

Planning Reinforcement with Your Intervention Team

A Resource for Families Enrolled in the
Preschool Autism Program



A recording of this presentation is available on the Autism Learning Partnership YouTube channel.

As we move through New Brunswick's COVID-19 Recovery Plan, Autism Intervention Services will continue to slowly adjust its service delivery. In preparation for an eventual return to in-person intervention with your child, the agency will be required to respect Public Health guidelines. As a part of these guidelines, the transportation of materials by agency staff to homes and childcare facilities will be different.

Before COVID-19, it is likely that the professionals arrived at sessions equipped with a bag or bin of reinforcers to use with your child. What you may not have known is that these reinforcers are chosen based on your child's preferences and have "extra power" for a few good reasons. This resource will help you understand those reasons and the science behind it and will show you how to get involved in the discussion on reinforcers during this time.

Moving forward, you will need to work with your team to plan for using toys and reinforcers a bit differently. As we progress through the recovery period, your clinical team may be unable to bring materials into your home. Your role will be very important in working with the team to identify and gather potential reinforcers as the team prepares to resume direct intervention with your child.

Why do reinforcers matter?

Having access to effective reinforcers is key to the success of the intervention!

When your child was receiving in-person intervention, their team was working to create multiple opportunities for your child to learn and practice new skills throughout their intervention sessions. The number of learning opportunities may be more than a child usually experiences during their "down-time". Reinforcement is helpful in motivating a child to participate in learning opportunities and is key in making sure that learning is fun! Reinforcement enables your child to learn new skills and adaptive behaviours and provides the motivation required to sustain their learning efforts.

A quick review of reinforcement

Reinforcement is a process where a consequence is delivered immediately following a behaviour which results in an increase of the future occurrence of that behaviour. The consequence can be receiving access to an object, toy, food, activity, social attention, praise and/or a pleasant sensation. Because we hope to get that reinforcement again in the future, we repeat the behaviour, even if we are not fully aware that this is happening.

Reinforcement applies in almost every aspect of everyone's daily life because it helps us get things we like and avoid things we do not like. In the same way, reinforcement works when teaching new skills and behaviours at home, both within and outside of intervention sessions.

What is a reinforcer?

A reinforcer can be an object, an activity, something to eat, social attention/praise or escaping an undesirable situation or sensation. An important thing to remember is that what is reinforcing for one person may not be reinforcing for another. Also, what is reinforcing for a person at one point in time may not be at another time. This applies to all of us, including your child.

For example, if you really like cake, a piece of cake might be a reinforcer for you sometimes, but it probably would not be a reinforcer for you when you are already very full. And, although you may love cake, some people do not and would rather have something else.

Identifying potential reinforcers for your child

To identify potential reinforcers, think of your child's preferences. Consider the following questions to help guide your reflection.

What are the things your child most likes to watch?	Examples: mirrors, bright lights, shiny objects, spinning objects, TV, etc.
What are the things your child most likes to listen to?	Examples: listening to music, car sounds, whistles, beeps, sirens, clapping, people signing, etc.
What are the things your child most likes to smell?	Examples: certain foods, flowers, playdough, pine trees, etc.
What are the things your child most likes to eat?	Examples: ice cream, pretzels, juice, graham crackers, McDonald's hamburgers, etc.
What physical activities does your child most enjoy?	Examples: being tickled, wrestling, running, dancing, swinging, being pulled on a scooter board, etc.
What sensation does your child most enjoy feeling with their hands?	Examples: feeling cold things like snow or an ice pack, or warm things like a hand warmer or a cup containing warm tea
What sensory activities does your child most enjoy?	Examples: splashing water in a sink, rolling something against their skin like a toy car, or the feel of air blown in their face from a fan
What forms of attention does your child most enjoy?	Examples: a hug, a pat on the back, clapping, saying "Good job", etc.

Observation is a powerful tool! Watch your child during the day to notice:

- What kinds of activities does your child often do?
- When given a choice between activities, what will your child choose?
- When left alone, what will your child play with?
- How does your child respond to social praise?
- What foods does your child request or seem to enjoy the most during meal and snack times?

Also, consider what reinforcers worked in the past to increase skills being taught or desired behaviours. Are these still effective?

Working in collaboration with your team is a good way to get some help when identifying potential reinforcers. They will have other suggestions or methods to do this.

