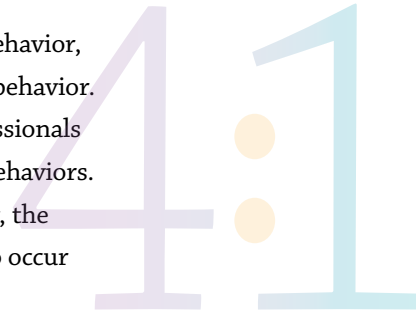


Effective Use of Reinforcement

Justice system professionals are often quick to recognize and respond to law-breaking behavior, but they are less likely to acknowledge and affirm when a person demonstrates positive behavior. A person is more likely to succeed on supervision and beyond when justice system professionals reinforce compliant and prosocial behaviors in addition to responding to noncompliant behaviors. People are motivated by positive reinforcement; the more attention we pay to a behavior, the more likely it will be repeated. Research has shown that behavior change is most likely to occur when reinforcements outnumber expressions of disapproval by a ratio of **at least 4:1**.



Type of Reinforcement

There are two primary ways to implement reinforcements: offer something pleasant or take away something unpleasant. And, there are three types of reinforcement: verbal or written recognition, justice system modification, and tangible.

VERBAL OR WRITTEN RECOGNITION

Words of affirmation
and praise
Letters of commendation
Certificates

JUSTICE SYSTEM MODIFICATION

Reduced reporting
Reduced drug screens
Reduced fees
Early discharge

TANGIBLE

Token

However, the most powerful reinforcement is intrinsic—that is, when a person does something for their own satisfaction. Self-reinforcement is more effective than relying on another person or the justice system to provide reinforcement.

Some Do's and Don'ts of Reinforcement

DO link reinforcements to goals and action steps that help people address their criminogenic needs.

DON'T focus on reinforcing behavior that is not connected to a person's criminogenic needs.

DO make sure behaviors that will be reinforced are attainable for the person.

DON'T ask people to engage in behaviors that are unrealistic for them.

DO make sure specific reinforcements (e.g., justice system modifications, tangible reinforcements) are available within the agency.

DON'T promise reinforcements that aren't available due to policy or cost.

DO make reinforcements meaningful by individualizing them.

DON'T apply a "one-size-fits-all" strategy.

DO reinforce the behavior immediately or as soon as possible after it is known.

DON'T hold off on recognizing prosocial behavior until a later time.

DO ensure people understand the connection between the reinforcement and their actions.

DON'T reinforce behavior without clarifying why the behavior is being rewarded and what its short- and long-term benefits are.

DO provide more positive reinforcements than responses to noncompliant behavior (at least 4:1).

DON'T be silent or use negative feedback more frequently than positive feedback.

DO reinforce new and desired behaviors frequently in the early stages and then taper off and replace with less frequent reinforcement.

DON'T fail to adjust how reinforcements are administered over time.

DO make sure reinforcements are proportionate to behaviors.

DON'T reinforce all behaviors in the same way.

DO recognize incremental progress, particularly when behaviors are more difficult, and take into consideration the person's risk level and stage of change.

DON'T reinforce behavior only after the person has mastered a new skill.

DO help the person articulate the intrinsic value/benefit of continuing the positive behavior.

DON'T rely exclusively on extrinsic reinforcement.

DO use a structured method to identify and reinforce positive behavior.

DON'T inconsistently reinforce behavior.

DO be genuine, showing that you mean what you say and that you appreciate the behavior that you are affirming.

DON'T reinforce behavior out of obligation.

Structuring Reinforcements

Many agencies are developing structured methods of providing reinforcements to ensure that staff are giving appropriate attention to people's positive behaviors. They may take into consideration the level of the positive behaviors; level of frequency/effort/mastery/permanency of the behaviors; connection of the behaviors with the person's criminogenic needs, with more significant reinforcement when people demonstrate positive behaviors in areas that have been problematic for them in the past; and/or the person's risk level. The following matrix is one example of a structured method of providing reinforcement, with more significant reinforcement the more significant the behavior and the greater the level of frequency/effort/mastery/permanency of the behavior.

REWARDS MATRIX	Level of Frequency/ Effort/Mastery/Permanency of Behavior	Level of Positive Behavior		
		Low	Moderate	High
Low	Minimal reinforcement	Minimal reinforcement	Moderate reinforcement	
Moderate	Minimal reinforcement	Moderate reinforcement	High reinforcement	
High	Moderate reinforcement	High reinforcement	Very significant reinforcement	