



BONUS GUIDE

Motivation & Reinforcement Strategies

THE ENGINE BEHIND EVERY ABA PROGRAM



FOUNDATIONS

Motivation Is the Engine

Motivating Operations (MOs) change how much a reinforcer is wanted right now, and how hard the learner will work for it. Read motivation before you run any target.

**EO**

Deprivation raises value and increases the behavior. A hungry learner works for a snack.

**AO**

Satiation lowers value and reduces the behavior. After lunch, food stops working.

**CAPTURE VS CONTRIVE**

Catch natural MOs or arrange them on purpose to create a reason to respond.

**KEY OUTCOME**

Present demands when motivation is high. When you control the MO, you control learning, not the child.

**GOOD TO KNOW**

Manipulate the environment before the trial. Contrive a small MO instead of waiting for behavior to fall apart.

CORE PRINCIPLES

What Makes Reinforcement Work

A consequence only reinforces when it reliably strengthens the behavior it follows. These four pillars decide whether it actually works.



Immediate

Deliver within one to two seconds so the learner links it to the right response.



Contingent

Given only after the target behavior, never for free or for approximations you did not cue.



Consistent

Every implementer reinforces the same behavior the same way across settings.



Individualized

Based on this learner's current preferences, confirmed by ongoing assessment.

IF BEHAVIOR ISN'T INCREASING, IT ISN'T REINFORCEMENT.

REINFORCER MENU

Types of Reinforcers

Draw from a range of reinforcer classes so you always have a strong, learner-specific option ready for each program.



Edible

Primary
reinforcers like
small bites or
sips.



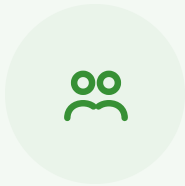
Tangible

Preferred toys,
fidgets, or held
objects.



Activity

Access to a
favored game
or movement
break.



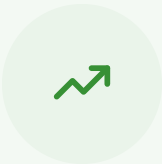
Social

Praise, tickles,
high-fives,
shared
attention.



Token

Conditioned
points
exchanged for
a backup.



LONG-TERM GOAL

Pair primary and tangible reinforcers with social ones, then fade toward natural, social reinforcement over time.



GOOD TO KNOW

Never assume preference. Run a formal preference assessment and let the learner's behavior rank the items.



INSTRUCTIONAL CONTROL

Pairing: Become the Source of Good Things

Before you place demands, pair yourself and the therapy space with reinforcement so the learner approaches you willingly.

- 1

Deliver freely at first
Give preferred items non-contingently. Ask for nothing so approach feels safe.

 **GOAL**
Build trust.
- 2

Show up with the good stuff
Control access so the best reinforcers arrive with you, not from the shelf.

 **RULE**
You = fun.
- 3

Follow the learner's lead
Join preferred play and add value without hijacking or correcting it.

 **METHOD**
Join in.
- 4

Introduce tiny, easy demands
Slip in simple, high-probability requests, then reinforce heavily.

 **START**
Low effort.
- 5

Keep pairing ongoing
Re-pair after hard sessions or breaks so approach stays strong.

 **WHEN**
Repeat.



KEY OUTCOME

Instructional control is earned through pairing, not forced through compliance drills or escalating demands.



DELIVERY

Schedules of Reinforcement

Reinforce richly while a skill is new, then thin the schedule so the behavior maintains without constant delivery.

**ACQUISITION**

Use continuous reinforcement (FR1): reinforce every correct response.

**RATIO**

Move to VR3 to VR5: reinforce after a varying number of responses.

**INTERVAL**

Reinforce the first correct response after a set time has passed.

**HOW TO THIN**

Stretch the requirement gradually, one step at a time. If responding drops, back up to the last schedule that worked.

**GOOD TO KNOW**

Variable schedules produce steady, satiation-resistant responding, which is why they maintain skills so well.



SYSTEMS

Build a Token Economy

A token economy bridges the delay between effort and payoff, keeping motivation steady across a full session.

1

Choose your tokens

Pick clear, easy-to-deliver tokens: stars, chips, or a marked board.

2

Define target behaviors

State exactly which responses earn a token, in observable terms.

