

Tip Sheet: Positive Reinforcement Strategies

Definition

- Positive Reinforcement is defined as “the contingent presentation of a stimulus, following a response, that increases the probability or rate of the response” (Alberto & Troutman, 2009, p. 217).
- Therefore, a positive reinforcer is the consequence itself that, “when presented immediately after a response increases the future rate or probability of the response” (Alberto & Troutman, 2009; p. 426).
- Positive reinforcement is essential to improving behavior

Rationale

Creating a positive class environment is important in preventing student problem behavior and supporting academic achievement. How a teacher responds to students can set the tone for a classroom (Conroy et al., 2009).

Implementation:

There are multiple ways to use positive reinforcement in the classroom. Below are several effective strategies.

Praise

Definition

- A positive statement by the teacher contingent on a behavior that indicates approval or satisfaction of student behavior (Simonsen et al., 2008).
- “Teacher-initiated statements that convey to children the specific academic or social behaviors in which teachers would like to see students continue to engage” (Conroy et al., 2009, p.19).

Rationale

In addition to creating a positive classroom environment, praise is a way to give students feedback and promote positive student/teacher interactions.

Implementation

- Effective praise is contingent on student behavior.
- Recommended ratio of praise to reprimands is 4:1 (Walker et al., 2004).
- Use the I-Feed-V mnemonic to guide your use of praise (Loveless, 1997):
 - I = immediate
 - F = frequent
 - E = enthusiastic
 - E = eye contact
 - D = describe the behavior
 - V = variety
- To increase your use of praise, consider these steps (Conroy et al., 2009):
 1. Identify time or activity when students are exhibiting challenging behaviors (e.g., off task, noncompliant).

2. Audio or video tape this time period, and measure the quantity and quality of your praise. Evaluate your praise in terms of:
 - Frequency- how often?
 - Type – general or specific?
 - Equity – do all students receive praise?
 - Appropriateness for developmental levels
3. Set a personal goal to increase frequency or quality of your praise.
4. Make a list of praise statements to be used with students who have the most challenging behaviors and/or who receive the lowest amounts of praise to use as part of your goal.
5. Implement and evaluate.

Evidence: Positive outcomes for both social and academic behaviors (e.g., Broden et al., 1970; Craft et al., 1998; Ferguson, & Houghton, 1992; Gable & Shores, 1980; Sutherland, 2000; Sutherland et al., 2000).

Premack Principle (Premack, 1962)

Definition:

- A reinforcement strategy that uses activities as positive reinforcement.
- Students are allowed to participate in a high-probability activity (something preferred) as a consequence (reward) for completing a low-probability activity (something less preferred).
- The goal is to use the high probability activity to increase the low-probability behavior.
Example: “You may go to recess after you complete your math problems.”

Other Terminology: “Grandmother’s rule” (“You may have dessert after you eat your brussel sprouts.”)

Rationale

Preferred activities are a type of secondary reinforcement. Activities are easily available in classroom settings to use as reinforcement (Alberto & Troutman, 2009).

Implementation

- Teacher determines the contingency: When then ...
 - *When* you complete the math assignment, *then* you can read your Harry Potter book for five minutes.
- Students complete the less preferred activity first and then participate in the more preferred activity. Teachers should also pair behavior specific praise with the activity reward.
- Students can also determine the sequence of less preferred and more preferred activities (Kern et al., 2001).
- Examples of activity reinforcers: (adapted from Alberto & Troutman, 2009):
 - Lead a class activity
 - Be line leader
 - Spend time on the computer
 - Participate in self-stimulatory behavior
 - Play with games or toys

- Go visit another teacher or principal
- Participate as a peer tutor
- Have access to gym

Please see “Forms” under “PBS Tier 1 Universal” for an elementary reinforcement survey (that can be adapted for secondary students) and a forced choice survey.

Evidence Effective for a variety of students, including individuals with severe disabilities (e.g., Azrin et al., 2006; Kern et al., 2001; Hanely et al., 2000; Osborne, 1969)

Group Contingencies

Definition:

- A group contingency establishes a criterion for performance of the whole class. Many times, the target behavior addresses a problem that the whole class is having (e.g., completing homework).
- The purpose is to support appropriate behavior and prevent problem behavior. (Kerr & Nelson, 2010)
- See below under “Other Terminology” for examples.

Other Terminology

There are three different ways to deliver contingencies within a classroom (Alberto & Troutman, 2009; Kerr & Nelson, 2010):

- ***Independent*** - contingencies are in place for all students, but the reward is based on individual student behavior.
 - Each student with fewer than one tardy per grading period will receive a free homework pass.
- ***Interdependent*** – contingencies are in place for all students, and the reward is based on all students in class reaching a certain level of behavior. (Be sure that all students are capable of performing target behaviors.)
 - If all students turn in their homework on time each morning, I will put 2 marbles on the jar. When the jar is full, we will have a pizza party.
- ***Dependent*** – contingencies are in place for all students, but reinforcement of whole class is based on performance of a few students.
 - The whole class can earn extra time outside if Juron, Sam, and Luke pass their spelling tests.

