

Positive Reinforcement and Rewards

Children learn about themselves when you interact with them. You can help them learn good things about themselves or bad things. You can teach your child that she is able to be strong, loving, and helpful. Let your child know when she is doing things you like. Take the time to notice when she is behaving well. This is called "positive reinforcement." It helps her learn what she can do well. It makes her want to repeat the positive behavior.

Positive reinforcement also gives children attention. Children love and need attention. They can get attention by doing good things and by doing bad things. You can avoid some bad behaviors by giving the child attention at the right times. Give your child plenty of positive attention so that he won't need to misbehave to be noticed by you. Try not to give him very much attention when he is doing the wrong things.

There are different ways to give your child positive reinforcement. It could be by rewarding him with items he can touch (for example, stickers or gifts) or rewarding him with something you say or do (like praise or a hug). Gifts and "things" can work well. Children understand them and want them. But they can be a problem, too. It can be expensive to give "things" all the time. The child might learn to do things only when he gets "paid" for it. And he may want bigger and bigger rewards. It is better if children learn to do the right thing because it feels right or because it makes other people happy. For example, you could praise your child for cleaning her room. Then she learns that a clean room pleases other people. On the other hand, you could promise her an ice cream cone for cleaning her room. Then she may get the work done, but she may do it only to get the ice cream. She may not understand why she needs to clean her room.

Some parents worry that positive attention will "spoil" their child. That probably will not happen. Positive attention will make your child want to be good so he can get your support. It will spoil your child only if you give rewards or praise that the child does not deserve.

Tips for parents using rewards and reinforcement

- When your child does something that you like, reward her by smiling or nodding to let her know that you are pleased. Hugs are good rewards, too.

- Praise your child for good behavior. Be very specific. Tell him exactly what behavior, actions and words you liked. Examples:

- "Thank you for cleaning up your room."
- "I like the way you shared your toys with your friends."
- "I am proud of the way you ran the race."

- When your child is doing something you do not like, stop and think. Do you need to say something negative to stop that behavior right away? That might reward her bad behavior with your attention. Sometimes you will need to do or say something negative. But sometimes you can wait and watch for something that she is doing right and talk to her about that. For example, your child may be getting restless at the doctor's office and begin to make faces and to complain. You could ignore that behavior and watch for when she gets involved in a magazine and stops complaining. Then you could tell her that you see that she is being very patient and that you appreciate her acting grown up. This way you are giving her positive attention. That teaches her what she should do instead of what she shouldn't do.

- Sometimes your child might be doing some things right and some things wrong. Try to focus on what he did right. For example, you may have asked your son to pick up his dirty clothes in his room. He may have picked them up but laid them on his bed instead of putting them in the laundry basket. Try to focus on what he did right. Tell him, "I am glad that you got your dirty clothes off the floor. Your room looks cleaner now."

- When you praise your child, try to focus on your feelings instead of judging how good or bad she is. For example, you might see your child helping another child when you come to pick her up from childcare. You could say, "I saw you helping the little children find their mittens when I came in today. That makes me feel proud of you." Or, "I like the way you asked your brother if you could play with the truck now. I think that was a polite thing to do."

- Also remember to compare your child's behavior to his own past behavior when you praise. Then he can learn how he is growing. Avoid comparing one child with other children. And don't expect them to be perfect. Look for improvement in every child. For example, your son might go upstairs as soon as you ask him to get ready for bed. You could tell him, "It makes me feel good that you got ready for bed when I asked you to. I used to have to ask you lots of times. You are getting more responsible all the time!"

- Your child can keep improving his behavior. You may try to set some future goals with him. For example, in the last situation you could add, "Maybe you can surprise me sometime. You could go to bed on your own when it is time. That would make me feel great!"

The difference between rewards and bribes

A reward is something that you give your child after a behavior is completed. Sometimes a reward will be a surprise. At other times, the rewards are part of a plan to help a child learn new behaviors. You might have a "sticker chart" for chores or for behavior. Tell your child what she needs to do to get a sticker. Other families may give their child "points" for doing chores or following rules. The child could exchange the points for things or for activities when he has saved enough of them. The reward should be fair. It should not be too big or too little. A reward is something that fits the behavior.

A bribe is different, though. It is something that you promise your child before he completes the behavior, but it is not part of a plan. It is also something that is big and valuable and does not fit the behavior. When you give a bribe, you might find that you beg or plead with your child. Giving bribes can be confusing to a child. It might make the child think he should do the right thing only when he is "paid." In general, it is better to give your child a reward rather than a bribe.

Rewards and positive reinforcement are ways to discipline a child. They are ways that can help everyone feel good. Some experts say you should use five times more rewards than punishments. They work better, and they make family life more fun. Try to find ways to use rewards and praise every day!

Sources:

Keep Kids Healthy (2003). *Discipline Guide*. Retrieved November 2003 from http://www.keepkidshealthy.com/parenting_tips/discipline/

BBCi Parenting Site. *Changing Discipline*. Retrieved November 2003 from http://www.bbc.co.uk/parenting/kids/primary_discipline2.shtml

Prepared by:

Rajeswari Natrajan
Extension Graduate Research Assistant

Judith A. Myers-Walls, Ph.D., CFLE
Extension Specialist