**Reinforcement**

**What is a Reinforcer?**
As by definition a Reinforcer is “a stimulus that, when presented following a response, increases or maintains the future frequency of that response”.

**But what does that really mean?**We are all reinforced throughout our days. E.g. To avoid being told off, we are on time; The praise from work colleagues for our last project motivates us to put more effort into the next one; We give ourselves a little treat after a hard workout at the gym; We work to earn money, which allows us to buy or do things we like. These are all Reinforcers. They (avoiding to be told off, praise, treat, money) make a specific behaviour (being on time, working hard, going to the gym) more likely.

**Why do we reinforce? Why is it important?**

Imagine you had to work for free. Would you do it? Maybe for a good cause and maybe one day per week, but for a year and just for your boss? No way!

It’s the same for our kids. Why bother to do something if you don’t like it and there is “nothing in it” for yourself. Therefore, before teaching anything we must make sure that our children are motivated and that we can provide consequences that will make it more likely for the child to want to learn in the future again.

**Finding Reinforcers**

Chances are you already know quite a few Reinforcers or things that are motivating for your child. Their favourite snack, jumping up and down on the bed, the big red Firetruck, the stickers in their “frozen” activity book etc. - these can all be used as Reinforcers, as your child is “naturally” highly motivated by them.

**If you are unsure**, observe your child. Give them access to everything that you have and see for how long they play and what they do. You’ll see that they show their preference by playing with an activity more frequently or for a longer period of time, while discarding others after a few seconds.

**New things** can become reinforcing by being paired with “old” Reinforcers. The best example is children working with a token board, or merit system. They find each token reinforcing because they have previously been paired with a strong personal Reinforcer e.g. praise, toys, favourite foods etc.
The best Reinforcer however is always you!

**How to become a Reinforcer**

As tutors we aim for our kids to get excited when we enter the room. We = fun!

As a parent your child will probably be motivated by you already, but there are some things you can do to motivate them further. Give them big smiles, show them you are excited by what you are going to do with them, shower them with your attention and praise when they learn something new! Bring in new toys or have a special box with toys and play games that they can only access through you. These can be rhymes with you tickling or blowing a raspberry at the end (e.g. round and round the garden, pat a cake) or singing songs for them (maybe they love an animal song like “down in the jungle” or their favourite Disney princess theme song). When they play a computer game or on their iPad, disable the sound and make up some silly noises as soundtrack or simply do physical play such as jumping them up and down on their Gymnastic ball or rolling them in a blanket.

**Important things to keep in mind**

**Reinforcers are different for each child**. Some of the things suggested above might not be reinforcing for your child. Always observe their reaction and adjust your games or toys to what your child likes.

**Reinforcers might change** from day to day or over years. We all have preferences and they can change or stay the same throughout our day. Keep an eye on the reaction of your child, if they don’t seem to enjoy something then it doesn’t work as a Reinforcer, even if it worked yesterday and will or might work again tomorrow.

**Avoid over-use**. Imagine you are eating your favourite food for every meal-time for over a week. You’d be sick of it. Try to have a range of Reinforcers and change them regularly. Even if your child absolutely can’t get enough of something by limiting it you will keep the motivation to work for it high.

**Don’t limit everything**! Having to suddenly work very hard for all the things you love can be very frustrating and exhausting. This might mean that some previous reinforcing items or games become less desirable. For example I am happy to walk 30 min to get to my favourite restaurant, but if I had to travel 2 hours across town to get there I would think about it twice. It is important to still give some things “for free”, or lots of Reinforcers for really great work!

Most importantly: Sometimes just have fun!!!

**Stepping Stones Behavioural Consultants**

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