TIER 1 STUDENT REINFORCEMENT SYSTEMS

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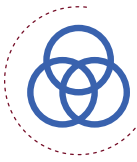
Tier 1 Student Reinforcement Systems

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Purpose

Acknowledging students' social, emotional, and behavioral skills is a key PBIS practice. Though the Center on PBIS (2021) emphasizes the role of educators in establishing positive connections with students and delivering specific praise to acknowledge students' skills, many schools adopt a more formal student reinforcement system. The purpose of this brief is to provide several conceptual reasons for using reinforcement strategies with students.
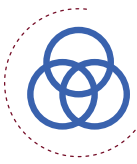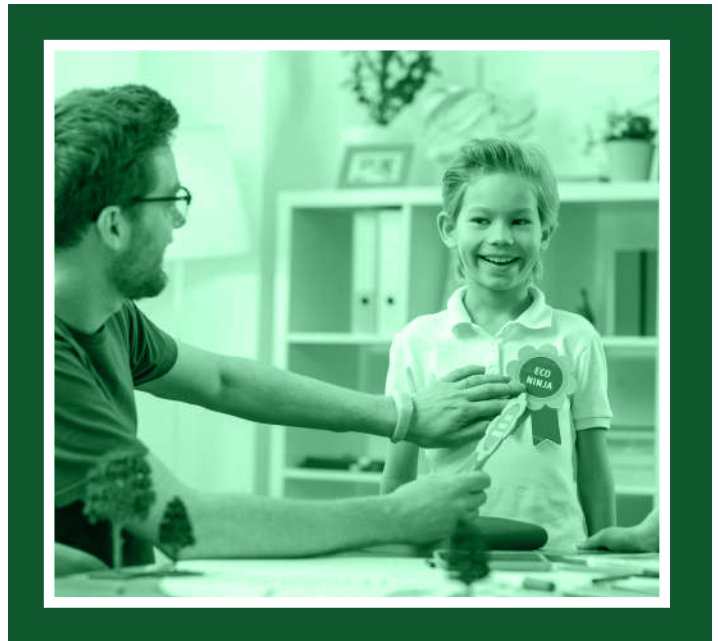
What is Positive Reinforcement?

Positive reinforcement is the process of delivering preferred attention, action(s), or item(s) after a behavior that increases the probability of the behavior occurring again (i.e., a rewarding consequence). The terms "reward" and "reinforcement" are often used interchangeably. Still, it is important to note that a reward is something given that may or may not increase the likelihood of that behavior occurring again. For example, a student may earn a sticker for running a mile. But, if they never run a mile again, the sticker did not positively reinforce their running. In contrast, positive reinforcement is a process that increases the probability of the behavior occurring again. For example, think of a student that is quiet during group lessons. Imagine you start praising their class participation. If the student participates more over time after receiving praise, then positive reinforcement occurred. Specifically, praise was the positive reinforcer and class participation was the behavior that increased. Positive reinforcement is a core component of Tier I interventions with the purpose of:

1. Maintaining or increasing desired behavior across the school

2. Building a positive school culture that emphasizes recognition and skill-building

How Do Educators Use Reinforcement in Tier I?

The use of reinforcement is important for several reasons. First, reinforcement strengthens student-staff interactions. Secondly, reinforcing behaviors clarifies school expectations for appropriate behavior. This also increases the likelihood that desired behaviors will occur again in the future by letting students know what they did correctly. Finally, the use of positive reinforcement can improve student attention, memory, learning, and other important skills. We want all these things for our students! Providing reinforcement is a change in focus from being reactive and punitive by responding when students make a mistake, to being proactive by teaching and recognizing students when they engage in appropriate behavior.

Some people might ask the question, "Aren't we decreasing intrinsic motivation by rewarding students?" A significant amount of research has been conducted that indicates that "there is no inherent negative property of reward" (Cameron et al., 2001). Intrinsic motivation does not decrease because of acknowledgment systems. Providing rewards is not
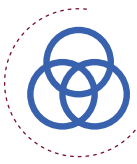
a bribe, because we collaborate with students to prioritize skills that are helpful to them, and we only reward students after they demonstrate those skills.

