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# Using Reinforcements for Effective Discipline

Beth Ackerman

*Liberty University*, [mackerman@liberty.edu](mailto:mackerman@liberty.edu)

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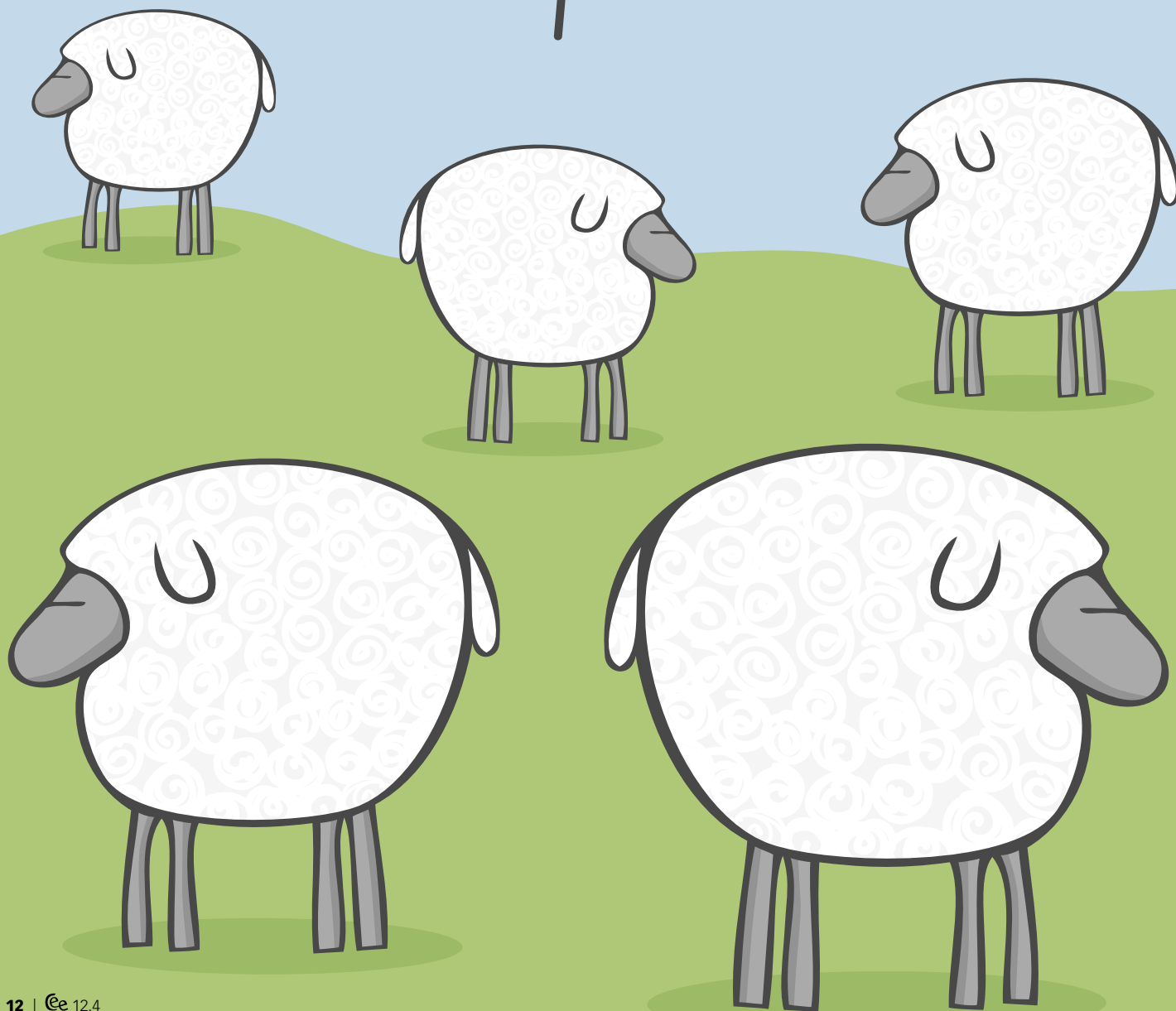
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# Using Reinforcements for Effective Discipline

By Beth Ackerman



# Once a teacher has established a positive atmosphere that includes clear routines,

he or she must use reinforcements to maintain discipline. These reinforcements can be positive as well as negative. We often use the model of the Good Shepherd and the symbolism of the rod and the staff as a negative reinforcement. However, the shepherd did not only use his rod to punish the sheep; he also used the hook on his staff to gently guide the sheep. The shepherd also used other techniques, in addition to the rod, to guide his sheep, such as knowing and providing for all the sheep's needs, as shown in Psalm 23. The Good Shepherd is a model of using reinforcements effectively and proactively.

