

# PARENTS' GUIDE TO REINFORCEMENT AT HOME

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## WHAT IS REINFORCEMENT?

Reinforcement is basically how we reward people, in this case, our children, for doing the things we want them to do, like doing their homework, cleaning their room, or brushing their teeth. We might give them some candy for doing their homework, or extra time on electronics for cleaning their room.

In Applied Behavior Analysis, the definition is more specific. In order to be called reinforcement, the reward has to result in the child doing those things more in the future.

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## HOW SHOULD I REINFORCE MY CHILD?

First, make sure you clearly define what you want your child to do. "Be good" or "behave" is vague and doesn't tell the child exactly what to do.

Even "do your homework" might not be good enough. Tell them exactly what to do: "I want you to read your book for 15 minutes and do your math worksheet."

Then make sure they know exactly what they will get. "Once that is done, you can play on your ipad for 10 minutes."

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Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Give clear directives with clear reward	Child does the task	Give child reward!
		

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## WHEN IT DOESN'T WORK

Simple concept, right? But it can go wrong. And probably it will. That's okay. Let's start with where you might be right now. If you're like a lot of parents, what's happening might be something like this:

Give child task	Child has a tantrum	Give child a time out
		

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## WHEN IT DOESN'T WORK

Or maybe it's more like this ...

Give child task	Child has a tantrum	Offer reward if they stop
		

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## WHEN IT DOESN'T WORK

In both of those cases, there's a problem.

In the first case, when the child has a tantrum and we give them a time out, we've allowed them to escape from the tasks. The child will now learn that if they have a tantrum, they won't have to do the task.

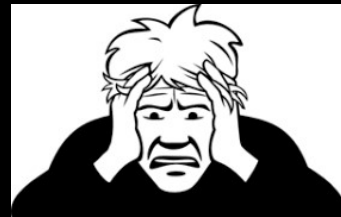
In the second case, we haven't told the child in advance what reward they are working for. And maybe there isn't one. By only offering the reward AFTER the tantrum, the child will learn that they only get rewards if FIRST they have a tantrum.

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## HOW DO WE FIX IT?

First, DO NOT FEEL GUILTY. Parenting is hard. And when you have a child with behavior problems, it's even harder.

But there are some things we can do to prevent these issues, or deal with them when they do happen. It's NOT a lost cause. It may take some work, but it is fixable.



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## THE TIME OUT PROBLEM - TROUBLESHOOTING

If you're giving the child a time out, there's a good chance you were getting frustrated and needed a time out, too. That's okay. Walk away and take a few deep breaths or eat a box of cookies. ☺ Whatever you need to do so you can come back and respond to the child calmly and rationally.

When you come back, the most important thing is that you reintroduce the task to the child. Make sure the escape from the task is only temporary. Keep your voice calm and neutral, and help the child get through the task.

Remember, this is just how we get through the problem. Next time, let's prevent the issue in the first place.

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## THE TIME OUT PROBLEM - PREVENTION

Your first step is to make sure you have a clear list of tasks and a clear reward. You can make visual charts to the child can see exactly what they need to do and what they will get for doing it.

When you decide what the child needs to do to earn the reward, keep in mind how much the child can do before the tantrums start. Maybe that's one task, or two, or one worksheet of homework, or 30 minutes of cleaning.

Next, make sure the reinforcement you offer comes BEFORE the tantrums start. If the child can do 3 tasks before a tantrum, give a reward after two tasks. If the child can clean for 30 minutes, give a reward at 25 minutes.

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## BUT WHY???

The reason we give a reward so early is to make sure we prevent the tantrums from occurring. If the child can normally do 30 minutes of work, but today they have a tantrum at 29 minutes, they won't get the reward. We WANT the child to succeed.

First of all, we as parents don't want to deal with the tantrum; it's frustrating and stressful. Secondly, if the child is successful, they learn that they CAN be successful, and they are more likely to continue being successful.

If they fail after 29 minutes of work and DON'T get the reward, they may learn that they can't do it and are less likely to work next time. It's a lose-lose for you and the child.



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## BUT WHAT IF IT STILL DOESN'T WORK?

Reality check ... sometimes you can do everything perfectly and this still won't work. Maybe the child didn't sleep well. Maybe they're in a bad mood because they had a fight with their sibling.

