? Sure. Absolutely. Go to bed nicely, stay in your room all night, wait until your clock turns green, come out in the morning. These are all the expected behaviors that we've talked about with her. She knows her target behaviors and she picked her reward. And it was so much easier than all the things I was coming up with. Ask them. Ask them what they want. Now if you have a teenager and they're like, "Well, I want new clothes, the new \$70 sneakers," or "I want a trip to Universal Studios," or something really expensive. "Okay, well we can make that a big long-term goal," and "Well, you want sneakers? Well, you can earn extra money by doing extra chores" or something.

You can make a plan to get there to these really big reinforcers and say, "Well, what's something that we can afford right now, that we can do right now that doesn't cost \$70 and a trip to the mall?" And come up with smaller reinforcers or rewards. We'll look at more examples that it's really just about paying attention to what your kids are in to and asking them. You can ask them to rank it. "What do you like the most? What do you like the least?" They're older, on a scale of one to 10. How awesome is this activity versus this one? And you never know. Even with some adults I was working with, the teacher asked some parent professionals in a classroom I was supporting and she was trying to train them. And I said, "Well they need reinforcers too. They need to be rewarded for engaging in the things you're asking them to do."

And the teacher went to them and she was like, "What can I offer to reward to you guys?" And she had all these ideas. And they said, "You know, I just want some more positive praise. I just, I really like it when you notice and tell me I'm doing a good job." And it was like, "Oh, that was it?" They didn't want lunch brought in and catered and extra time off and all these other things that she was really struggling to come up with how to reward these grown ups. They wanted some praise and some attention. Okay. I will give you that. Absolutely.

If you just ask sometimes that's a much easier route than spinning your wheels and wasting time. Be efficient. Find some good reinforcers and use the good stuff. Really our point here is building up those good behaviors and the problems don't have a place anymore. We're replacing them with something that works instead and that gets the good reinforcement.

Finding reinforcers. This doesn't seem like it's super hard or a complex thing because that we kind of forget about it sometimes. Sometimes the easy things we forget about and we don't realize we need to stop and think about it and reassess where we are. In the world of ABA we do preference assessments. We're going to talk about that. We'll share some practical examples and some creative reward ideas today.

Let's review. What is positive reinforcement? Hopefully you can all answer this without even looking at the screen. A behavior occurs. Something is added. And then the behavior happens more often in the future. We're really just focusing on strengthening a behavior. Catch your kiddos being good. Give them some sort of reward. And then make sure the reward is working. And that's what today is about. Is the reward working? Is it a good enough reward? Is it something that they're interested in right now?

In preference assessment, free operant is really the technical term for what we're talking about right now. Just observe your kiddos. Let them play with stuff. Let them do things in their spare time. What do they choose to do? Just be aware. Pay attention. Observe them. Watch them with your eyeballs and see what do they like to do right now?

Rating scales. No matter what age your kiddo is, you can do some sort of ranking. "How much do you like these rewards I'm offering you?" Older kids, you can have them make their own list and then rank them one through 10. "Which one's your favorite? Which one's your least favorite?" You could a thumbs up, thumbs down, thumbs sideways. "Do you like M&M's? Thumbs up, thumbs down, thumbs sideways. How much do you like M&M's? Do you like extra time to play Barbies?" Whatever it is that your kid's in to. Let them tell you how much they like it. Let them rank them, their top preferences one through three. Think about all the different kinds of surveys and rating skills that we do as adults to provide information. We're doing the exact same thing for our kiddos. We just want to find out what's the most motivating to them right now.

There's a little thing called too much of good thing. That's satiation, being satiated with something. Then you don't want it anymore. If you offer watching or screen time or something like that as a reward and they're watching multiple shows a day, then TV might not be so reinforcing anymore because they're getting it a lot. They're watching a bunch of it and they're like, "Oh, well I don't have to earn it right now because I'm just going to watch it later anyway. Why would I work to earn TV? Why would I put forth the effort to do my chores or obey something that I don't feel like doing?"

Making sure that the reward is only available as a reward. It is a reward. It's not something that's just part of your routine and your schedule. You're offering something they get everyday at 3:00 anyway, then that's not a reward. It's okay to have the fun things everyday at 3:00. It's okay to have these good things going on all the time. That's called non-contingent reinforcement, if you want to be technical. But when you're really trying to increase the behavior, find something else. Find a different reward and only make it available when they earn it. You want to make sure that the things that you're using as reinforcers are not available. And that means physically.

