

Why Consistency is Important:

A Parent's Guide to Variable Reinforcement

Shawna Allevato

University of Pittsburgh

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Glossary



- ◆ **Reinforcement** – When a behavior is followed by a consequence that will therefore increase that behavior occurring in the future
- ◆ **Maintenance** – When a behavior continues to occur because it is reinforced sometimes, and not others.
- ◆ **Extinction** – When a behavior that has been reinforced in the past, is no longer reinforced and therefore decreases in the future.
- ◆ **Token Economy** – When tokens are received for good behavior that can then be exchanged for a preferred reinforcer, such as a toy, more play time, money, etc.

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)

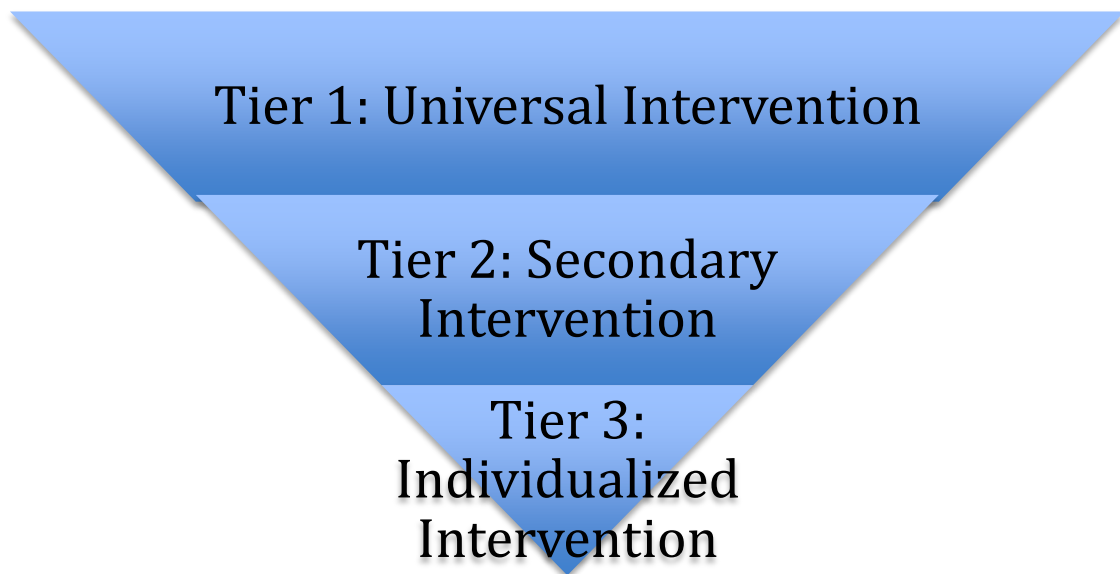


PBIS includes behavior change strategies that involve focusing on procedures that teach, strengthen, and support desired student behavior rather than punish undesired behavior. This concept is currently being used in some schools and has demonstrated that the use of the strategies that promote positive behavior across the entire school environment has dramatically decreased the school's disciplinary referrals. For this concept to be effective, educators and professionals have to be aware of providing these supports to the entire range of student behavior within the school (Kerr & Nelson, 2010).

What does PBIS have to do with Variable Reinforcement?

PBIS uses a variety of highly effective strategies that not only attempts to decrease students' problem behavior, but replace that problem behavior with an appropriate, desired behavior. Using these strategies at home with your child will not only benefit you and your family, at home, but also give your child a better all around quality of life.

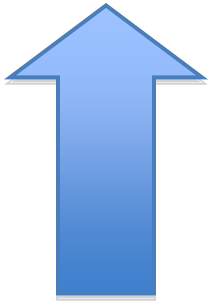
PBIS is based on a 3-tier intervention process...