In the same way, the teacher can implement many types of positive and negative reinforcements, including eye contact, a call to the parents to pick up their child, a pat on the back, or a token economy. When deciding which reinforcement to use, the teacher should always try the least restrictive option first and move to a higher level only after attempting to gain control at a lower level. For example, before sending a child to time-out, the teacher might find that distracting the child will bring the desired result. Only when a variety of positive and negative techniques are used consistently do the “sheep” listen to the teacher's voice.

Teachers should take responsibility for implementing their own reinforcements, trying various responses to children's behavior instead of giving up if the first is unsuccessful. Common reactions from ineffective, reactive teachers—rather than proactive ones—include stating reactive comments without addressing the problem (such as “One more time, and I'm going to give you a time-out”) or immediately jumping to more restrictive methods (such as calling parents without even giving a warning first). Preschool directors do not appreciate the reactive-not-proactive approach. It is easier to gain a director's

support after exhausting all possible less-restrictive actions and using all options in the classroom. Also, effective teachers employ more positive reinforcements than negative ones; doing so helps maintain a fun and positive classroom atmosphere in which good behavior is rewarded.

## Key Principles for Using Reinforcements

**Reinforcements must be implemented fairly.** Consistent reinforcement is important for teachers—but there is a difference between fairness and consistency. Being consistent is recognizing that the teacher always gives a consequence when a rule is

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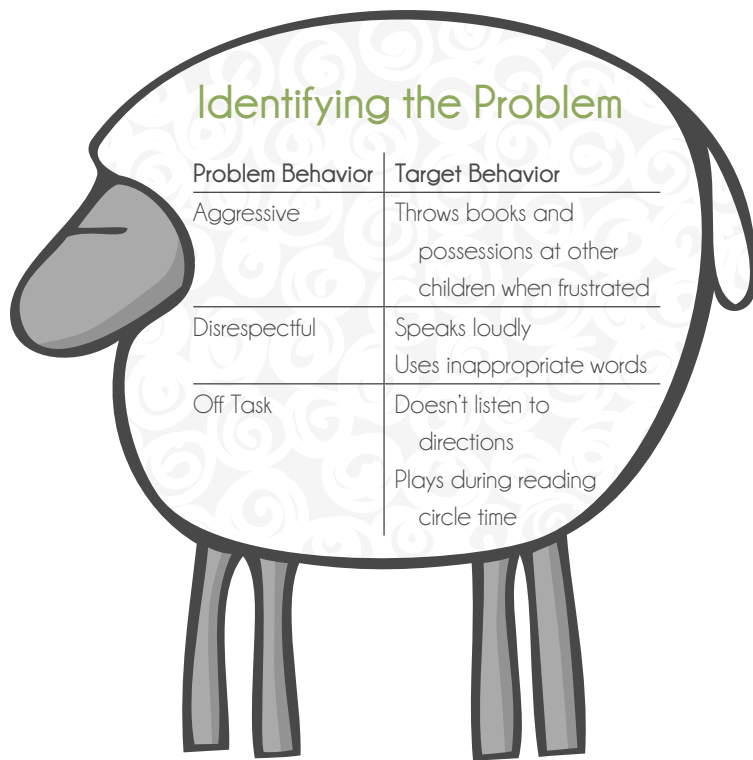
broken. However, teachers may give different consequences to different children, depending on the individual child's needs. One child may need only a stern look to get her back on task, while

another child may need a call home.

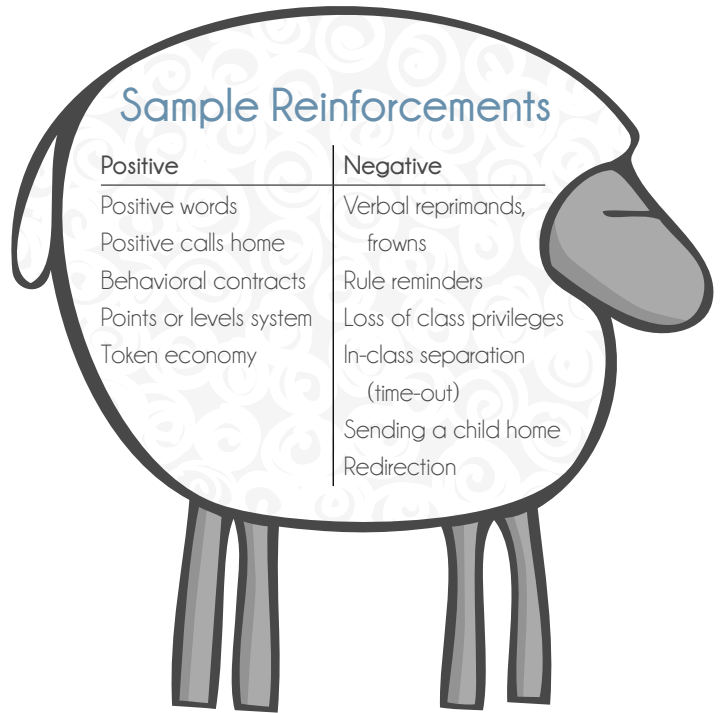
**Reinforcements must be implemented immediately.** For rewards and consequences to be effective, they must be given immediately following the positive or negative actions. Children need to recognize limits and to know exactly when they have made an error. Again, just as in teaching other skills (such as reading), immediate feedback is always better for improving learning. Although the teacher should respond to an inappropriate behavior immediately, he or she should always remain calm and matter-of-fact when giving a consequence. There is never a reason for a teacher to shout, yell, or talk down to a child. A teacher can be stern without raising his or her voice, and yelling would be inconsistent with modeling appropriate behavior for the children to follow.