If you have little kids, put them up high. If you have older kids, then you need to have control over the devices, over the remote control. Lock down your wifi password. Whatever you need to do to make sure that they cannot control those rewards on their own. They have to earn it by following whatever requirements, whatever expectations you've very clearly outlined, now that you know about target behaviors and getting to the point and telling them what to do. Make sure that whatever the reward is is only available for doing the target behavior. Change up your rewards a lot. Kiddos change their interests. I change my interests. The same things that I might reward myself with for meeting goals that I've set, I'm going to change those. I'm not always going to give myself the same rewards. Why would you always give your child the same reward?

And ask them every time they earn something. You can ask them when you're doing your rating scale and you're talking about it, kind of making a plan but also once they've earned

something, "Okay, what do you want? Let's talk about your choices." Give some options off of that list you talked about before. And ask them every time, you're going to use Premack Principle, "First, I need you to do your homework and then what would you like to do afterwards as a reward?" And we'll get more into Premack as we keep going.

When do we go back to the drawing board? How often to I need to make a list and rank them and all of these things? Well, in the definition of positive reinforcement we say we pay attention to the behavior that we're wanting to increase. If it's not increasing then we're not reinforcing it. If you're giving candy every day for your child getting dressed by themselves and they stop dressing themselves, then you're just giving them candy. You're not giving them a reinforcers, you're just giving candy. And it's not reinforcing the behavior if the behavior's not increasing. If the behavior's not increasing, if it's not happening more often, more independently, then your reward just isn't good enough.

That doesn't mean you need to spend more money, get bigger things. It might mean bigger in quantity. You need to give seven minutes of free time instead of five minutes of free time. You need to just do something different. Go back to that list. Make a new list. Figure out what your kiddo is in to right now. If you're using time to do an art activity as a reward but at school they're working on this huge art project and they're doing art in every subject, they come home and you say, "I need you to do X, Y, Z and then you can use your art kit." And the kid's like, "Yeah, not in to it." They're not going to do the required behaviors first.

Make sure it's desirable for your kiddo and that can change from day to day. That can change from week to week. It will change from week to week or month to month. Because their interests change. Ask them or watch them and see what interested they're really in to. On our Facebook group I'd really like everybody to share your creative reinforcer ideas and let's brainstorm together. This is just to get you started. For little kids, let them stay up late at bedtime. That can mean three minutes. It doesn't you have to let them stay up an hour but it can be special and exciting and you get to stay up late together.

They can choose a food item on each meal. Add some chocolate raisins to your lunch plate. You're not filling them with sugar and candy, it can be something really small. But, "You're in charge and you get to pick" and it's a big deal. Let them make a video on your phone and let them call or Face Time somebody and share their good news. "What did you earn? What did you do? Let's all be excited together." Extra play time with a parent. I put after a sibling has gone to bed because that's the arrangement at my house right now with an infant who goes to bed early. But, arranging to make sure that you and your child one on one time together. That one on one attention can be so powerful and it can be to do a puzzle, to color a picture, to play a game. It doesn't have to be "We're going to Disney on Ice" for one on one attention.

It can be something very simple. Make special things with their names on them. And especially if there're learning to spell their names and they're younger, they're really in to this sort of thing. Or whatever their interesting in. Whatever they're in to, turn it into an activity that you can do together. Let's build with Play-Doh. The characters from Paw Patrol or whatever they're in to. And then go on a special outing together. It doesn't have to be

expensive. Go to the park. Go to the library. Go out for ice cream. Something that's cheap and easy and quick. But make it special. Make it a big deal. Ask your kiddo, like I said about the breakfast that is still effective months later, whatever they want. You don't have to always go for treasure box, prize bag, candy, these sorts of things that you think about.

But be creative. Think outside the box. With older kids, what's cool to them? What are they in to? A later curfew or bedtime is a big deal. Extra time with your phone. Money to buy new apps or permission to buy something new. They have to earn these new things that they want. Take away from other chores. If they have a chore list that they're supposed to do every week, "You can earn, you get to pick two of those things to assign to mom. Three of those things and I will do them for you if you earn it." Do a special activity together. Again, that one on one time and attention, that's not going to go away. That's something that can be special to build your relation. Allowance money is kind of obvious. That's not exactly creative.

Inviting a friend to do stuff. Letting them have more choice and be in charge and feel a little more authority and a little more autonomy as they get older can be a big deal. But you can frame that within "You earn it by doing the desired behaviors." Giving them some freedom and letting them choose their own reinforcers. And giving them that independence and watching them grow into it and earn it within the framework that "These are the expectations that I've clearly defined for you," as we've talked about in target behaviors. Not a lecture. Quick, "Here are our expectations. What do you want to earn by doing it?"

Please share your ideas, especially across different ages, different genders, different places that you live. There are so many different reinforcers ideas. Jump into the conversation on our Facebook group. And share what your reinforcer ideas are. And that'll be part of your homework this week, on your to-do list. Find some new ideas. Talk to your kiddo about this. Put it to work and then let us know how it's going.