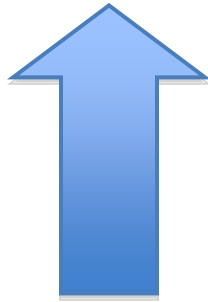
To reach the entire range of student behavior, PBIS is based on a multi-tiered intervention process where the following tier is a more intensive intervention designed for students who failed to succeed with the previous, less intensive tier intervention. Tier one is designed to be implemented school wide, and hopes to prevent students from falling into risk. Tier two consists of interventions for students whom tier one interventions were not effective for or for students who pose a greater risk for failing. Tier three is highly intensive and individualized for students whom tier two was not effective and students who have serious problems. This model allows for educators to better pinpoint those individuals who really need individual attention and support to be successful academically and behaviorally in school.

What is Reinforcement?

- ◆ This means is that your child is doing a behavior and that behavior is followed by a consequence that results in your child doing that behavior again in the future



Reinforcement



Bad Behavior

Remember those ever too familiar trips to the grocery store when your child throws a temper tantrum for that candy bar they want?



*Chances are, when your child throws a temper tantrum, you give them what they want so they will stop! This is **reinforcing** their bad behavior. BUT by learning helpful tips, you can start to **reinforce** GOOD behavior to replace the BAD behavior!*

What is Variable Reinforcement?

◆.....◆

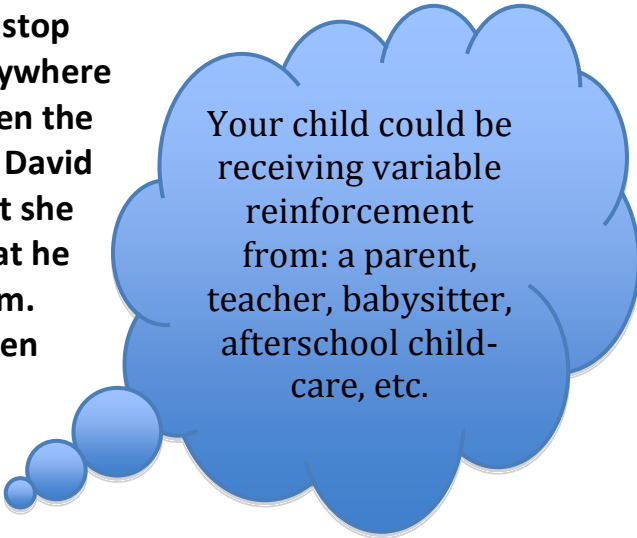
Let's take this one step further. Perhaps the consequence that follows your child's behavior doesn't occur every time the behavior occurs – this is called an “intermittent reinforcement schedule” or a “variable reinforcement schedules”. If we go back to the grocery store, suppose you don't give in and give your child the candy bar this time, but you did last week when the temper tantrum exploded. This is how the behavior is maintained.

Another great example of variable reinforcement is a slot machine-people continue to put money into a slot machine because occasionally, they will hit jackpot. As a parent, it is important to notice when and how often you are responding to your child's problem behavior. After teaching your child how to respond appropriately, you can then use a variable reinforcement schedule to maintain appropriate behavior rather than unwanted, problem behavior!