Reinforcement Differs by Process and Category

There are various ways to reinforce students meeting Tier I expectations (school rules). There are three general categories of positive reinforcers: tangible, activity, and social. Tangible reinforcers are typically small items like toys, candy, or stickers. Activity reinforcers offer access to preferred activities like class parties or school events. Social reinforcers include praise or attention that a staff member or another student might deliver. In addition to the three types of positive reinforcers, there are "escape reinforcers " which offer students opportunities for a non-preferred activity or task to be "escaped" or removed, such as earning a brief break during work or a "no-homework" pass that takes away an assignment.

EXAMPLES

1. Tangible: students get stickers when they participate in class

2. Activity: students earn a pass to attend the school dance when they obtain good attendance

3. Social: students give peer shout-outs during morning meeting after being especially kind to a peer

4. Escape: students get to skip a quiz after completing all homework assignments

## Schedules of Reinforcement Have Varying Effects on Behavior

The schedule of reinforcement refers to how often or how consistently a reinforcer is provided. Reinforcers are often delivered after a behavior occurs a specified number of times. Depending on the type of schedule, reinforcers may be provided following:

- Every instance of behavior

- A set number of behaviors (e.g., after every three times prosocial behavior is observed)

- An approximate number of behaviors (e.g., about every 3-5 times prosocial behavior occurs)

Providing a reward after every instance of behavior (i.e., continuous reinforcement) best supports quick learning or an increase in behavior; this is helpful when behavior is new or inconsistent. On the other hand, providing a reward after multiple instances of behavior (i.e., intermittent reinforcement) helps students learn to continue engaging in that behavior even without getting a reinforcer. Combining the two, Tier I interventions are most effective when they start with continuous reinforcement and slowly transition to an intermittent schedule of reinforcement once expectations are established; this helps to maintain behavior change over time and improve sustainability.

EXAMPLE

Walkerville Elementary School recently rolled out a Tier I system where students receive tickets for the school store by helping peers. As this system was
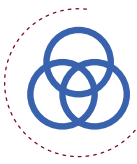
new and the school rarely observed students helping peers, teachers handed out a ticket every time they observed any student offer help to a peer (continuous reinforcement). As students began to assist peers readily, teachers continued to hand out tickets only every other time, then eventually, every few times, they observed it (intermittent reinforcement).

Reinforcement is a Relationship Between Behavior and Preferred Item/ Activity

Two primary ways to teach reinforcement rules are: (a) tell students about them and/or (b) expose students to them. For many students, explaining that you will reward certain behaviors is enough! For others, however, you may set up situations for the student to earn the reinforcer. The use of visual cues and reminders can support the student in earning the reinforcer. Note that all students need to earn the reinforcer at some point – this will show them the relationship exists! Remember that every student should have an equitable opportunity to earn reinforcers at the Tier I level. This might mean that teaching methods or the desired behavior look slightly different across students to avoid only a few students earning majority of reinforcers.
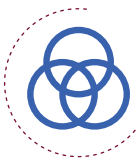
EXAMPLE

A teacher at Third Street Elementary School implements a "Woo Woo Wagon" in her classroom – a cart full of toys not otherwise available. She carefully explained to students the expectations and meaning of the tickets. She placed a sign at the front of the room to remind students of the reinforcer and ways of earning tickets. She considered each student's skills when giving out tickets all week. For example, some students who raised their hands and participated in any capacity earned a ticket. In contrast, more talkative students got their tickets after waiting their turn and participating a few times.

Teacher-Selected Rewards May Not Be Reinforcers

It is important to understand that just because you think students may prefer something does not mean it is an effective reinforcer (i.e., it will lead to the desired behavior). Remember, you should only consider something a reinforcer if the behavior increases. While students may give you clues as to their preferences (e.g., engaging with an item/activity), the best way to determine whether something is a reinforcer is by regularly reviewing data on student behavior. Whenever possible, involve students in your reinforcement selection by asking about their preferences. For example, you may recruit a representative group of students to serve as a focus group for a school-wide system. Student preferences can change over time; assess preferences frequently, especially if you notice your system becoming less effective. While recommendations vary, try to assess preferences at least twice a year. If you notice preferences are different each time you assess, consider examining preferences even more often (e.g., quarterly).

EXAMPLE

One great way to offer students a choice of reinforcers is by opening a student-run school store with various options so each student may pick something according to personal preferences. For example, the John Adams High School store includes no-homework passes, tickets to a school basketball game, "wear a hat to school" passes, lunch with a preferred teacher, small locker decorations, and much more!