3

Set the exchange ratio

Decide how many tokens buy a backup; start low so payoff feels reachable.

4

Pick strong backups

Offer several confirmed high-preference items so tokens stay valuable.

5

Deliver immediately

Hand the token the instant the behavior occurs, paired with praise.

6

Thin over time

Raise the token requirement as the skill strengthens and stabilizes.

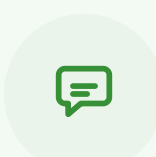
EVERYDAY TOOLS

Premack & First / Then

The Premack principle uses a high-probability activity to reinforce a lower-probability one. Framed as "First, then," it is simple enough for any caregiver.

**THE PRINCIPLE**

Access to a preferred activity is contingent on first completing the less-preferred task.

**EXAMPLE**

"First put on your shoes, then we go to the park." Shoes reliably earn the park, so effort rises.

**DO**

Keep it concrete and honor the "then" every single time.

**ORDER MATTERS**

State the demand first, the reward second, never the reverse.

**TIP**

Pair a First/Then visual board with the phrase so the contingency is clear before the task begins.



MAINTENANCE

Keep Reinforcers Strong

Satiation quietly drains a reinforcer's power. Manage access so your best items keep driving effort.

- 1

Rotate reinforcers
Vary items across trials and sessions so no single one wears out.



WHY
Fights satiation.
- 2

Use small amounts
Deliver bite-sized portions and brief access to allow many trials.



AIM
More reps.
- 3

Save the best for hard tasks
Reserve top-tier reinforcers for the most effortful demands.

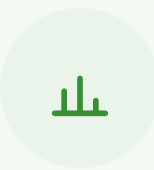


MATCH
Effort to value.
- 4

Reserve items for therapy only
Restrict the strongest reinforcers to sessions so they stay special.



CONTROL
Limit access.



KEY PRINCIPLE

Re-run preference assessments regularly. Preferences shift, and yesterday's favorite may not motivate today.

GET IT RIGHT

Bribery vs Reinforcement

Both offer something the learner wants, but timing and intent make them opposites. One builds skills; the other accidentally rewards problem behavior.

REINFORCEMENT

- ✓ Planned in advance as part of the program.
- ✓ Delivered after the target behavior occurs.
- ✓ Contingent on a specific, defined response.
- ✓ Strengthens skills you want to see grow.

BRIBERY

- ✗ Offered in the moment to stop escalation.
- ✗ Delivered during or before the problem behavior.
- ✗ Reactive, with no planned contingency.
- ✗ Teaches that acting out unlocks rewards.

WATCH FOR

Never offer a preferred item to end a tantrum. That reinforces the tantrum and makes it more likely next time.

THE TEST

Ask: did I plan this before the behavior, and is it earned by the response I want? If yes, it is reinforcement.

PROBLEM-SOLVING

When Motivation Is Low

When responding stalls, work through these checks in order before assuming the learner cannot do the task.

1

Re-run a preference check

Confirm the reinforcer is still wanted; run a quick multiple-stimulus assessment.

2

Increase the MO

Build value through brief deprivation or a contrived establishing operation.

3

Lower the task demand

Drop back to an easier step or add prompts to guarantee success.

4

Enrich reinforcement

Increase magnitude, quality, or immediacy of what the learner earns.

5

Check for satiation

Rotate to a fresh reinforcer if the current one has lost its pull.

**REMEMBER**

Low motivation is data, not defiance. Adjust the antecedent and the reinforcer before changing the goal.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Implementation Checklist

Run this quick check before and during every session to keep motivation and reinforcement working for you.

**Assess preferences first**

Confirm today's reinforcers with a fresh preference check.

**Read and arrange the MO**

Present demands when motivation is high; contrive it if needed.

**Reinforce immediately and contingently**

Deliver within seconds, only for the target response.

**Match the schedule to the goal**

Continuous for new skills, thinned for maintenance.

**Rotate to prevent satiation**

Vary reinforcers and reserve the strongest for hard tasks.

**Never reinforce problem behavior**

Keep delivery planned; avoid bribery under pressure.

MOTIVATION FIRST, INSTRUCTION SECOND.

