



motivation

Understanding and Using Motivation and Reinforcement: TIPS to Start the School Year off Right!

By Annette Wragge M.Ed., BCBA

Understanding what motivates a student, and how to use reinforcement to increase desirable behaviors and decrease undesirable behaviors is key to a good school year for parents and teachers.

Let's start with motivation. The simple definition of motivation according to the Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary includes the following three components:

1. "the act or process of giving someone a reason for doing something"
2. "the condition of being eager to act or work" (don't we want that from our children/students?)
3. "a force or influence that causes someone to do something"

Motivation is a big deal. If we understand what motivates individuals on the autism spectrum we can give them a reason to do the things we need them to do. When used diligently, proactive strategies based on motivational drives can be highly effective in increasing learning, and decreasing problem behaviors.

The simple definition of reinforcement according to the Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary includes the following:

1. "the act of strengthening or encouraging something"
2. "a thing that strengthens or encourages something"

Reinforcement is also a big deal. "Positive reinforcement is the most important and most widely applied principle of behavior analysis" (Cooper, Heron and Heward, 2007, p.257). Reinforcement is the process in which we use acts or things as a consequence to make the behavior occur more frequently.

Tips for Success:

- 1) Know the individual's strengths and special interests
- 2) Do frequent reinforcer assessments and use highly preferred items to expand skills
- 3) Use errorless learning and a heavy schedule of reinforcement when introducing new skills
- 4) Embrace the idea that there is a reinforcer (and often lots of them) for everyone
- 5) What the student finds reinforcing can change – sometimes frequently! If a behavior doesn't increase following reinforcement – the items or activity is NOT a reinforcer
- 6) Pair yourself with reinforcement by spending time doing activities the child likes
- 7) Show an interest in the child and their preferred interests/items
- 8) Without motivation and attention – no learning can take place. Motivation can be affected by what is available in the environment. Modify the environment so you can provide access to highly reinforcing items or activities (extrinsic) for learning/working and over time you can systematically reduce some of those items and move to more natural or internal reinforcers.

Cooper, J., Heron, T., & Heward, W. (2007). *Applied Behavior Analysis*. New Jersey: Pearson Education.

Merriam-Webster's essential learner's English dictionary. (2010). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.