Continuation of Reinforcement Is Important

Once students have demonstrated a desired behavior, it may be tempting to stop reinforcing it. Withholding reinforcement is called extinction. Extinction can have two unwanted effects: (a) the desired behavior may decrease or stop and/or (b) inappropriate behavior may re-emerge. You may offset these unwanted effects by slowly shifting to intermittent reinforcement (reinforcing an approximate number of responses). If you start to see either of the unwanted effects of extinction while altering Tier I reinforcement systems, it may be a sign that you are decreasing reinforcement or increasing the effort to earn reinforcement too quickly. Ultimately, you want to continue to reinforce desired behavior in some capacity to ensure students keep engaging in it. Developing systems to monitor ongoing reinforcement may help pre-correct for lapses in recognizing students' ongoing engagement in the desired behavior.

EXAMPLE

Degrassi Community School teachers sent positive home notes to caregivers when their child played nicely with others on the playground without roughhousing. Recess monitors collected data and gave completed data sheets to classroom teachers, who wrote the notes. At first, notes were sent home after every instance of positive playground etiquette. Over time, the MTSS team set new criteria to shift what was required to earn a note slowly. For example, weekly calendar reminders were scheduled to prompt a review of students who earned a note home. In addition, the MTSS team reviewed data quarterly to ensure that desired behavior was still being rewarded and done so equitably.

Consider Your Context to Implement a Sustainable System

When planning to implement a new system, there are four main factors: scope, anticipated benefits, potential barriers, and required resources. Each of these factors will influence your system's (a) feasibility, or how likely the system will be possible to implement consistently, and (b) sustainability, or capacity to withstand over time. The table below includes several questions that should be answered to ensure readiness in each area.
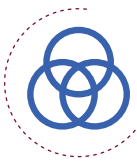
EXAMPLE

Sunnydale High is implementing a school-wide reinforcement system across all students and grade levels (scope). They want students to earn raffle tickets for following school rules. The PBIS team hopes to increase behaviors consistent with these school-wide expectations throughout the school day (anticipated benefits). The PBIS team anticipated that it could be costly regarding personnel and monetary resources (potential barriers). All teachers are responsible for passing out raffle tickets to ensure immediate and frequent reinforcement. The PBIS team also recruited the student government to solicit student input on preferred, low-cost reinforcers and collaborated with the parent-teacher organization to request community donations (required resources). The PBIS team plans to meet monthly to review whether tickets are being delivered frequently and equitably across all students and make modifications as needed.

Things to Consider When Implementing a School Store or Raffle

School stores and raffles are two of the most common school reinforcement systems. What will work best for your school is essential when deciding what system to implement. Both school stores and raffles are only as powerful as the items they feature, so consider this carefully. Raffles are quick and easy, and multiple raffles can be held simultaneously, both big and small. However, raffles mean only one or a few students will get a prize which can be disappointing to all the other students who entered. Some students may give up trying if they have a history of not winning. School stores are more challenging to operate since someone needs to run them, the items must be purchased, values must be decided on, and keeping track of points and items can be difficult. Because of these reasons, the store may only be "open" once a month. Both school stores and raffles need prizes which can be costly, though it is wise to consider "experiences" or "privileges" that are free as prizes.

Table 1. Benefits, Barriers and Required Resources for Reinforcement Systems

Scope	Anticipated Benefits	Potential Barriers	Required Resources
Who is your target audience?	What are your goals for the system?	Are there any barriers that you can anticipate?	What resources, including personnel and time, will your system require?
How broadly do you need to assess and plan for preferences?	What behavior(s) do you wish to target?	What solutions can be generated in advance?	Where and by whom will these resources be located?
What is the extent of the data collection required to monitor your system?	How will you know if your system is working?	How will you respond if not all students benefit from the system?	What systems are already in place that can be leveraged?

Summary

Acknowledging students is a core component of a PBIS framework, and many schools develop positive reinforcement systems. When considering how to implement these reinforcement systems in your school, it is important to consider the preferences of your students for what they prefer to obtain, how often they are being reinforced, and the sustainability of the reinforcement system you use. Your system can be as simple or complex as you decide, and there are likely lessons that will be learned along the way. However, no matter what you choose, your students will likely be excited about earning prizes, and you will see this throughout the school.

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