

What is Behavior Modification?

1.1 Behavior modification is one of the five main types of child discipline. It's based on an underlying principle that guides a lot of discipline strategies. It's based on B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning concept. It's a fairly straightforward process that uses a behaviorist approach to explain the science behind behavior change. Although it was based on research with lab rats, it's definitely applicable to humans as well.

Operant conditioning shows the impact that what happens right before (antecedents) and what happens right after (consequences) a behavior affects the likelihood of that behavior happening again. When it comes to discipline, parents can apply this principle by using reinforcement to encourage good behaviors to be repeated and punishment to discourage negative behavior from being repeated.

Behavior modification consists of four main components; positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment and negative punishment. It's likely that most parents use some of these components as part of their discipline strategy already.

Behavior modification is a great way to address a variety of behavior problems. It is often used to shape behavior one step at a time. It can particularly effective when disciplining kids with ADHD, autism or oppositional defiant disorder.

Positive Punishment

Punishment is used to stop negative behaviors. Although it sounds confusing to refer to a punishment as positive, in operant conditioning, positive means adding a consequence that will deter the child from repeating the behavior. Of course when it comes to discipline, it's important to distinguish that there is a difference between consequences and punishment.

Positive punishments have a place in healthy discipline but they should not be relied on too heavily. When kids receive positive punishment too often, it can cause them to focus more on their anger toward their parents for the punishment rather than truly learning from their mistake and focusing on how to do things differently.

One of the most common examples of positive punishment is spanking. There is a lot of research that indicates that spanking can be detrimental to children and can

increase aggression and other behavior problems. There are certainly many alternatives to spanking that don't involve physical discipline.

Specific examples of positive punishment include:

- **Parents give a child extra chores to do when he lies about cleaning his bedroom.**
- **A teenager is allowed to face natural consequences when his parents allow him to go to school without his homework done and he receives a zero.**
- **A child says a swear word and his parents tell him to write 100 sentences saying he will not swear again.**

Negative Punishment

Negative punishment involves taking something away from a child that the child enjoys. Examples include taking away privileges or removing positive attention. These can be very effective ways to help a child learn from mistakes.

Specific examples of negative punishment include:

- **A child is placed in time out for misbehavior which removes him from the environment that he enjoys.**
- **A parent uses active ignoring to withdraw all attention when a child exhibits a temper tantrum.**
- **A teenager loses her cell phone privileges when she comes home an hour late for her curfew.**

Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement refers to giving a child something that will reinforce the behavior and motivate the child to repeat the behavior. Discipline that relies mostly on positive reinforcement is usually very effective. Examples of positive reinforcement include praise, a reward system, or a token economy system and they can all be very effective positive consequences.

Even much of our adult world relies on positive reinforcement. When adults go to work, they usually receive a paycheck at regular intervals. This paycheck reinforces their work and increases the likelihood they'll keep showing up to work.

When kids don't receive positive reinforcement, they are less likely to repeat a behavior. A child who cleans his entire room without being asked might be very excited about his hard work. Yet, if no one acknowledges his hard work, he's less likely to want to clean his room again.

Sometimes misbehavior can be accidentally given positive reinforcement. A child who yells and screams until his parents give him what he wants has just received reinforcement for his temper tantrum.

Positive reinforcement works best when reinforcers are given at regular intervals. A young child may benefit from a sticker chart where stickers are earned immediately after the behavior is exhibited. A teenager can usually delay gratification longer and can wait until the end of the week to receive allowance money.

Specific examples of positive reinforcement include:

- **A child puts his dishes in the sink when he's done eating and his mother says, "Great job putting your dish away before I even asked you!"**
- **A child earns time on his video games for completing his homework without arguing.**
- **A teenager receives an A on his report card which encourages him to keep studying.**

Negative Reinforcement

Negative reinforcement is when a child is motivated to change his behavior because it will take away something unpleasant. A child who stops a behavior because his parent is yelling at him is trying to get rid of the negative reinforcer (the yelling). Negative reinforcement should be used sparingly with kids as it is less likely to be as effective as positive reinforcement.

