

Principles of Reinforcement

When implementing reinforcement, teams should keep in mind several important principles. Review the principles below and consider how familiar you and your team are with each of these important principles. Use the tools and resources in *The Power of Reinforcement Navigation Essentials* toolkit to learn more about the principles that are less familiar.

Very Familiar Somewhat Familiar Not Familiar	Reinforcement should be delivered according to a planned reinforcement schedule. Initially, youth should be immediately provided with reinforcement after they use the target skill. As youth become more proficient, reinforcement can be reduced using an intermittent reinforcement schedule.
Very Familiar Somewhat Familiar Not Familiar	Reinforcement should be delivered frequently. This principle is particularly important when a youth is first learning a new skill. If the target skill is not reinforced frequently, the youth may not use the skill enough for it to become well established.
Very Familiar Somewhat Familiar Not Familiar	A variety of reinforcers are used. Over time or with regular availability, youth may grow tired of using the same reinforcer. As a result, they may stop using the target skill because they are no longer motivated to do so. Reinforcers should be changed frequently so that reinforcement continues to be effective.
Very Familiar Somewhat Familiar Not Familiar	Reinforcement should be delivered enthusiastically. Deliver reinforcement enthusiastically, but genuinely. When reinforcement is provided with enthusiasm, individuals begin to realize that they have done something important. Of course, the “enthusiasm” you provide should match the preferences of the individual. Some individuals may find loud noises aversive or may experience anxiety and prefer calm, quiet enthusiasm. There’s no substitute for knowing the individual when determining what level of enthusiasm will work best.

<p>Very Familiar</p> <p>Somewhat Familiar</p> <p>Not Familiar</p>	<p>Teach the If/Then contingency.</p> <p>The key to using reinforcement is that an individual understands that their behavior is related to receiving the reinforcer. In other words, reinforcement depends on or is contingent upon the target response. You may need to teach youth the “if-then” contingency: “If I do this, I get this in return.” If a youth still does not use the target skill after this concept has been taught, then the reinforcer most likely is not motivating enough.</p>
<p>Very Familiar</p> <p>Somewhat Familiar</p> <p>Not Familiar</p>	<p>Pair any reinforcement with social reinforcement, whenever possible.</p> <p>Some youth may not be motivated by social reinforcers such as praise. To help promote socialization, provide social reinforcement together with other types of reinforcement like tangibles or preferred activities. When this is done, the youth learns that interacting with other individuals is fun, and social reinforcement becomes a conditioned reinforcer.</p>
<p>Very Familiar</p> <p>Somewhat Familiar</p> <p>Not Familiar</p>	<p>Describe the target skill when reinforcement is provided.</p> <p>Identify or label the target skill when reinforcement is provided. By labeling the skill, you may identify the behavior that is being reinforced. For example, you might say, “Nice job tying your shoe!” Or “Wow, you used your calming strategies! Way to go!”. This is particularly important for the youth to understand which behavior or skill resulted in the reinforcement.</p>
<p>Very Familiar</p> <p>Somewhat Familiar</p> <p>Not Familiar</p>	<p>Reinforcers are age appropriate.</p> <p>Reinforcers should be age appropriate. It sometimes takes some creativity to identify reinforcers that are appropriate for the age of the individual (Smaby, MacDonald, Ahearn & Dube, 2007). If an individual prefers things that may be considered to not be age appropriate, do not remove them, but rather consider how you might introduce related, more age-appropriate options. For example, instead of using cartoon dog stickers with a high school-aged youth who receives services in an inclusive setting, you might instead allow time to look at pictures of dogs on the computer during breaks throughout the day.</p>
<p>Very Familiar</p> <p>Somewhat Familiar</p> <p>Not Familiar</p>	<p>Consider and use youth’s special interests.</p> <p>Youth may have highly preferred topics, activities, or items. These special interests are powerful, especially if you can find ways to use these special interests to motivate. For example, if a youth likes music, animation, weather, or other unique fascinations, consider how you can use these to reinforce learning and positive behavior.</p>