

# Using Positive Reinforcement to Motivate and Support Learning at Home



Preventing the spread of COVID-19 requires us to make major changes to our well-established routines. However, many children with ASD and other neurodevelopmental disorders struggle to adapt to even minor changes. They may insist on keeping things the same even when others assure them that a new way of doing things is needed or is what is best for them. The closing of schools and other services has surely impacted daily routines, but it is also causing many other unexpected events that children with ASD or other neurodevelopmental disorders must respond to. One of those unexpected events is learning at home with parents and guardians. Many children are not motivated to do learning at home tasks and may engage in problem behaviour when asked to learn and practice new skills. However, learning new routines and habits is possible with the right incentives and motivational support. The tool for providing incentives and motivational support for learning new routines is positive reinforcement.

The idea behind positive reinforcement is that when our behaviour is followed by a satisfying consequence, such as praise, money, or recognition, the likelihood of that behaviour happening again is increased. It can help to think of the satisfying consequence that follows behaviour and keeps it going in the future as a reward. Positive reinforcement works because the brain connects the behaviour with the reward and so we repeat the behaviour with the hopes of being rewarded again in the future, even if we're not aware this is happening. Positive reinforcement applies to everyone, regardless of age or ability, and shapes almost every aspect of our daily behaviour because it helps us get things we like and avoid things we don't like. In the same way, you can use positive reinforcement at home to influence and motivate your child and get the results and behaviour you want.

## Positive Reinforcement

There are four basic steps for using positive reinforcement to increase or improve behaviour:

1. Identify the behaviour you want to increase;
2. Identify potential rewards;
3. Put your plan into effect; and
4. Monitor and adapt the plan as needed.

### 1. Identify the Behaviour You Want to Increase

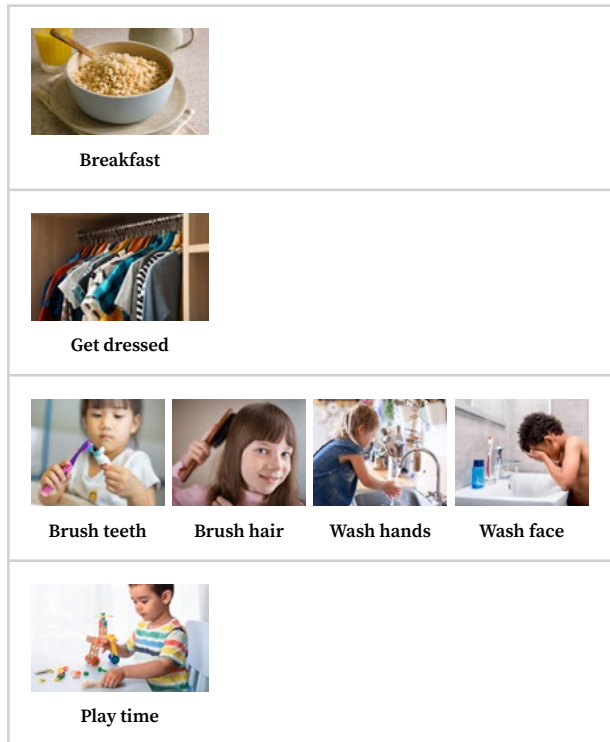
It may seem obvious that the behaviour you want is cooperation with learning at home. However, you need to be more specific so that you and your child understand exactly what *learning at home* means and you can agree when the learning tasks are done. Your definition of learning can include functional skills, chores, or school tasks, etc. You need to identify what tasks need to be done as well as the quality that is expected, and/or how long your child is expected to work on tasks. The best way to specify what tasks need to be done and how long your child needs to work depends on your child's level of understanding.

If your child can read and can work somewhat independently, you may want to use a daily "to do" list that includes school learning, chores, hygiene, etc. as shown in these examples.

<p><b>Learning Activities to do every day</b></p> <p><u>Exercise/Outdoors</u></p> <p>Go for a walk Ride your bike Help with gardening/yard work Other</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IXL Math (20 minutes)</li> <li>• Duolingo (20 minutes)</li> <li>• Read in French (15 minutes)</li> <li>• Read in English (15 minutes)</li> <li>• Practice flute (15 minutes)</li> <li>• Physical activity/time outside (30 minutes)</li> <li>• Other (science, writing, etc. if suggested by your teacher)</li> </ul>
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To Do	Done
Eat breakfast	✓
Get dressed	✓
Brush teeth	✓
Comb hair	✓
Wash face and hands	✓
Activity Schedule	
Snack	

If your child needs more support, use a visual schedule with objects or pictures to show what needs to be done, as shown below:

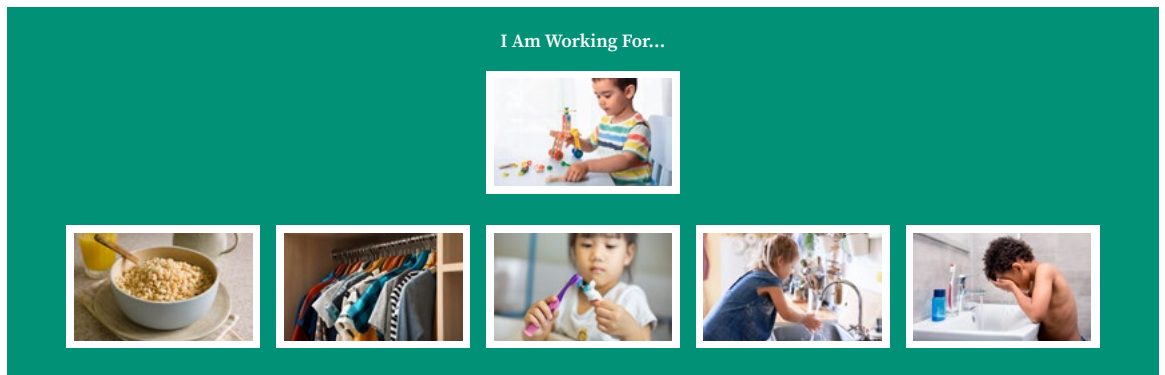


*Pictures are used to show what tasks to do and in what order.*



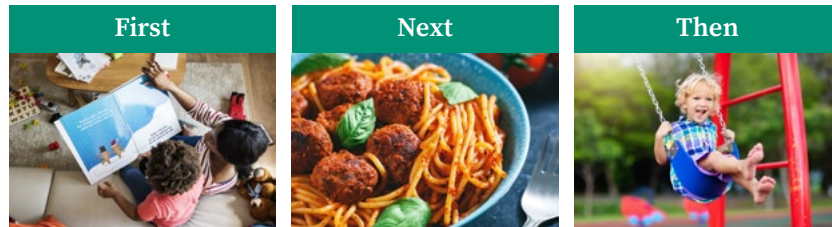
*Objects are used to show what tasks to do and in what order.*

Another option is an “I am working for” chart that indicates how many tasks need to be done to earn a reward. The reward is indicated at the top of the chart with the actual reward, or a picture or drawing. The number of boxes below the reward indicate the number of tasks that must be completed to earn the reward. In the example shown here, 5 tasks are required to earn the reward.



The number of boxes can be adapted to meet your child’s needs. You may want to start with 1 or 2 boxes and increase the number as your child learns to work cooperatively. You can use pictures or drawings to indicate the tasks or use the boxes to check off tasks as they are completed.

A “first-next-then” arrangement, as seen here, indicates that your child must complete two tasks they don’t want or like to do to receive something they want. In the example, the child must read a book and have lunch before using the swing. You can use pictures, words, or drawings to indicate the tasks to be done and the reward that will be earned.



Set priorities and focus on the learning tasks that are most important to you or are most important to your child’s long term well being. You may want to have your child work on skills they were learning at school or in their intervention plan, or on skills that are most important at home during physical distancing, such as hygiene, and daily living skills.

Additional information about structuring your child’s time and using visual schedules and activity schedules to support learning at home is available in the *Personalized Learning Supports* tab [Learning from Home: Resources for Families](#).

## 2. Identify Potential Rewards

There are several ways to identify rewards your child may find motivating. You can observe your child when choices are available and note what items, activities, food, etc. they select most often, or you can ask your child what they want to work for. Reinforcing rewards can include favourite food and drinks, treats, favourite toys, electronics such as iPad, TV, and computer, activities such as walks or riding a bike, movies, free time, and so on. Your child must want it and be willing to work for it for something to be an effective reinforcing reward.

For something to be considered a reinforcing reward, your child must want it, be willing to work for it, and not get the reward without doing the tasks you want them to do. If your child isn’t willing to do the tasks to earn reward or if they can get the reward without doing the tasks, your reinforcement plan won’t work.

Potential Rewards			
Food & Drink	Tangible Items	Activities	Attention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cookies, candy, or other treats</li> <li>• Chips or crackers</li> <li>• Fruit</li> <li>• Juice</li> <li>• Flavoured milk</li> <li>• Etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dolls, cars, or other toys</li> <li>• Assembly toys or blocks</li> <li>• Collector cards</li> <li>• Music or movies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walking or hiking</li> <li>• Riding bike</li> <li>• Swinging</li> <li>• Playing games with others</li> <li>• Arts and crafts</li> <li>• Dancing</li> <li>• Screen time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Praise</li> <li>• One-on-one activity</li> <li>• Hugs and squeezes</li> <li>• Telling/listening to jokes</li> </ul>

It is also important to find as many reinforcing rewards as possible, especially as time goes on. If not, your child may get tired of the reward and it will lose its effectiveness to motivate them work. If rewards that were once effective lose their influence on behaviour, it’s time for new ones.

Finally, you must also decide how much of the reward your child will earn for completing tasks. You want to offer enough of the reward to motivate your child to work, but not too much. The size of the reward should match the amount of work they do. The more work they do, or the more difficult the work is, the more reward they get and easier, or less work, means receiving less of the reward. For example, if screen

time is the reward, you might provide 10 minutes of screen time for completing two or three short easy tasks and allow 30 minutes of screen time for longer or more difficult tasks.

