How to use reinforcement at home, without bribing.

Esta lección en español

What it is. **Reinforcement** is anything that follows a behavior and makes that behavior more likely next time. It is a result, not a prize. A smile can be one. So can getting out of bath time.

Why it matters. Reinforcement is already running in your house whether you planned it or not; the floor-drop that delays the bath is being paid every evening. The question is not whether to use it. The question is whether you are aiming it.

BRIBE OR REINFORCEMENT?

The line is *when* the deal is made.

A bribe is offered in the middle of the behavior you do not want, to make it stop. "If you stop screaming you can have the tablet." That pays the scream. **Reinforcement is agreed before, in calm, and delivered after the behavior you do want.** "Shoes on by the count of ten, and you pick the music in the car." Same tablet, same music; opposite lesson.

THE METHOD

How to do it yourself: seven steps.

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1. **Pick the behavior you want *more* of, and say it as a "do."** Not "stop fighting about shoes" — "shoes on within one minute of being asked."
2. **Find real reinforcers.** Watch what they choose when nobody is directing them. Ask. Offer a short menu. Something is only a reinforcer if the behavior goes up — you find out by trying. A ten-minute preference assessment turns the watching into a ranked list.
3. **Set the deal in advance, in plain words, when everyone is calm.** Small and immediate beats big and later, especially under age eight or for a brand-new skill. Saturday is too far away for a Tuesday morning. A first-then board puts the deal where they can see it.
4. **Deliver right after, every time at first.** Name what they did: "Shoes on, first ask — music's yours." Once it is steady, thin it: every other time, then now and then.
5. **Pair it with your words.** Over time the praise itself starts to carry the weight, and the music can fade.
6. **Never as a way out of a meltdown.** If you hear yourself negotiating mid-scream, that is the bribe line. Wait for the first calm second, then carry on with the day. The deal for tomorrow still stands.
7. **Tally five days.** Is the behavior up? If not, change the reinforcer or shrink the step. Do not decide the child "doesn't respond to rewards" — you have not found the right one yet, or the step is too big.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Sam, age five, and the shoes.

Made-up example. The names and numbers below are invented to show the method.

Behavior wanted: *shoes on within a count of ten of being asked, in the morning*.
Deal, made at bedtime: shoes on by ten means Sam picks the music in the car.

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Delivered every morning it happened, named out loud.

Week	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Days out of 5
1	no	yes	yes	no	yes	3
2	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	5
3 (music every other day, praise every day)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	5

What changed: the deal moved from the hallway at 7:40 to the bedroom at 8 p.m. the night before. Same child, same shoes. By week three the music was every other day and the mornings held.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

How good deals fall apart.

- Promising something you will not actually deliver. One broken deal costs ten kept ones.
- A reinforcer too far away. A five-year-old cannot see Saturday from Tuesday.
- Reinforcing “being good.” That is not a behavior anyone can see. Name the do.
- Taking the earned thing away later as punishment for something else. The deal stops being trusted.
- Making the deal during the scream. That is the bribe, and it works — on the wrong behavior.

TRY IT

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One question, then the answer.

In the checkout line, mid-scream, a parent says “stop and you can have the candy.” The screaming stops. Bribe or reinforcement — and what got reinforced?

▼ Show the answer, and why

A bribe, and the scream was reinforced. The deal was made during the behavior nobody wanted, and the scream produced the candy. Next week’s scream will be a little longer and a little louder. The same candy, agreed at the car door *before* the store for “hands on the cart the whole way,” would have been reinforcement.

Something to keep

Reinforcement plan, one page.

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Behavior I want more of (as a “do,” defined)	When and where

The deal, in the words I will say	What earns it (reinforcers, tested)	Delivered how soon after

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Out of 5

If it is flat after five days, I will change:

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WHERE DRAGEN HELPS

Built with you, not handed to you.

Caregiver training is this lesson done side by side: you practice, someone watches, you get feedback. Ask your child's own BCBA for it; it is often part of an ABA plan. DRAGENhealth applies the same science to sport and training.

DRAGENfamily, the hub at home, logs what you see as it happens and shows the last two weeks as a graph, so every adult works from the same page. The paper version above works tonight.

Free on this page, and yours to keep: the lesson and its printable sheet. No email, no login.

SOURCE

Where this comes from.

Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* (1953), for the idea; Cooper, Heron & Heward, *Applied Behavior Analysis* (3rd ed., 2020), the chapters on positive reinforcement and on schedules, for the practice.

Examples on this page are made up. They contain no client, student or family information. This lesson teaches a method; it does not replace your child's care team, your BCBA, or your payer's written rules.

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