Reinforcement: Positive Versus Negative
Est. Time: 30 Minutes

Objective

Learn how to differentiate between and to apply positive and negative reinforcement.

Overview

Teachers often use reinforcement to teach new skills or to increase appropriate or desired behaviors. Although the ultimate goal is for students to regulate their own behavior by responding to intrinsic motivators (e.g., feeling proud), initially teachers might need to deliver more concrete reinforcers to encourage appropriate behavior and to help students learn how to control their own behavior.

When we think of reinforcement, we typically think of what is referred to as **positive reinforcement** (e.g., giving a student a sticker for completing an assignment, giving a thumbs up for not talking in the hallway). Positive reinforcement involves providing a desired consequence after a student engages in a desired behavior, which, in turn, creates the likelihood of increased occurrence of the behavior in the future. Ideally, teachers should try to incorporate positive reinforcement into their daily lessons and activities to encourage skill acquisition and desired behavior. Positive reinforcers fall into three categories: tangible, social, and activity.

Tangible	Social	Activity
Reinforcers that the student can see, touch, or hold	Reinforcers that involve interpersonal interactions	Reinforcers that involve the student engaging in a desired activity
• Stickers • Tokens • School supplies • Art supplies • Certificates	• A smile • Praise • A thumbs-up • Clapping or cheering from others • Choosing a partner for an activity • Having lunch with a significant adult	• Reading a story • Drawing • Extra recess • Distributing materials • Tutoring others • Extra computer time • Exploring a topic of interest

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However, teachers can also encourage a student's acquisition of skills or desired behavior through **negative reinforcement**. Negative reinforcement involves removing an unwanted object or condition once the student has engaged in the desired behavior, which, in turn, creates the likelihood of increased occurrence of the behavior in the future. For example, a teacher might give a student a break from a non-preferred task after completing a portion of his problems, or the teacher might exempt students from the final exam if they have an A average for the class. Click the image below (or visit https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/mcontent/reinforcement-p-vs-n/) to view a video example of negative reinforcement.

Negative reinforcement should not be confused with *punishment*, which consists of providing an undesired consequence to decrease a behavior.

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Notice that the teacher uses negative reinforcement to increase how much classwork Emma completes. Because Emma struggles to complete her mathematics lesson, her teacher decides to temporarily remove the aversive task (i.e., completing mathematics problems) by allowing Emma to take a short break. After the break, she will complete five more math problems, alternating between classwork and breaks until she has completed the task. Over time, the teacher will gradually require her to complete more problems before getting a break. The goal is for Emma to complete classwork without a break.

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For Your Information

It is important to understand that teachers often use negative reinforcement without realizing they are doing so, inadvertently increasing an undesirable student behavior. Consider the following example.

Ms. Levine is giving a mathematics test. Bryden, who struggles in math and does not want to take the test, starts making noises and distracting his fellow students. In response, Ms. Levine sends Bryden to the principal's office.

By being disruptive, Bryden is sent to the principals' office and avoids taking the test (i.e., the undesired task is removed). Because he was allowed to avoid the test through disruptive behavior, the likelihood that Bryden will display disruptive behavior during the next mathematics test has increased.

Activity

Read the scenarios below.

Scenario 1: Jagan has ADHD. He has difficulty sitting still during 20-minute whole-group instructional time. During this activity, he often loses focus and begins playing with items on his desk and humming, which almost always creates distractions for others who sit near him and often disrupts the entire class.

Scenario 2: Ashanti, who has autism, performs well academically but struggles to work in small-group settings where she has to interact socially with her peers. Ashanti's teacher has worked hard to make sure the classroom is welcoming, respectful, and safe for all students. One of the teacher's goals for Ashanti this year is to increase her social interactions and participation in small-group activities.

Questions/Discussion Topics

1. For each of the students in the scenarios above:

    a. Describe one positive and one negative reinforcement that their teachers could use to help them to be more successful in the classroom.
    b. Explain which you think would be easier to implement in a classroom situation.

2. When you think about the negative reinforcement you would use for each student, do any drawbacks or potentially undesirable side effects come to mind?

3. Try to think of an instance when a teacher inadvertently used negative reinforcement. It can be something you witnessed as a student or something you yourself did as a teacher. Now, complete the following:

    a. Describe the scenario.
    b. What did you or the teacher you observed want or expect the student to do?
    c. What did the student actually do?
    d. What could either you or the teacher you observed have done differently?

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References

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