

**HOW TO MOTIVATE CHILDREN POSITIVELY:  
A KEY TO GOOD BEHAVIOR**  
William Doverspike, Ph.D.  
Drdoverspike.com  
770-913-0506

Motivating children has as much to do with using basic behavioral principles as it does with understanding child development. Many parents understand their children, but do not always understand the behavioral principles that motivate behavior. Rather than using methods that produce negative outcomes, behavioral psychologists use tools that are based on positive motivational principles. There are several basic operant principles that have been proven to be effective in motivating behavior.

**Understand reinforcers.** A *reinforcer* is something that follows a behavior and increases the probability of that behavior occurring in the future. Although sometimes called *rewards*, the most powerful reinforcers are often intangibles, such as attention, praise, or even a smile or eye contact. Attention is such a powerful reinforcer in children that it can inadvertently reinforce negative behavior. If a child receives too much negative attention for undesirable behavior, the undesirable behavior usually increases (because it is being reinforced). Therefore, it is important to use positive attention focused on the desired behaviors.

**Focus on reinforcing objectives.** *Goals* are usually considered in terms of the end product that is desired. SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time bound. *Objectives* are the smaller steps that lead to goals. Goals are reached by focusing on objectives. Reinforce steps rather than goals. Reward progress rather than perfection.

**Think about shaping behavior.** Behavioral psychologists use the term *shaping* to refer to reinforcement of successive approximations of the desired behavior until it is reached. Behaviorists reinforce approximations of the desired behavior rather than waiting for the desired behavior and then rewarding it.

**Divide and conquer.** Whether in training animals, students, or managers, the starting point involves taking the goal or *target behavior* and breaking it down into its component parts. A target behavior is a desired goal that is reached by accomplishing the objectives that lead to it.

**Ask for small increments of behavior.** Rather than requesting too much at first, remember to divide the overall task into smaller, manageable components. For example, if a child's room is a mess, start by asking for a smaller, specific objective (e.g., putting clothes in their drawers, cleaning up the desk, putting the trash in the plastic bag).

**Ask for active, not passive, behavior.** Ask for positive rather than negative actions. In other words, request the presence of a specific desired behavior rather than the absence of an undesired behavior. Say "Do this" rather than "Don't do that" when you describe what you want done.

**Catch your child doing right.** Sometimes, perhaps by a random occurrence, a child might engage in a desirable behavior. Behaviorists call such behavior a *free operant*. Reward the behavior. Notice it. Praise it. Positive reinforcement of free operants increases the probability that they will occur in the future. In other words, don't catch your child doing wrong; catch your child doing right.

**Use immediate rewards.** As soon as possible after your child accomplishes a specific task, praise the child for it. Don't delay praise, but deliver it immediately. Professional animal trainers reward target behaviors within a second of their occurrence. Otherwise, the opportunity may be lost forever.

**Reinforce motivation.** Even if a target behavior is not reached, but the effort to reach it is there, reinforce effort. Rewarding effort is one of the best ways to build a child's motivation. Motivation to do most things is not internal until it is internalized, and most internal motivation is established because it was initially rewarded externally (i.e., through reinforcement).

**Reward specifically.** Don't reward general obedience. Pinpoint your goals and ask for and reward specific tasks that are completed. For example, if your child is fairly productive all day, don't reward her by saying "You were great today." Instead, say "You were great in completing your homework this afternoon."

**Reward often at first and less often in the future.** At first, reinforce every action—no matter how small—that is in the desired direction. This schedule will help maintain the new behavior as you reward progressively less often in the future. As the behavior becomes more firmly established, reward less frequently. Psychologists refer to this principle as "stretching" the reinforcement interval, which results in the behavior eventually being more permanent and more resistant to extinction. However, the biggest mistake often involves stretching the reinforcement interval too soon or too long.

**Ask for work before play.** Apply the *Premack principle*, which is also known as "Grandma's rule." Behavioral psychologists have demonstrated that high frequency behaviors (e.g., play) can be used as natural reinforcers of low frequency behaviors (e.g., work) if the high frequency behaviors are made contingent on the low frequency behaviors. In other words, plan the least rewarding tasks first and the most rewarding tasks last. In other words, first work and then play.

**Reward high-quality performance.** Keep your standards realistically high and achievable for

the task you want your child to accomplish. Let her know exactly what you want done. For example, if your child meets a deadline on which you've both agreed, but on which she has made a number of errors, decide in advance which goal is more important (e.g., time management or accuracy) and reward the performance. Gently bring the errors to her attention and encourage her to redo the work. However, reinforce effort and reward her for the portion of her work that is acceptable.

**Keep your agreement clear and simple.** For example, it is better to say "Please write clear letters on the page" rather than "Don't use sloppy handwriting." Describe specifically the behavior you expect. For example, say to your child, "You pick up the plates, and I'll move the chairs, and then we'll play" rather than saying, "You help me pick up, and I'll help you clean, and then you pick your favorite game."

**Be consistent in your interactions.** Once you and your child agree on a plan, stick to it. Don't stop your plan unless there is a very special reason to do so. For example, if you and your child agree that she'll finish five math problems before getting up from the table, don't stop her after three problems simply because you're feeling guilty about her working so hard that day.

**Always be fair and honest.** Never use gimmicks or manipulation. Your child should feel that the reinforcement you offer is worth her efforts. Never withhold a reward if it is earned.

**Transfer the initiative as soon as you can.** As soon as it is practical, shift the responsibility for the new behavior over to your child. Ultimately, what you're after is your child's own self-management. When this is done, it will be easier for you and it will help your child to grow in her academic skills and self-confidence.

**Understanding punishment.** By definition, a *punishment* is a consequence that has the effect of decreasing the target behavior that it follows. Why, then, are some parents so quick to use punishment? The reason is mainly because it is reinforcing to some parents. Punishment stops the behavior, at least at that moment and at least in the presence of the punisher. However, although punishment may decrease an undesirable behavior in the presence of the punisher, punishment does not actually build new behaviors. We often use only the tools that we know how to use, rather than learning to use the tools that are best for the job. Rather than using the same old tool for new jobs, consider using the right tool for the job.

**Beware of using punishment.** Behavioral psychologists have demonstrated that punishment can decrease target behaviors if the punishment is applied immediately, severely, and consistently. However, punishment does not build or increase new behaviors. Even worse, punishment can also inhibit or reduce behavior in general—particularly in the presence of the punisher. It is never an effective means of establishing new behavior. Rather than punishing what is wrong, catch the child doing right and then reinforce the behavior.

**Remember that time out is punishment.** When studying rats and pigeons, operant theorists often observed what happens when the animal is placed in a space where there is *time out* from reinforcement. Parents are sometimes too quick to use “time out” as a punishment, which is unfortunate for the child because punishments do not actually build behavioral skills.

**Take time and get results.** Most people overestimate how much they can accomplish in a short amount of time, but they grossly underestimate how much they can accomplish over a longer period of time. Think long term and do not expect changes overnight.

**Use these principles to motivate yourself.** Last but not least, use these motivation principles to manage your own behavior. Divide large tasks into their smaller components. Focus on active rather than passive behavior by using a “to do” list rather than a “don’t do” list. To increase work productivity, perform work before play. To increase play, then play before work.

Copyright © 2008 by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.  
Content last updated 2015

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2008, February). Managing people using positive motivation: A key to positive motivation. Retrieved from <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>