Train Up a Child...

Reinforcing Winning Behavior

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"If any person be in Christ, he is a new creature..."

(2 Corinthians 5:17)

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Reinforcing Winning Behavior

In this lesson we will look at how you can reinforce winning behavior in your children. Before continuing, please write three or four ways you reinforce your children's winning behavior. Write your thoughts on the enclosed **Response Sheet and then put it out of your sight until the end of this lesson.** Next, we recommend that you read the entire lesson through once without looking up any scriptures. **Finally, go back for a more in-depth study before completing the Response Sheet.**

I. Introduction

Reinforcement is the idea of encouraging or discouraging a person to do something. The person is given some type of reward or punishment for either doing or not doing a particular deed. The deed we want the other person to do can be either good or bad.

"Positive reinforcement" is rewarding the other person when he actually does or does not do what we want. Suppose that you want you child to spend more time doing his homework. If you allow him to play with his favorite toy for each minute he studies, you are using the technique of positive reinforcement.

"Positive reinforcement" does not mean that you are getting the other person to do something positive. It means that you are using positive methods to get him to do what you want. The desired action can be either good or bad.

Yes, it is possible to reinforce losing behavior (1 Samuel 2:22-25, 29, 3:11-14). What we want to do is to reinforce winning behavior.

There are four parts to reinforcing behavior:

- The repeated and graduated practice in doing something
- The giving of praise for small improvement in performance
- Feedback on how much improvement has been made and how much that needs to be made (This is done by keeping accurate records and measurements of performance.)
- Statements designed to provide the person with expectations of gradual and eventual success

II. Misuses Of Positive Reinforcement

Remember, "positive" in positive reinforcement means that the person is doing what we want. The methods we use in rewarding a person do not have to be positive or good. They can be negative. Some of these negative methods of positive reinforcement are as follows:

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A. Flattery

Flattery is more than a lie. Often, there is some bit of truth in flattery. It is taking this truth and exaggerating it. Flattery is a deceitful form of praise. The flatterer always wants the person he is flattering to do something for him or her. It is a form of manipulation.

Does flattery work? Yes. In Acts 12:21-23 we have the story of King Herod's paying a visit to the cities of Tyre and Sidon. For some reason Herod was angry with them, but they needed his good will. So, they invited him for a state visit. When Herod was delivering his speech, in an attempt to gain his favor, they yelled out, "This is the voice of a god and not of a man." Their flattery worked on Herod because he liked the idea of being considered a god. The bad part of it, at least for Herod, was that God was not pleased. As a Jew, Herod knew that for a man to think of himself as a god was blasphemy. Because Herod listened to their flattery, God touched him with some type of disease,"... and he was eaten by worms and died."

Sir Walter Raleigh once said, "Flatterers are the worst kind of traitors for they will strengthen your imperfections, encourage you in all evils, correct you in nothing, but so shadow and paint all your vices and follies as you shall never by their will, know good from evil, or vice from virtue." Regardless of how we try to deceive ourselves, we never flatter people for their good. We are wanting something and will do anything to get it. Flattery corrupts not only the person being flattered, but also the flatterer.

Flattery is usually so obvious that we know when we are being flattered. Children, on the other hand, do not have the experience to recognize flattery. When we flatter children, they will accept it as truth. What happens when they discover that it was all a lie? It can cause some major emotional or adjustment problems for them.

B. Bribery

Bribery is giving something (usually money, gifts, or political favors) to a government or company official if he will do something for you. Usually, the person doing the bribing wants something that is either illegal, immoral, or unethical. Like flattery, bribery is always wrong.

In the Old Testament God declared a curse against judges and other officials who accepted bribes (Exodus 23:8; Deuteronomy 16:18-1; Isaiah 33:15; Amos 2:6). In the New Testament (Matthew 28:11-15) the Jewish leaders bribed the guards at Jesus'

tomb to say that Jesus' disciples had stolen His body. Here we see the highest religious leaders of the Jewish nation acting in way that was condemned by their law. Is it no wonder the common people flocked to hear Jesus? He was defending them from the unrighteous, ungodly men who claimed to speak for God.