Case Study



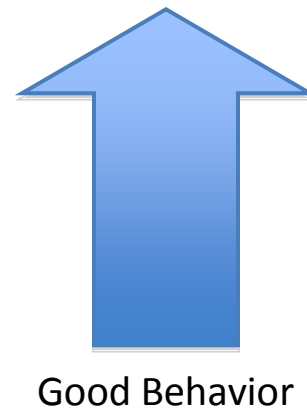
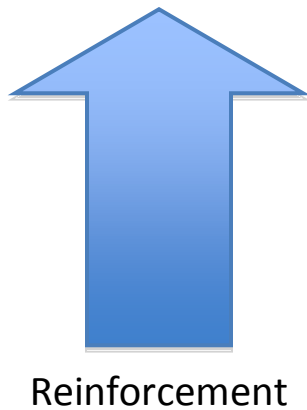
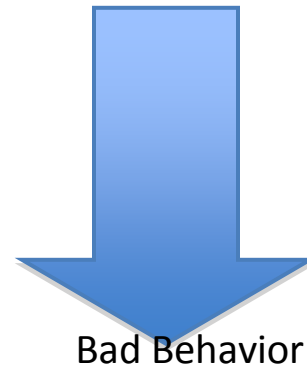
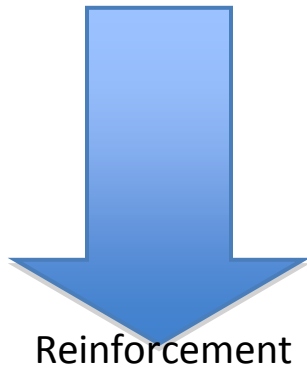
Stacy is a working mother, married, with two children. David, Stacy's 5-year-old son, was diagnosed with ADHD and has a habit of screaming when he wants attention. David will scream at home when he wants the attention of his parents, at school when he wants his teacher's attention, and scream at daycare when he wants the child care worker's attention. Every time David screams, the shrieking is so intolerable; that everyone gives him his or her full attention just so he will stop screaming. Stacy is embarrassed to take him anywhere because often times, if she is not by his side when the screaming starts, people begin to stare because David is so disruptive. A friend suggested to Stacy that she start ignoring David's screaming so he learns that he cannot get his way whenever he wants to scream. Stacy tried this method for a few weeks, but often times it was too difficult to stick to, and David's father, as well as his teacher, was not too happy about letting David disrupt others. What should Stacy do?



Solution...

For an intervention to work, the screaming behavior needs to be receiving consistent consequences. Stacy will need to talk to all the people in David's life who will experience David's screaming behavior. For the behavior to decrease, everyone will have to completely ignore David's screaming behavior. It is important to note that this behavior will get worse before it gets better, so be prepared. It will also be important for everyone to praise David when he is using appropriate behavior. Therefore, David will learn that he receives praise when he is using appropriate behavior, and receives nothing when he screams. This is a way to "catch David being good", before he has a chance to be bad.

Possible Interventions



Praise-and-Ignore Approach

When using the praise-and-ignore approach, it is important to remember that your child will try hard and harder with their bad behavior to get what they want, before they learn that you are not going to give in. In short, the bad behavior will get worse before it gets better so be prepared, and stand strong! Remember, that when you give in just that ONE time, your child is receiving variable reinforcement for their bad behavior, which is exactly what we are trying to avoid! To be sure that consistency is being maintained, you'll have to inform all those who will experience the child's bad behavior, how to ignore the behavior. When a behavior has been reinforced in the past, and is then ignored, the behavior will stop occurring, and therefore has been put on extinction. By giving frequent praise to your child for "being good", your child will eventually make the connection that they are noticed and praised when they are being good, and ignored when they are, being bad (Kerr & Nelson, 2010).

Frequently Asked Questions



- ◆ **I'm afraid my babysitter isn't being consistent with my child's behavior when I am not around. What should I do?**

Consider providing your babysitter with specific notes on how to ignore specific behavior and how to reinforce appropriate behavior. Encourage your babysitter to talk to you about difficulties she may be encountering with this process.

- ◆ **My mother in law doesn't seem to understand this process. She says that she never raised her children that way and they turned out fine. What should I tell her?**

Gently explain how sending your child mixed messages from different people in their life is only making their negative behavior worse. To teach your child appropriate behavior, everyone must be consistent in how they react to the behavior.

- ◆ **My child's teachers seem to have different rules for bad behavior than we have at home. What should I do?**

Make an appointment with your child's teachers and explain to them the importance of consistency across all settings in your child's life. Be specific about how you are ignoring negative behavior, and praising appropriate behavior. Be sure to discuss specific plans as to what negative behavior your child is engaging in at school, and how the teachers can react to it. Having open lines of communication with your child's teacher will only make this process easier on everyone.

