



## WHAT IS IT?

Reinforcement is providing something positive (i.e., attention, praise, a reward) after a child or group of children engage in a specific behavior. Experiencing a positive outcome increases the likelihood that they will repeat the behavior.

## WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- ◆ A group of children take turns to use the seesaw during recess. Their teacher gives each of them a sticker and says, “Great job taking turns using the seesaw so everyone could play!”
- ◆ A child offers to share his snack with another child. The teacher uses labeled praise by saying, “That was so nice of you to share your snack! I bet your friend is feeling happy.”

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Most children enjoy adult attention and recognition. When a teacher gives attention to, praises, or rewards the behaviors that support child success in the classroom, the teacher is seeing and appreciating a child’s behavior. This helps children learn the expected behaviors in their classroom community. And, it increases children’s self-esteem by drawing attention to what they are doing *well*.

## Types of Reinforcement

There are many ways to acknowledge children’s positive behavior.

- Labeled Praise:** Drawing attention to positive behavior using specific, verbal praise.  
“You are taking turns so that all of you can use the swing!” instead of, “Good job, friends!”
- Tokens/Rewards:** Using small, tangible rewards to indicate recognition of children’s efforts.  
Children receive stickers every time the teacher notices sharing or turn-taking.
- Special Attention:** Giving physical attention (e.g., high-five), special recognition, or a special role to acknowledge positive behavior.  
The teacher offers children “air-fives” for listening and responding to peers during a large-group activity.
- Differential Attention:** Choosing not to focus on mild undesired behavior (e.g., whining) and directing attention back to the child when that behavior is no longer displayed.  
A child refuses to join in an activity with his classmates. As soon as the child walks over and stands by the group, his teacher approaches, smiles, and pats him on the back.
- Reinforcement System:** A more formal way of reinforcing behaviors when children need additional support.  
A child is having difficulty staying on-task. Each time she finishes an activity, her teacher gives her a sticker. Once she has 5 stickers, the teacher sends a positive note home.



## TIPS FOR USING REINFORCEMENT

### 1. Rules of thumb:

- Catch the behavior as it is happening!
  - Notice and reinforce behavior that will help children be successful in the classroom community (e.g., listening to directions, sharing materials).
- Be thoughtful in selecting which reinforcers to use.
  - Not *all* children like the same things (e.g., shy children may be less reinforced by attention). Consider their unique interests, preferences, and background when deciding what may/may not be reinforcing.
- Distribute reinforcement equitably across children.
  - Critically reflect on how your own cultural lens and biases (e.g., racial, disability, linguistic, gender) influence which children you choose to use reinforcement with.
- Consistency is key!
  - Children learn expectations when your response is predictable.

### 2. When using labeled praise, tokens/rewards, or special attention...

- Describe what it is (i.e., positive behavior) that you are seeing and appreciating.
  - “You used kind words to ask them to share,” instead of, “Good job!”
- Give them *right away* when you notice the positive behavior.
- Focus on effort and progress, not the “perfect” display of behavior.
  - For a child who is working to use kinder words with peers, reinforce times when they say something kind (*even* if it is not on their own, or it occurs after prompting).

### 3. When giving differential attention...

- Decide what mild behavior you want to reduce (e.g., whining).
- Anticipate when the child may display the targeted negative behavior.
- Choose not to acknowledge this behavior (e.g., walk away, turn your back, attend to another child).
- Reinforce the child by attending *as soon as* they display a neutral or positive behavior.

### 4. When using a reinforcement system...

- Choose a type of system you want to use.
- Identify target positive behaviors and how often you want to reinforce these behaviors. Ask the child what reinforcers they might want to work for.
- Make sure goals are attainable and match the child’s abilities, development, and needs.
- Keep language simple and use visuals to remind children what they are working for.

## RESOURCES THAT SUPPORT USING REINFORCEMENT

**Reinforcement**  
[ECE Resource Hub](#)  
CASTL ©

**Recommendations and  
Considerations for Positive  
Descriptive Feedback**  
[Available as PDF](#)  
NCPMI ©

**Starters for Giving Positive  
Feedback and Encouragement**  
[Available as PDF](#)  
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