C. Expectations

We all have limited abilities and potentials. It is important to know the limits of our abilities and potential. If not, we can either fail to try to reach them or try to go beyond them. Either way, we are only hurting ourselves.

We all have different abilities and potentials. What might be a simple thing for us, might be beyond the abilities of someone else. When we expect or demand that people perform beyond the limits of their abilities, we are hurting them. They will consider themselves failures. They lose self-esteem. They see themselves as worthless. They are not! People can only fail if they do not do something that they can do.

Often we try to bribe children to do things that are beyond their abilities. When they fail to perform as we want them, we treat them as failures. Not every child can make straight A's in school. Parents should know what their children's potentials are. If they have the potential to be C students; demand that they be C students. Parents should not demand that *all* children be A students.

III. Types of Reinforcers

Most ways to reinforce behavior are not negative or bad. There are several good ways.

A. Social

Social reinforcement can take several directions. One is giving praise to a child. Praise is being truthful. Focus on what the child has done best and tell him or her what a good job he/she has done. It is important that you do not qualify your praise with a "...but you should have done it...." Let the praise stand by itself. Do not lie or exaggerate.

Another way to reinforce is to give attention to the child. We all want to be treated as if we exist and are important. Paul Lehrer in an article on operant conditioning (1971) says that the best place for training a child is at the family dinner table. This might sound rather corny or old-fashioned, but it can be a time when the entire family can

get together and talk every day. Here the family can talk about their day without feeling as if they are getting the "third degree."

Most parents today have allowed society to make unrealistic demands upon them and their children. It is only when parents place the long-term interests of their children above the shallow "go-go" culture, that families will function as God intended. If parents do not pay positive attention to their children, the children will create unpleasant situations to gain attention, even if it is negative attention. Even a beating is better than being ignored. A beating at least tells the child that someone thinks enough about him to abuse him physically. Ignoring a child tells him or her that he or she should never have been born—that he has no value to anybody.

Affection is a third way to express social reinforcement. It can be a hug, a smile, touching, a kind word. It tells the child that he is a person of worth, someone who is worthy of being loved just because he exists.

Showing affection should not depend on a child's doing what we want him to do. The use of affection to manipulate children teaches them that they are worthwhile only as long as they obey their parents. Do not confuse affection with discipline. Affection lets the child know you love him and want the best for him. It should be given unconditionally. Discipline, on the other hand, is used to guide a child in his or her search for right and wrong.

B. <u>Activity</u>

Rewarding a child by allowing him or her a favorite activity is a great reinforcer. How would you approach getting your son or daughter to do homework? One, you can ignore it. If they get it done, o.k. If not, o.k. You are teaching him that he is worthless.

Two, you could punish him for not doing it. This creates a great deal of tension and stress in the family. Both the parents and the child are continually at each other's throats. This solution only makes things worse.

Three, you can reward him by allowing him to play video games when he has finished his homework. Unless handled properly, this can turn into bribery or punishment. They key here is not punishment or bribery, but rewarding the child for doing his homework.

It is necessary to keep the reward equal with the desired behavior. Do not pay him $10 for doing his homework. Allow him to spend an equal amount of time playing video games.

C. Tokens

Tokens are similar to money that is earned and then spent on goods and services. A token could be a chit or poker chip that is given to a child as a reward to reinforce behavior. The tokens have no value themselves but can be exchanged for some object or privilege the child values. The things for which the tokens are exchanged are called reinforcers.

According to Alan O. Ross, "...for tokens to be used effectively, each child must possess the answers to the following questions:

- How many units of what behavior must I emit in order to earn how many tokens?
- How many tokens must I accumulate before I can exchange them for the back-up reinforcer of my choice?
- And, what are the items from which I may make the selection?"