Specific examples of negative reinforcement include:

- **A mother nags her son to do his chores every night so one night he decides to do his chores right when he gets home from school to avoid hearing her nag.**
- **A child has been getting into arguments with peers at the bus stop so his mother decides to go to the bus stop with him every day. He begins behaving at the bus stop so his mother won't wait for the bus with him.**

- **A teenager complains about not wanting to go to school the entire ride to school every morning. His father turns on talk radio loudly to drown him out. The next day the teenager stops complaining so his father won't turn on talk radio.**

1.2 Positive reinforcement is a behavior modification technique that is used to encourage good behavior. It can be used to address a variety of behavior problems and is a fast and efficient way to promote good behavior.

How Positive Reinforcement Works

Whenever a child exhibits a behavior, there are either positive or negative consequences that result. If a child receives a negative consequence, like time out, he's less likely to repeat that behavior again. However, if a child receives a positive consequence, it encourages him to repeat the behavior again.

Positive reinforcement doesn't just affect children's behavior. It also affects adults. For example, most people go to work so they can receive a paycheck. This paycheck provides positive reinforcement reinforces that encourages people to continue to go to work.

Examples of Positive Reinforcement

There are many ways to reinforce a behavior. And many of them don't cost any more or require much effort. Positive reinforcement doesn't necessarily need to be a tangible item. Instead you can positively reinforce a child's behavior by:

- **giving a high five**
- **offering praise**
- **giving a hug or pat on the back**
- **giving a thumbs-up**
- **clapping and cheering**
- **telling another adult how proud you are of your child's behavior while your child is listening**

More Free and Low Cost Reward Ideas

You can also offer positive reinforcement by giving a child extra privileges or tangible rewards. For example, if your child cleans his room without being asked, you can take him to the playground to encourage him to clean his room on his own again next time.

There are many different types of reward systems you can use as positive reinforcement. Younger children often do well with sticker charts and older children often respond well to token economy systems.

Behaviors to Reinforce

Use positive reinforcement to encourage any behaviors that you want your child to repeat. Examples of behaviors to reinforce include:

- **using manners**
- **playing quietly**
- **waiting patiently**
- **playing nicely with a sibling**
- **complying with a request right away**
- **putting in a lot of effort on a difficult task**
- **completing chores**

Positive reinforcement can also be used to shape a child's behavior. Shaping behavior means providing positive reinforcement for small steps that a child is taking to work toward good behavior. For example, if you want your 5-year-old to learn how to behave more responsibly, provide positive reinforcement for small tasks, such as putting his dish in the sink or picking his clothes up off the floor.

More Behaviors that Respond Well to Reward Systems

Schedules of Reinforcement

The more often and the more consistently you can reinforce good behavior, the more likely your child will repeat these behaviors. This is especially true when your child is first learning and practicing a new behavior. Try to positively reinforce the behavior each time you see it.

After all, how often would you go to work if you only got paid sporadically? It might cause you to lose incentive to go to work if you weren't sure if you were going to receive positive reinforcement in the form of a paycheck.

This doesn't mean that you need to offer your child a reward every time he carries his dish to the sink. You can certainly set up a reward system where you provide immediate reinforcement in the form of a sticker or token. Then, stickers and tokens can later be exchanged for bigger rewards.

Over time, you can space out your reinforcement more. Provide children with some surprise positive reinforcement from time to time and it will still likely be effective. For example, if your child was well-behaved for the day, allow him to stay up an extra 15 minutes to encourage him to behave again tomorrow.

Avoid Accidental Positive Reinforcement

Sometimes parents accidentally reinforce negative behavior. One common way this happens is with attention. Attention can be very reinforcing, even if it's negative attention.

For example, a child who is purposely annoying his mother receives reinforcement every time his mother says, "Stop that!" or "Don't do that." Ignoring can be one of the best ways to respond to obnoxious attention-seeking behavior.

Another way in which parents sometimes reinforce negative behavior is when they give in. For example, if a parent tells a child he can't go outside and play, but then the child begs and pleads until the parent gives in, the child's whining has been positively reinforced. The child learned that whining helps him get what he wants and he's likely to whine again in the future.

Take care to avoid accidentally reinforcing negative behavior. Instead, negative behavior should result in negative consequences, such as a loss of privileges or logical consequences.