

ParentBrief



What's the secret for teaching children to behave? The power of positive reinforcement

Imagine this scenario. You've landed this great job and you're looking forward to climbing the corporate ladder. The work is very appropriate for your gender, age and ability. You rock up to this great job and you work your socks off the first week (making a few errors of judgement because it's a steep learning curve) and then at the end of the week there's no salary credited to your account. The same thing happens next week, and the week after. Are you going to repeat your efforts and keep going back to work? I suspect not. Let's face it, one of the main reasons you keep working is the positive reinforcement of a salary. So how do our kids feel when there's no positive reinforcement for when they really work hard to behave well?

Here's an important message: Do not take your children's good behaviour for granted.

How positive reinforcement works

Positive reinforcement is based on a simple scientific fact: Behaviour that is reinforced tends to be repeated, while behaviour that is not reinforced tends to fall away.

Positive reinforcement is one of those practical parenting strategies that makes complete sense. For one thing, positive reinforcement works to modify behaviour. For another, it encourages appropriate behaviour, while at the same time providing us as parents with the opportunity to address inappropriate behaviour. There are consequences for all behaviour and when appropriate behaviour is reinforced, it stands to reason that kids will see less reason to exhibit inappropriate behaviour. By the same token when negative behaviour results in negative consequences, kids will hopefully (if not eventually)

work out for themselves that it's not worth repeating the same exercise that landed them in the pooh first (or second) time around.

One other very important point to keep in mind. When we pay attention to our children's negative behaviour by giving them our attention, a lecture or a stern look, we can actually be reinforcing the negative behaviour, rather than a positive behaviour. So, put most of your positive reinforcement including your attention and emotional energy into reinforcing your children's positive behaviours.

Building kids up

Outcomes from positive reinforcement not only help to modify behaviour, they also help to build kids up. When our kids are given a high five, thumbs up, offered praise for doing a good job, given a pat on the back or told how proud of them we are, they experience feelings of satisfaction and confidence. Positive reinforcement tells kids that they're giving this tricky job of being a kid their best shot – that they're trying their best, maybe falling down on the job some days, but succeeding on others. They know their efforts are valued and appreciated, and they'll keep returning to work because there's motivation to do so.

Overdoing it

Overdoing positive reinforcement doesn't work. Kids are the first to recognise false praise or constant praise when praise isn't warranted. The work of kids includes tidying up, putting things back where they belong, feeding pets, doing homework and being ready for school on time. These jobs don't require any tangible rewards or extra privileges other than a 'thank you' or 'well done' from parents when kids complete a chore or respond to a request. Similarly with negative, attention-seeking behaviour, ignoring the behaviour and not indulging the child by giving in, is less likely to reinforce it.

Ways to praise and reinforce behaviour

- **Catch kids in the act.** Praise cooperation, teamwork, patience, tolerance, sharing.
- **Give praise when you are alongside a child.** Make eye contact, and ensure your child can hear you.
- **Be sincere and be specific.** Let kids know exactly what you're praising them for.
- **Praise doesn't always have to be verbal.** A hug, wink, smile or a pat on the back are just as effective.
- **Praise often, appropriately and consistently.**
- **Reinforce positive behaviour** with privileges and tangible rewards when appropriate
- **Praise effort, hard work and perseverance.**
- **Let kids hear you praise them** to other people and family members.

The more often and the more consistently we apply positive reinforcement to our kids' behaviour, the more likely they are to repeat behaviours that attract a positive response from us. Teachable moments happen every day with kids, and positive reinforcement is right up there in teaching kids how to feel good about themselves. Praise and reinforcement from us encourages and motivates them to want to make the most of their talents, learning and opportunities.