Note: An independent contingency is not the same as an individual contingency. An individual contingency uses target behavior, performance criteria, and rewards based on an individual student needs and may be different from other student contingencies.

Rationale

- According to behavioral theory, consequences control behavior. By providing predictable consequences to students, teachers can effectively shape appropriate behavior and minimize problem behavior (Kerr & Nelson, 2010).
- Group contingencies are easily implemented as well as cost effective, time efficient, and acceptable to students and teachers (e.g., Moore et al., 1994).

- Students are encouraged to work together, which can be reinforcing for some students, particularly adolescents (Alberto & Troutman, 2009).

Implementation

1. Define target behavior
2. Determine type of group contingency
3. Collect baseline data
4. Establish criterion and reinforcement intervals
5. Determine reinforcement
6. Implement and monitor

Evidence

Effective with students at risk for and with high incidence disabilities. For example:

- Improve classroom compliance/behavior and reduce disruption (e.g., Lohrman & Talerico, 2004)
- Improve social skills (e.g., Skinner, et al., 2000)
- Improve verbal interactions (e.g., Hansen & Lignugaris-Kraft, 2005).
- Also, see Theodore et al., (2003) for a review of group contingencies and outcomes of comparison studies.

Good Behavior Game

Definition

A reinforcement-based strategy that uses interdependent group contingencies.

Rationale

- Interdependent group contingencies deliver rewards to a group as a whole making it time efficient for teachers.
- Because consequences are based on group performance, all students in the group share responsibility for meeting the goal. This decreases the likelihood of certain students being blamed for loss of reinforcement.

(Skinner, Cashwell, & Dunn, 1996)

Implementation

- 1) Decide which times of day or class periods the game will be played
 - Target time when appropriate academic behaviors are expected
- 2) Define the negative behaviors that will be counted during the game
 - E.g., leaving seat, talking out, or disrupting
- 3) Determine rewards (daily, weekly)
 - Think about rewards that support class goals (e.g., free time for winning groups to practice social skills)
- 4) Introduce game to class:
 - a. Divide class into two to three teams
 - b. Ask student to name their teams to build team spirit
 - c. Inform students of the target behavior(s) that will be scored
 - i. Each time the target behavior occurs, teacher makes a tick mark on board
 - d. Determine winning team(s)

- i. Any team that does not exceed a certain number of points, e.g., 4 (both teams can win)
- ii. Or, if both team exceed the cutoff, the team with the lowest score wins
- iii. The team with the fewest points at the end of the week can earn an extra reward

5) Play the game

Evidence

- General and special education classes (Darveaux, 1984; Salend, et al., 1989)
- Elementary students in urban schools as well as secondary-age students (Lannie & McCurdy, 2007; Salend et al., 1989; Werthamer-Larsson, et al., 1991)
- Decreased disruptive behaviors, (e.g., talk –outs, out of seat; Barrish, Saunders & Wolf, 1969)
- Possible reduction of risk (Bradshaw et al., 2009)

Mystery Motivator

Definition

A reinforcement-based strategy that delivers random reinforcements for appropriate classroom behavior (Jenson et al., 1994).

Rationale

- The mystery motivator strategy incorporates feedback to students on their behavioral performance, a variable reinforcement schedule, and a variety of reinforcers (Moore et al., 1994).
- The unpredictability of variable schedules of reinforcement prevents many of the problems associated with fixed schedules of reinforcement. Variable schedules support more consistent levels of student behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2009).

Implementation

Steps (Jenson et al., 1994)

- 1) Select a variety of basic reinforcers.
- 2) Write one of the reinforcers on a piece of paper and put in sealed envelope.
- 3) Define target behavior and criteria.
- 4) With invisible pen, write M on calendar reward days.
- 5) If students meet criteria, student colors in day with developer pen.
- 6) If no M, praise students and encourage for next day.
- 7) Use at least two to three M per week until students are used to system.
- 8) Bonus: Write a number with invisible pen; if students met their target that many times at least, get bonus

Example of Mystery Motivator Calendar

Note: The M is written in invisible ink

FEBRUARY						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1 M	2 M	3	4 M	5	6
7	8 M	9	10 M	11	12	13
14	15	16 M	17	18	19 M	20
21	22	23	24 M	25	26	27
28						

Evidence

- Evidence for reducing inappropriate classroom behavior (e.g., Moore et al., 1994) and improving homework completing (e.g., Madaus et al., 2003)
- Also part of multicomponent interventions (e.g., precision requests, mystery motivators, token economy with response cost, and antecedent strategies (e.g., public posting of classroom rules and teacher movement) (e.g., De Martini–Scully et al., 2000; Musser et al., 2001)

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