If you recognize this in advance, perfect! There's a simple solution. If you normally ask for 30 minutes of work before the reward, give the reward after 15 or 20 minutes, or schedule a break in the middle of the 30 minutes. You could also change the tasks and make them easier or something that the child likes.

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## BUT IT HAPPENED ANYWAY ...

If you DON'T recognize the problem in advance, and a tantrum happens, it's okay. You already know how to get through this.

Stay calm and rational. Allow the child to take break. You can say something like, "I can see this is frustrating you. Take a five minute break. Get a drink of water and then we will come back to this."

Kids aren't perfect, and they get frustrated, too. Make sure your child knows that it's okay to feel that way, and help them get through it.

Don't allow access to the reward during the break. This should just be a break for the child to calm down. Then come back to the task.

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## THE TANTRUM = REWARD PROBLEM

Let's go back to the other problem. Here's a reminder.

Give child task	Child has a tantrum	Offer reward if they stop
		

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## THE TANTRUM = REWARD PROBLEM

This scenario tends to happen when we're frustrated as parents. Maybe we're tired or busy or stressed, and we just can't deal with the tantrum right now. So we give the child the reward just to make it stop.

It's understandable that we are frustrated, especially if we are working from home and trying to homeschool our children all at the same time.

Trust me, I get this, and I am with you. We will survive this.

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## HOW CAN WE AVOID THIS?

First of all, we just go back to basics. Make sure the reward and expectations are clear from the beginning.

Second, make sure your expectations aren't too high. Make sure the task is something the child can do independently if you aren't available to help. Break up bigger tasks into smaller tasks. Clean your room becomes a list of specific tasks: put your dirty laundry in the hamper, put away your clean laundry, pick up the garbage from the floor, put your toys in the toy box, etc.

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## WHAT IF IT HAPPENS ANYWAY?

If you do all that and the tantrum still happens, follow the same advice as for the time-out problem. The most important thing is that you DON'T allow access to the reward.

Be calm, be rational. You can do this!



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## WHAT ABOUT PUNISHMENT?

So, why not just use punishment? Ground them, take away the iPad, lecture them, spanking, etc. Well, there are lots of reasons. Let's take a look.

Give child task	Child has a tantrum	Punishment
		

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## PROBLEMS WITH PUNISHMENT

The first problem is that this does NOT result in the child accomplishing the task. They didn't do it, they get punished, and that's the end of it. Parents may think "well, they need to have consequences for their actions." And that's true. But we should make sure those consequences lead to the results we want. Ultimately, we want the child to do the chores or complete the homework. Punishment generally doesn't accomplish that.

Punishment *might* reduce tantrum behavior in the above scenario. But it doesn't really do anything to reward the behaviors we want to see. So the tantrums may stop, but the child might still not complete the task.

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## PROBLEMS WITH PUNISHMENT

Another problem is that a lot of us tend to use punishment when we are feeling frustrated and angry. These leads to two issues.

First, we are likely to give out an unrealistic punishment. "No iPad for three months!" It might seem right in the moment, but in the long run, the punishment probably doesn't fit the crime.

Second, both parent and child end up feeling angry and resentful. This can damage the relationship and make the child less likely to listen to the parent and follow directions.

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I bet you have questions.


*"Why am I rewarding them for something they should do anyway?"*

Most of us probably wouldn't go to work if we didn't get paid. Some kids are motivated by things like good grades or just getting praised by their parents.

But other kids aren't motivated by those things. This is especially true of children with emotional/behavior disorders or children with autism. We offer rewards to get them motivated. As time goes on, we can fade those rewards.

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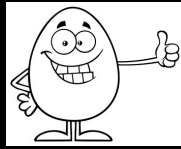
## SHOULD I ...?



*"Should I still punish? Don't kids need consequences?"*

In behavioral terms, a consequence can be a reward OR a punishment. Rewarding the good things is often more powerful than punishing the bad. And while punishment might reduce a "bad" behavior, it doesn't increase the good behavior. Our goal should always be to increase the good behaviors, as that will naturally reduce the "bad" behaviors.

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## SET UP FOR SUCCESS!

Hopefully, you've learned a little about how to reward your child and increase the behaviors you want to see. Just remember, the best thing you can is to prepare your child for success. Set reasonable expectations, make sure your child can do the tasks, and make the rewards and when they will be given clear. And be flexible. Not every day will be perfect, and sometimes we have to go with the flow. Adjust when you need to so that you and your child can be successful.

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