

Skills for Good Parenting: Elementary Ages - Behaviorism

Behaviorism goes back to Psych 101. But even if these ideas are familiar to you, you may not have thought about them in the context of being a parent.

Let's begin with **positive reinforcement**, which increases the frequency of a behavior by providing a rewarding consequence. These are things like going out for ice cream when a child has done all their chores for the week or video games before dinner if homework is done. We use positive reinforcements for ourselves too – like getting to lie on the sofa and have a cold drink after we've cut the grass on a hot Saturday afternoon. These are very basic positive rewards.

Negative reinforcement can sometimes get a little confusing. Negative reinforcement increases the frequency of a behavior by removing something negative. It's relief from something unpleasant. If you have a headache and take medicine and the headache goes away, that's negative reinforcement. Similarly, if you get in the car and turn the car on, your car might beep at you until you put your seatbelt on. When you put your seatbelt on, and the annoying beeping stops, that's negative reinforcement. You're more likely to put your seatbelt on next time to avoid the beeping.

Shaping is reinforcing small steps towards a larger goal. Rather than expecting our kids to go from 0 to 60 we take small steps toward the behavior that we want. So, if a child has a chronically messy room, rather than expecting overnight for them to keep it perfectly clean, we might start by asking them to make their bed every day for a week. The next week, we ask them to make their bed **and** put their dirty clothes in the hamper, and so on.

Extinction reduces a behavior by withholding previous reinforcement. If the behavior is ignored, eventually the child will understand that they will not get attention for this behavior. If your daughter continues to have tantrums because they elicit a response from you, try simply walking away. Once she learns that you don't respond to tantrums, she will seek other ways of getting attention, which you can reinforce by giving praise/positive attention for positive behavior.

Punishment is a consequence that is intended to result in the decrease of a behavior. We're going to be talking about this much more in the next article.