**Reinforcements should target a specific behavior.** This can be one of the most important steps for giving rewards and consequences. To effectively deal with a challenging child, a teacher must identify a specific target behavior. Breaking a broad, abstract category or attitude down to a specific behavior makes responding to it possible and

allows children to better understand acceptable and unacceptable behavior and to take control of their actions. For example, if a child is having trouble with anger, that child would not be punished for the abstract quality *anger*. Instead, the teacher needs to identify a specific behavior, such as throwing an item, yelling, or hitting. Naming the behavior also helps the teacher communicate to the parents and the administrators what specific behavior needs work. Another common example is disrespect. A teacher may tell Johnny to not be disrespectful, but he may not even understand what that means. A more specific, identifiable behavior would be raising



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his voice or talking back to the teacher. Often, just identifying the problem can help the child change his or her behavior.

**Reinforcements should be implemented in stages, from least restrictive to most restrictive.** It is always difficult to determine what types of rewards or punishments to use, but it is always important to start with the simplest, least restrictive reinforcement. Doing so teaches the child to internalize the behavior rather than being motivated by fear of the teacher's severe punishment or being bribed by the teacher's excessive reward. There is no reason to send a child to the director's office without first trying to give a stern look or to use proximity to the teacher, or (better yet) first rewarding the children who are doing what they are supposed to do or "catching" a child being good who typically causes problems.

In addition, it is best to rely on positive reinforcements more often than negative ones because positive reinforcements more effectively promote appropriate behavior. Most approaches for dealing with child disruptions involve various forms of punishment, and some of these approaches may make school safer or calmer by removing the offending children or discouraging negative behaviors. But some studies

have shown that these approaches have little effect on encouraging children to perform socially appropriate behaviors (Maag 2001, 173). The chart on the previous page gives examples of positive and negative reinforcements.

Many veteran preschool teachers have mastered these techniques. They naturally jump in and out of their behavioral repertoire. They'll use proximity control by standing near an off-task child while turning to Johnny and giving him a wink for doing a great job and then turning their head to the other side of the room to give Chris a disappointed look. Sometimes this type of behavior management goes unnoticed because these classrooms tend to run smoothly. But teachers seeking ways to address behavior concerns in their classrooms would do well to watch these veteran teachers at work.

Understanding and using the technique of "least restrictive before more restrictive" also helps a teacher communicate better with parents and administrators when more assistance is needed. Most administrators greatly appreciate teachers who can manage child behavior within their own classrooms. However, when

help is needed from the home or the director, it helps to be able to articulate what has already been tried before asking for help.

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Distraction is a popular technique for managing behavior, and it should be tried before most other reinforcements. It is a technique that can teach a child to redirect his or her habits and behaviors rather than needing external stimuli to manage behavior.

A simple example is two children fighting over a toy—often you can redirect both or one of the children to another toy.

Time-outs can be used to discourage unwanted behavior. There are those who feel that time-outs can be humiliating or ineffective. But most teachers use this technique even if they do not call it *time-out*. Examples of modified time-outs include sitting a child out during recess or taking away the child's current activities.

When used correctively and appropriately, a time-out can be an effective technique. First, as with any technique, there needs to be support for the technique from parents and administration. This will ensure consistency and encourage child compliance. Second, expectations for these time-outs should be taught—such as no noises, no gestures, or no excessive movements. Third, the teacher should be careful not to assign too much time. One common rule of thumb is one minute per year of age (for example, a three-minute time-out for a three-year-old child).

A teacher's success is often determined by how well that teacher manages children's behavior. ☺

Reference

Maag, John W. 2001. Rewarded by punishment: Reflections on the disuse of positive reinforcement in schools. *Exceptional Children* 67, no. 2: 173–186.

**Beth Ackerman**, EdD, has more than a decade of experience of working with children who have emotional and behavioral disabilities. She currently teaches behavior management at Liberty University, where she is associate dean of the School of Education. She is the author of *PRAISE—Effectively Guiding Behavior* (Colorado Springs, CO: Purposeful Design, 2007).

