PYRAMID EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANTS

Teaching Visual Reinforcement Systems©

The foundation for all of our lessons, whether at home, school, or in the community is our "Let's Make a Deal" philosophy. Despite all of our carefull planning for each detail of a lesson, our plans are futile if we don't consider motivating the student to participate in the lesson. We use the principles of reinforcement in learning to ensure student motivation.

The relationship between a teacher and a student is analogous to the relationship between a boss and an employee. When we work for an employer we want to ensure that certain elements are part of our contract. We want to know if the "payoff" we receive is going to be sufficient for us to stay at the job.

- What the reinforcer will be (paycheck!)
- When the reinforcer will be delivered
- What "time off" is available
- What job is to be done

We don't expect to remember all of the details spoken at our initial job interview, so we want to be certain that each element of the agreement we come to with our boss is described in a written contract. Another way to think about a written contract is to see it as a visual representation of the deal between the employer and the employee.

When a teacher wants a student to learn something, the teacher actually wants the student to do something differently (i.e., change his or her behavior in some way that indicates that the lesson was learned). The relationship between a teacher and a learner is simlar to our relationship with our employer. Just as we know **before** we begin our job assignment what the reinforcement will be (a paycheck!), so too should our students. As noted in *The Pyramid Approach to Education* (Bondy, 2013), teachers should always arrange for "Let's make a deal" with a student prior to all lessons. This deal should indicate basically the same elements our job contracts indicate and should be visually represented.

1. Reinforcer Assessment

Before beginning a reinforcement system, items such as foods, toys, and activities that are highly desirable to the learner need to be identified. Develop a hierarchy of the most preferred items to the least preferred items. These preferences will most likely change over time; maintain on-going assessments and surveys.

2. Teach the First Deal

Begin to make mini-deals with the preferred items before introducing the visual reinforcement card. The idea is for the learner to learn to "trust" that you are an honest broker. Start with activities that are easy for the learner or activities that are known and/or part of an established routine.

- Show learner the potential reinforcer
- Ask learner to perform a short, known task
- Upon completion of the quick, easy task, immediately **(within 1/2 second)** give the reinforcer and praise

For example, show a desired toy car, ask learner to place one puzzle piece in a puzzle and then immediately give the car and social praise. Gradually increase the amount of work required to earn access to the reinforcer.

3. Teach the Visual Reinforcement Card

    - Begin with the one-token card or pre-load a 5-token card with 4 tokens.
    - Show the desired item and/or put a picture of that item on the visual reinforcement card.
    - Signal the task.
    - When learner performs the task, **immediately "pay**" with a token.
    - Physically guide the learner to place the token on the token card and then to exchange it ("cash in") for access to the chosen reinforcer.
    - Gradually increase the number of tokens to be earned, up to 5.
    - Gradually increase the amount of work required for each token.

Points to remember when implementing visual reinforcement systems:

1. Once reinforcers are identified, these items should be **listed** in places where those who will work with the learner can easily note them. Also indicate how many tokens (what size 'deal') the student currently has mastered.
2. Continue to assess reinforcers.
3. Different tasks can require a different number of tokens to be earned.
4. Use this system across the day.
5. **Never get rid of reinforcement!**
6. **NEVER remove tokens as a consequence for challenging behavior!**