

## Introduction

The systematic use of reinforcement is the most powerful tool in strengthening or teaching new behavior. This manual explains how to select reinforcers that are effective in bringing about behavior change.

Some persons have difficulty selecting and delivering reinforcers and are disappointed in the results of their behavior management efforts. This book is designed to help those persons discover a wider range of potential reinforcers and learn basic guidelines for selecting effective reinforcers. Additional help in understanding the principles of reinforcement may be obtained by reading a basic reference (e.g., Hall, 1975; Kazdin, 1994).

The exercises included are best used under the direction of a professional with a background in the behavioral principles and procedures on which reinforcement is based. The exercises should be completed by the person going through the manual. Feedback and discussion about the exercises should be provided by a professional during two or more sessions. In some cases, effective feedback can be given over the telephone.

Teachers, employers, parents, and trainers in special classes or institutions will find this manual helpful. Selecting and using appropriate reinforcers is a basic step toward solving many behavioral, performance, and educational problems.

## What Are Reinforcers?

### At Home

Jill McGill was on the verge of tears. She had tired of scolding and nagging her 15-year-old daughter, Sharon, to make her bed and clean her room. Jill decided to use something she had heard about—reinforcement. She proposed to Sharon that if she would always make her bed and keep her room neat during the last 2 months of the school year, the family would travel to the coast and spend a week camping at the beach. She was shocked when Sharon, who had always loved camping and the ocean, stated she saw nothing wrong with her room and would “rather stay home during the summer

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than go camping at the dumb seashore." Jill had exclaimed in surprise, "But Sharon, you've always loved going to the beach!" Sharon's only comment as she stormed out of the room was an indignant, "Oh, Mother!"

### **In a Special Class**

Ms. Hiker was a first-year teacher in a preschool class for exceptional children. She and her aide had been successful in getting seven of her eight students to make good progress toward the social and preacademic goals that had been set up for the class. One boy, Dante, had not responded. Unlike his classmates, Dante was not motivated by hugs or smiles or exclamations such as "Good boy!" The only thing that seemed to interest Dante was the daily midmorning snack. Because nothing else seemed to work, Ms. Hiker began giving Dante bites of snack or sips of juice when he responded appropriately to her suggestions. She also gave him hugs and praise for his efforts. Soon Dante was making good progress. He even began to respond to hugs and praise. By the end of the year, Dante had reached all but one of the individual goals his teachers and parents had set on his Individualized Education Plan.

### **In Industry**

In a large industrial plant with a high level of absenteeism, a program designed to punish workers who were absent had been ineffective. Then management, working with representatives of labor, came up with a program to recognize good attendance records. Workers without absences earned privileges, including free days off, freedom from having to punch in and out on the time clock, and freedom from punitive action for absences after good, long-term, no-absence records. The costs were negligible, yet savings approaching \$1 million a year were realized by the company (from Kempen & Hall, 1977).

These three anecdotes illustrate both the appropriate and inappropriate selection of reinforcing consequences. Even though almost everyone recognizes the importance of using rewards of various kinds to motivate learning and performance, many persons do not understand the importance of selecting and delivering effective reinforcers. In such cases even the best intentioned parent, teacher, or employer may be unsuccessful in bringing about desired changes in behavior.

## **What Does a Reinforcer Do?**

A reinforcer is any event that increases the strength of the behavior it follows. Reinforcement is the procedure of increasing the strength of a behavior by following it with a reinforcer (reinforcing event.)