

## REINFORCEMENT VS PUNISHMENT



Washing hands, matching, reading, or bike riding—these are challenging skills sets that take motivation and strategic techniques to teach and learn. In Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), specific strategies are implemented to help children encounter success in behaviors that are meaningful to them and their families, while simultaneously eliminating unwanted behaviors. For these purposes, two imperative techniques are used throughout ABA: reinforcement and

punishment. Now, all too often, these two terms are either misused or misunderstood. However, it is important to fully comprehend the difference between these two techniques to apply them correctly. This is especially important for parents or other professionals looking to improve behaviors or teach skills, and ultimately, help a child succeed in their daily routines.

Let's dive right in, shall we?

## **REINFORCEMENT**

The use of reinforcement is important when the desire is to increase a behavior. Reinforcement is the addition or removal of a stimulus (fancy jargon for a thing or event that brings about a reaction) with the intention of increasing the probability that a specific behavior will occur in the future. The addition or the removal of the stimulus is something that needs to happen IMMEDIATELY after a behavior occurs.

**POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT:** Positive reinforcement is the ADDITION of a specific pleasant stimulus with the intention of increasing a meaningful behavior. An example is:

- A teacher gives a student a sticker when they have all their homework completed. As a result, the student demonstrates homework completion daily, as opposed to once a week.

Now, you will notice that for every behavior in the above examples, the stimulus (the sticker) was presented with the intention of increasing the behavior in the future.

**NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT:** Negative reinforcement is the REMOVAL of a specific aversive stimulus after a behavior was exhibited, with the intention of increasing said behavior. An example is:

- A young lady gets an A in her psychology class, so the professor allows her to be exempt from the final exam. As a result, the young lady tries to get straight A's.

As you can see in the above examples, to increase the likelihood of a positive behavior occurring again, an aversive stimulus (the final exam) was removed. When using reinforcement as a technique, it is important to remember that it is being used to increase the behavior.

## **PUNISHMENT**

Now, punishment is a technique that is typically used after all other alternate, reinforcement-based strategies have been exhausted. Punishment is the addition or removal of a specific stimulus as a means of decreasing undesired behaviors. In ABA, it is preferred to use PROACTIVE procedures, as opposed to REACTIVE procedures for unwanted behaviors. However, punishment is still a learning tool, and can be an effective strategy when used correctly!

**POSITIVE PUNISHMENT:** Positive punishment is the ADDITION of a specific aversive stimulus with the intention of decreasing a specific behavior.

- A mother tells her son to "STOP!" when a child goes to touch the stove, and the child does not reach for stove again.

**NEGATIVE PUNISHMENT:** Negative punishment is the REMOVAL of a specific pleasant stimulus after a certain behavior was exhibited with the intention of decreasing said behaviors.

- Child throws a toy, and mother proceeds to take the toy away. Toy throwing decreases.

It is important to remember that punishment, by itself, does not function as a teaching tool. A child must be taught an alternative behavior that could replace the undesired behavior for the strategy to be effective. For example, a child hits their

mother as a means of attention. The mother ignores the child's behavior and teaches the child to say "hello" as an alternative behavior. The child says "hello" and the mother reinforces the behavior by responding with the attention the child was originally seeking! By ignoring the child's undesired behavior, and then reinforcing the desired behavior that is taught, the child will begin to understand the correct way to request attention.

All these strategies can be useful tools when trying to increase or decrease behaviors. However, it is also important not to overuse any of these individual strategies. Nonetheless, it is important to use best judgement, and not to take the decision of which strategy to use too lightly, as consistency is key with ALL interventions.



**Eyas Landing** is a therapy clinic with a mission to provide evidence-based and family-centered therapy services for children, adolescents, and their families. The primary goal is to deliver relationship-based interventions within the most natural environments and to empower families to reach their full potential. To achieve this goal, our highly educated, compassionate staff dedicates time and expertise to create experiences that maximize therapeutic outcomes. The strength, determination, and perseverance of our clients are evident as they succeed in therapy, and ultimately in their daily lives.

Eyas Landing offers a wide range of comprehensive services including Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, ABA Therapy, Social Work, Family Therapy, and Neuropsych testing. Services are provided throughout the Chicagoland area via Telehealth, In-Home, and in our state of the art clinic.

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