References

- Brennan, E. M., Huffstutter, K., Rosenzweig, J. M., & Bradley, J. R. (2008). Child care and employed parents of children with emotional or behavioral disorders. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 16*(2), 78-89.
- Rosenzweig, Huffstutter, Brennan and Bradley from Portland State University in Oregon looked at the difficulties associated with parents finding quality care for their children with disabilities. The two major issues the researchers answered in their study were: (a) the profile of episodes of childcare used by families of children having emotional or behavioral disorders and (b) the level of satisfaction with child care, difficulty making child care arrangements, work-family fit, and family flexibility predict parent reports of stress and of limiting work hours because of child care considerations. The researchers interviewed 60 parents of children with emotional or behavioral disorders. More than half of the parents reported that their work hours were limited by their child's mental health and of these parents, elevated levels of stress were reported based on stress scales. Overall, the parent's reports showed that childcare varied from day to day and was complex. The most frequent profile of care the parents reported was by the other parent after the child received care in public school by instructional staff. Parents showed significant rates of lower satisfaction concerning the childcare for their child with an emotional or behavioral disorder. Parents also reported working fewer hours than they wished due to their childcare arrangement. Research shows that families with children with disabilities have significantly less flexibility in their family/work/child care schedules, which is mainly due to the requirements and demands of the child with a disability. The reported limitations of this study include the non-representative sample size in comparison with the number of children that actually have an emotional or behavior disorder, and the parents do not represent a diverse set of respondents. This information will be useful for my project because it furthers my knowledge and understanding of the difficulties associated with parents of children with emotional or behavior disorders. I will be able to somewhat empathize with the difficulties with childcare many parents have and are currently experiencing. I can explain to parents that this inconsistency in childcare could be providing variable reinforcement for their child's negative behavior, which does anything but improve problem behavior. I can then provide other research that supports implementing intermittent reinforcement of positive behavior. I could offer suggestions as such as the use behavior charts and other handouts that will allow for practical steps in providing consistency to their reinforcement and monitoring their child's behavior and progress.
- Heiman, T. (2002). Parents of children with disabilities: Resilience, coping, and future expectations. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities, 14*(2), 159-171.
- Tali Heiman is a professor at The Open University of Israel. This article examines resiliency in parents of children with intellectual, physical, or learning disabilities. Heiman stresses the importance of resiliency in the fact that a child's disability affects not only the child, but also the family, and the environment where the disability is prominent. Studies show that discovering a child has a disability elicits similar responses as bereavement. Heiman studied 32 parents of children with special needs by reviewing

their responses to an interview that was designed to question the parents' experience with having a child with a disability who lived at home by looking at their past, present, and future. The results were divided according to the topic of the question: parent's suspicion of the diagnoses, parents' responses to the diagnosis, the reactions of other family members to the diagnosis, concerns or problems in rearing the child, the child's influence on the parents' life, services used by parents, parents' feelings, parents' concerns and expectations, and parent's activity for their child's future welfare. The results provide understanding as to the effectiveness of support that help families caring for individuals with developmental disabilities. Heiman identified 3 factors that help parents' function resiliently: a) an open discussion and consultation with family, friends, and professionals; b) a positive bond between the parents; c) a continuous and intensive educational, therapeutic, and psychological support for family members. This study will further help my project as it allows me understand the hardships and complications a parent can deal with when rearing a child with a developmental disability. I will be able to offer parents these specific factors that can help their family in dealing with their child's behavior problems or disability. I am somewhat skeptical about generalizing this study to the United States, as Israel experiences a different culture than what the United States may encounter.

Jull, S. & Miranda, P. (2011). Parents as play date facilitators for preschoolers with autism. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 13*(1), 17-30.

