

Skills for Good Parenting: High School and Beyond - 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. We get to lie on the sofa and have a cold drink after we've cut the grass on a hot Saturday afternoon. This is a very basic positive reward.

Negative reinforcement can sometimes get a little confusing. Negative reinforcement increases the frequency of a behavior by removing something negative. It is 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 your teenager has learned that nagging you gets them what they want, it is possible to retrain them by picking your spot and standing firm. It won't be easy, but can be done.

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

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