What makes a reinforcer effective?

Even if your child loves the item that you offer them right after a desired behaviour, certain things influence the power of a reinforcer. Let's look at a few simple but important concepts.

Availability

A reinforcer is more effective if it is something that your child wants but is reserved for a specific behaviour or situation. For example, if your child regularly eats popcorn, they may not be willing to work to get popcorn in exchange for the hard work of completing a task since they usually get it for "free"! But, if they have not had popcorn in a while and you offer it as a reinforcer for practicing a new skill, they will be more likely to work hard in order to get the popcorn.

Immediacy

To be effective, a reinforcer must be delivered immediately following the behaviour you are trying to reinforce. For example, if you are working on toilet training and the reinforcer is an “M&M”, it needs to be delivered right after your child has used the “potty” for it to be most effective. Since reinforcement is something that occurs following a behaviour, the more immediate the reinforcer is provided following a behaviour, the more likely you are to be reinforcing the specific behavior as intended.

Size

How much of the reinforcer should you provide? The size of a reinforcer should be proportional to the intensity of the effort the child has to put into the desired behaviour. It is particularly important to offer a great quality reinforcer when your child is putting effort into something new or difficult.

Contingency

Always ensure that the reinforcer is given only when the child performs the desired behaviour. Using the “First...then” approach is an example of how to provide reinforcement contingent on the occurrence of the behaviour. For example, you can say, “First you put on your shoes and then you can have the tablet.” Making sure the reinforcer is delivered only after the shoes are on is a good use of contingency.



Things to remember when using reinforcement

- You can use reinforcement strategically to motivate your child to learn new skills or to demonstrate a desired behaviour.
- Reinforcement should be planned and not introduced after your child refuses to do something.
- Do not promise or offer reinforcers that you cannot or do not intend to deliver.
- Once you have identified a potential reinforcer, it may be necessary to make that item or activity unavailable, except for when your child exhibits the behavior or skill you are trying to increase. This will make the reinforcer even more valuable to your child, and he or she will be more motivated to work for it.

- Be aware that your child’s preferences may often change; therefore, the selection of reinforcers should also change.
- Remember that something is a reinforcer only if it increases the behavior it follows.

How do you prepare reinforcers as in-person services begin to resume?

- Talk to your team to **identify reinforcers** and how many you should prepare for the intervention. Your team can help you brainstorm ideas if you need support.
- Any object/toy that will be used as a reinforcer during intervention sessions must be thoroughly **washed and disinfected** between sessions. Rinsing with water is also important as children may place one of these objects in their mouth. You should avoid items that cannot be easily cleaned such as stuffed toys, play dough or puzzles. Refer to the Government of New Brunswick website to access specific public health guidelines on the disinfecting of objects and surfaces. www.gnb.ca
- Along with being washed and disinfected, **reinforcers should be stored** until your child’s next scheduled intervention session. Storing the materials used for teaching your child new skills and behaviours ensures that they do not have “free” access to them. If the child has access to these materials only when used as a reinforcer for a desired behaviour, task completion or skill, then you will ensure that they remain exciting and reinforcing for your child. Your child will therefore be more motivated to work for them. Consider having another similar bin to use outside of intervention to continue working on goals outlined collaboratively in your child’s intervention plan.

Final thoughts

In the past, you may have been involved in identifying reinforcers in collaboration with your clinical team and you may have also received coaching from them on how to use reinforcement in learning. That’s great! Hopefully this resource will serve as a reminder and guide for you. If this is newer to you, we hope that it will provide you with a little extra help in becoming more familiar and comfortable with some aspects of reinforcement and that you will be able to begin using it strategically in your child’s learning.

Regardless of whether the concept of reinforcement is new to you or not, you will be playing an important role in the identification, selection and care of potential reinforcers to use in your child’s intervention and everyday life. Your clinical team is there for you and can offer lots of tips and suggestions. Do not be afraid to ask questions and to offer suggestions yourself! Remember, you are the expert on your child. Working together will ensure the best outcomes for your child.

References

Reinforcement Assessment for Individuals with Severe Disabilities (RAISD). Revised from Fisher, W. W., Piazza, C. C., Bowman, L. G., & Amari, A. (1996). Integrating caregiver report with a systematic choice assessment. *American Journal on Mental Retardation*, 101, 15–25.