Stephanie Jull, a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia and her professor, Pat Miranda are focusing their research on autism, augmentative and alternative communication as well as positive behavior support. The purpose of this study was to look at the effectiveness of play dates implemented by the parents with children with autism and typically developing peers in the home environment. Each parent was trained and supervised by a graduate student during the play dates. Variables such as synchronous reciprocal interactions, affect, social validity and utility of strategies were defined and measured. Overall, the results of the study showed that there was a marked increase in SRIs (self-report inventory), based on their parents, in both children. The author concluded that parents are able to learn the skills required to become skilled play date facilitators within the home environment. The researchers noted during the play interactions that the peers were beginning to ask questions and provide direction and feedback to the child with autism with parent prompting. Because this was an ABAB reversal study, the reversal period was able to show the researchers the dramatic decrease in SRIs. The researchers concluded that both parents were able to further implement these skills in the home after the conclusion of the study and reported the usefulness of the strategies. I won't be able to use this research in its entirety for my project, but I do find it useful to note that these parents were willing to learn and be trained in facilitating an intervention for the child with a disability. It will be important to emphasize to parents that there is evidence based research that is effective in helping their child have a better quality of life, if they are willing to seek out and learn these strategies.

Kazdin, A.E., & Polster, R. (1973). Intermittent token reinforcement and response maintenance in extinction. *Behavior Therapy, 4*, 386-391.

Alan Kazdin from Pennsylvania State University and Richard Polster from Shore Training Center in Illinois looked at the effects of a token economy on social interactions of two male adults with mental retardation. Research shows that an intermittent or partial reinforcement schedule can be used to increase resistance to extinction. This study specifically looks at the use of intermittent reinforcement to maintain a response developed through a token economy with an experimental reversal design. Tokens were emitted contingent on the subject's social interactions. During the reversal phase, no tokens were given contingent on social interactions, only praise was given. As the study progressed, the researchers would thin the token economy given during the reinforcement phases. Results showed that responses produced during the reversal phases were significantly decreased when token reinforcement was being withheld. When intermittent token reinforcement was implemented, responses were maintained even when the reinforcement contingency was withdrawn. So in short, responses of subjects who, were being maintained by continuous reinforcement were more likely to be extinguished when reinforcement was withdrawn. This study will be helpful for my project because it supports the fact that consistency is important when producing reinforcement for children to maintain their behavior. Noting that this study is over 20 years old, the fact that behavior modification terms and techniques have been studied for this long, should be encouraging to parents whom I will be trying to reach with my project.

Kerr, M. M. & Nelson, C. M. (2010). *Strategies for addressing behavior problems in the classroom* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Miltenberger, R.G. (2008). *Behavior modification: Principles and procedures* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Park, J. H., Alber-Morgan, S. R., & Fleming, C. (2011). Collaborating with parents to implement behavioral interventions for children with challenging behaviors. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 43*(3), 22-30.

Park, an assistant professor at Wheelock College, Alber-Morgan an associate professor at Ohio State University and her doctoral student, Fleming, based this article on the observation that behavior interventions for children with behavior problems have generally been implemented by a professional for decades now. The authors believe that since parents are with their children for the majority of the time, and have the most knowledge of the child's history and environment, that interventions would be proven much more effective if the parents were actively involved in the implementation. The authors take the role of coaching the readers/practitioners in approaching, and dealing with the family in terms of these behavioral interventions. The authors first stress the importance of providing the parents with information on the behavioral approach, perhaps understanding that some of their behaviors may be reinforcing their child's challenging behaviors. It is important in this process that the parents are completely involved in the behavioral interventions and the practitioners are aware of the parent's commitment to this intervention so that the plan will be most effective for the family. Practitioners must train the parents to successfully intervene by showing them how to record and respond to their child's behavior, model appropriate intervention procedures, guide and provide specific feedback, and even encourage the other family

to learn these behavior strategies. The authors offer a specific example family for the readers to review as well as various web sites that practitioners can offer parents of children with challenging behaviors. The authors stress the importance of having parents who feel like they are part of a team with the practitioner(s), so that parents are more likely to work effectively. This article will be very beneficial to my project as I create a presentation to explain to parents the importance of their involvement and consistency in their child's life. This article will help me in my approach of my presentation to be very collaborative and not condescending to the parents. It was encouraging to learn practical ways to approach and deal with parents, as this can sometimes be a daunting task for young practitioners.