This might sound a little complicated for children, but it does not take long before they learn how to work the system. *You* might think it is too complicated, but you do it when you are trying to decide where to work, the amount of money needed to pay bills, which bills must be paid to survive (food, shelter, clothing), and how much is left over for luxuries.

When you are creating a token system to use with your children, make sure that you list how many tokens they will receive for doing what you want them to do, what objects and privileges can be bought, and how many tokens each will cost. Be honest with the children; make a list with which you both agree and then stay with it. When you are reinforcing winning behavior, the combining of several types of positive reinforcers (tokens and praise) will increase the chances the child will do what you want him to do.

IV. Principles for Using Positive Reinforcement

A. Identify the Desired Attitude or Behavior.

This is the most important part of the process. Both the parent and the child need to know exactly what kind of change in attitude and/or behavior is desired. This does not mean that the child needs to agree to the change. It means that he or she needs to understand what type of change is required.

B. Discuss the Situation With the Child.
Do not keep secrets. Let the child know how the reinforcement program is working. Let the child know his strengths and weaknesses.

C. Keep a Progress Report of Achievement.

This means keeping a daily record of how the child is responding to the reinforcement training. An accurate record of progress helps the parents know how well the reinforcement program is working. If he is rejecting it, this needs to be noted. If the program needs to be modified, do so. Do not waste time on something that is not working as it should be.

D. Avoid Complaining, Criticizing, and Condemning.

Treat the child with respect. Part of the positive reinforcement process is to develop his self-esteem. Point out where he did not perform as required, but do it in a straight forward manner. Do not complain, criticize or condemn.

E. Emphasize Actions, Not Personality.

When reviewing the progress report, and other times when you are reviewing his performance, talk only about his attitude or behavior. Do not attack the child's personality. Remember, you are trying to change behavior and build self-esteem. When you criticize him as a person, you are telling him that he is worthless. Building his self-esteem is part of the program of changing his behavior.

F. Vary the Time When You Give Positive Reinforcement.

Do not schedule the the positive reinforcement at a specific time every day or week. Vary it. If you have a set schedule for giving positive reinforcement, it soon loses its effectiveness. The child will make sure that he is performing correctly just before it is time for his reward. Give it when the child earns it.

G. Positive Reinforcement Is Both Internal and External.

Initially, most if not all the positive reinforcement will come from his parents and others. As time progresses and he begins to change to the desired behavior, he will start giving himself positive reinforcement. The goal of positive reinforcement is that eventually most of the reinforcement the child receives will be internal.

H. Positive Reinforcement Varies With Each Person.

Everybody is different. Everybody is motivated by different things. What might motivate one person might not motivate another. Design each positive reinforcement program so it will be effective for your particular child. Know what he or she values and include that in the program. Do not waste time by including something which will have no effect on the child.

I. Positive Reinforcement Is Circular.

Positive reinforcement is given for a certain performance. As a result, the performance changes again, which is rewarded with additional positive reinforcement, which in turn causes performance to change. It just keeps on going.

J. Relationship Affects Positive Reinforcement

The greater the prestige and relationship, the greater will be the effect of positive reinforcement. A mother and father will have a greater effect on their child than someone outside the family. The family is the organization designed by God to create mature, complete people. When a family fulfills its God ordained purpose, all members will be winners.

V. Conclusion

We are not born with our attitudes and behaviors. We learn them. Initially, they come from our families. As we develop and mature, other people and organizations affect them.

When parents want their children to develop certain behaviors and attitudes, they need to model those behaviors. The earlier they start the process, the easier it will be on both the parents and the children.

One point to remember is, “Send'em to bed with a kiss, a prayer, and a listening ear.“

Now, please start over and study the lesson and the related scriptures. **When you finish your in-depth study, return to the enclosed Response Sheet and write your answers to the study questions about this lesson.**