

# Behavior modification: the proper application of reinforcement



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Behavior Modification: The Proper Application of Reinforcement The notion of positive reinforcement as a behavior modification technique has a long history and a wide variety of applications. People teach their dogs to sit and roll over by rewarding them with food when they perform the desired behavior correctly. It has also been applied in classrooms where students have learning disabilities. The potential benefits of this form of behavior modification are significant; it must be noted, however, that there may be negative consequences when incorrect behaviors are rewarded. This essay will provide a brief definition of reinforcement, explain how behavior can be modified when reinforcement is used correctly, and identify some negative outcomes when incorrect behavior is rewarded.

As an initial matter, it is important to define what is meant by reinforcement. The basic concept involves a change in an organism's surroundings that happens regularly when the organism responds in a given manner and which is known to increase the probability that the given response will be performed (Reinforcement, 2005: np). These surrounding variables are controlled or managed in order to study the effects of a particular type of reinforcement. It is not the organism which is being reinforced; instead it is the behavior which is the subject of the reinforcement, also known as operant conditioning (Michaels, 1975: 13). An early and authoritative statement defining reinforcement posited that,

Events which are found to be reinforcing are of two sorts. Some reinforcements consist of presenting stimuli, of adding something - for example, food, water, sexual contact - to the situation. These we call positive reinforcers. Others consist of removing something - for example, a loud noise, a very bright light, extreme cold or heat, or electric shock - from the

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situation. These we call negative reinforcers. In both cases the effect of reinforcement is the same - the probability of response is increased.

(Skinner, 1953: 73).

The most significant question is how to modify behavior by using reinforcement properly. Research demonstrates that the correct use of reinforcement requires a clear identification and accounting for all of the variables relevant to a particular behavior. In studies dealing with autistic children, for example, it has been found that using positive rewards, and maintaining a high level of reinforcement through teacher monitoring, has allowed instructors to modify the verbal behavior of these learning-challenged students (Caffrey & Rubin: 4). To manage or to modify behavior correctly, as set forth by Mather & Goldstein, it is necessary to carefully control the behavior modification process (2001: 97). First, the problem must be defined. This means a particular behavior must be defined. Second, there must be a plan to alter the surroundings in order to induce behavioral changes. Third, there must be an identification of a useful positive reinforcer. Fourth, the reinforcer must be applied in a consistent manner and not veer off into the realm of punishment. These steps can increase the probability of reinforcement being a successful behavior modification technique.

Finally, dangers arise when reinforcement is used incorrectly. Skinner's second type of reinforcement, a negative stimuli or punishment, has been shown to produce far less predictable results regarding behavior. Indeed, " In experiments with laboratory animals and studies with children, punishment decreases the frequency of a previously reinforced response only temporarily, and it can produce other " emotional" behavior (wing-flapping in pigeons, for example) and physiological changes (increased heart rate, for <https://assignbuster.com/behavior-modification-the-proper-application-of-reinforcement/>

example) that have no clear equivalents in reinforcement" (Reinforcement, 2005: np). The point is that reinforcement is a very strict process. Attempts to reinforce by punishing have resulted in, at best, short-term modifications of behavior in both humans and in animals. Deviating from the positive or reward nature is likely to result in inconsistent and unpredictable behavior. In the final analysis, reinforcement has been shown to be a viable and useful technique for behavior modification. The key considerations are identifying and controlling the relevant variables, emphasizing the positive, and making efforts not to veer in the non-reinforcement realm of punishment. Used properly, reinforcement techniques can be used for animals, for humans, and in a wide variety of contexts.

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