### 3. Put Your Plan into Effect

Putting your reinforcement plan into effect means explaining it to your child to the extent possible and then providing the reward when home learning tasks are completed.

If your child can understand, explain in a relaxed and matter of fact way what they must do, the rewards available for doing it, when it must be done, and how and when the reward will be given. Be clear about what tasks they must do and about how much of the reward they will get when finished. If your child is less able to understand, you may use a simple instruction where you name the task and the reward, such as “first brush teeth, then play time.” By explaining the plan or by giving a simple instruction, you are helping your child understand that you control the things they like and want, and they must do the tasks to get the reward.

To help your plan be effective, the reward needs to occur as close to the behaviour as possible. This helps strengthen the link between completing tasks and the reward. Giving lots of praise for getting started, efforts made, cooperation, and persistence will also help your plan be more effective. It’s OK to have some expectations about how well your child does the tasks, but don’t put too much emphasis on perfect results as this may undermine your child’s motivation.



Frequent reinforcement helps get behaviour started. Reinforcement comes from the reward your child receives when they complete the tasks, but it can also come from the attention they receive from you. Give lots of praise, ask and answer questions, and offer encouragement. As your child learns the routine, you can provide less attention while they are working and combine your attention with other rewards that are given when work is completed.

Some children can do more work before receiving a reward than others. You may require your child to complete all the tasks you've identified before receiving the reward or you may chunk the tasks and provide a reinforcing reward after your child completes each part.

It's OK to help your child be successful in earning the reward. Assistance may be given in the form of reminders to get started, help with difficult tasks, or gently pointing out things that may have been missed. Try to give as much assistance as needed in the beginning and then reduce the amount of assistance as quickly as possible so that your child learns to complete the tasks independently. Giving assistance ensures your child is successful and earns the reward, and it helps strengthen the link between your child's positive behaviour and the reward.

When your child is willingly completing tasks, it is important to continue giving rewards some of the time. You may give more praise and attention and less of other rewards, like treats, but to keep the behaviour going you need to provide a reinforcing reward some of the time. If you stop reinforcing the behaviour, your child's motivation may decrease, meaning the behaviour you want to see will also decrease or stop. This might also mean your child will become less cooperative, refuse to do the tasks, or engage in other unwanted behaviour. Reinforce the behaviour you want to see.

#### 4. Monitor and Adapt as Needed

Monitoring your plan to be sure it is working can be done formally or informally. Formal tracking means recording information, such as how many tasks are completed, or how long it took for your child to get started to decide if your plan helping you and your child achieve. Informal tracking means loosely monitoring how your child is doing each day. Whether tracking formally or informally, use the information about how the plan is working to make decisions about changes to the plan as needed. Some changes you might consider include:

- Adding new rewards when your child tires of current ones,
- Adding more or better rewards for difficult tasks to help increase your child's motivation to work on them,
- Reducing the rewards for tasks your child finds easy,
- Providing more assistance for things your child gets "stuck" on, and
- Increasing the number of tasks your child needs to complete to earn a reward to help the plan be more sustainable long-term.

### Final Thoughts

You can use positive reinforcement strategically to motivate and reward your child for doing things they don't enjoy or want to do. The more encouraging you can be, the more effective your reinforcement plan will be. Say what you mean and show your child that you mean what you say by following through. The more you focus on and reinforce the behaviour you want to see, the less you will have to rely on coercion and punishment to get your child to complete tasks at home. Practicing positive reinforcement isn't easy but the more you do it, the easier it gets. And, when more positive reinforcement is given, there is often a decrease in unwanted behaviour without having to tackle it directly.

When using positive reinforcement to motivate your child to complete tasks at home:

- Be clear about the behaviour you want to see.
- Identify rewards before starting and try to find new rewards so you can provide variety and prevent your child from tiring of what you have to offer. If rewards no longer influence your child's willingness to complete tasks, it's time for new ones.

- Be sure your expectations are realistic. If you make the requirements too high, your child won't be motivated to work for the reward or will give up before earning it. If your expectations aren't high enough, your plan won't be sustainable. Either way, your plan won't work.
- It's OK to remind your child of the reward but don't use it as a bribe. (A reward is given after the desired behaviour occurs, while a bribe is given before the desired behaviour occurs.)
- Give lots of praise and connect praise and rewards to following instructions and completing tasks. Give praise for getting started, effort, and persistence. Focus on the process of doing the tasks and what is learned along the way rather than the final product. It's OK to have some expectations for how well the tasks are done, but don't put too much emphasis on getting everything right or perfect results.
- Try to remain positive.
- Start with what is manageable and gradually increase the number of tasks or the time your child spends working on tasks.
- Be patient. The results of positive reinforcement may not be immediately noticeable but, if you have the right rewards and have realistic expectations, you should see progress.

## References

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