

# Positive and Negative Reinforcement

Reinforcement and punishment are often used as parenting tools to modify children’s behavior. Let’s review the difference between **positive reinforcement** and **negative reinforcement**, and the difference in outcomes between reinforcement and punishment.

## The Difference Between Positive and Negative Reinforcement

In behavioral psychology, a **reinforcement** is the introduction of a favorable condition that will make a desired behavior **more likely to happen, continue or strengthen in the future**.

Because the favorable condition acts as a reward, reinforcement is a reward-based conditioning.

There are positive and negative reinforcement.

They can be confusing because the technical terms used in psychology is often misrepresented in pop culture.

As technical parlance, positive refers to adding a factor while negative refers to removing a factor.

But positive and negative do not represent the quality of the factor being added or removed. That factor can be pleasant or unpleasant.

For instance, positive can be adding something unpleasant resulting in unpleasant feelings, while negative can be removing something unpleasant resulting in pleasant feelings.

So, remember that positive and negative refer to adding and removing something, not to the quality of the added/removed factor or the resulted feelings.

## Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is adding a pleasant stimulus to enhance a behavior.

Positive Reinforcement Examples	Pleasant Stimulus	Desired Behavior
A mother gives her daughter a toy for doing homework.	toy	do homework
A father praises his son for practicing soccer.	praise	practice soccer

## Negative Reinforcement

Negative reinforcement is removing an aversive stimulus to enhance a behavior.

Negative Reinforcement Examples	Aversive Stimulus	Desired Behavior
To stop his mother’s nagging, Alex does his chores.	nagging	do chores
To remove the bad smell from her body, Erin takes a shower.	bad smell	take a shower

## Positive Punishment vs Negative Punishment

While the goal of reinforcement is to reinforce a desired behavior, the goal of punishment is to make an undesired behavior less likely to happen, continue or strengthen in the future.

As with reinforcement, the technical meanings of positive and negative punishment refer to adding or removing a factor to obtain the results. They do not refer to the quality or impact of the punishment.

### Positive Punishment

Positive punishment is adding an aversive stimulus to deter a behavior.

Positive Punishment Examples	Aversive Stimulus	Undesired Behavior
Mom gives Mag a time-out for lying.	time-out	lying
Jon was assigned extra homework because he was late to school.	extra homework	be late for school

### Negative Punishment

Negative punishment is removing a pleasant stimulus to deter a behavior.

Negative Punishment Examples	Pleasant Stimulus	Undesired Behavior
Mary's tv time was cut by 20 minutes because she did not listen to her Mom.	tv time	did not listen
Jack was grounded for talking back.	go out	talk back

### Reinforcement vs Punishment

	Add / Remove	Stimulus	Behavior
Positive Reinforcement	add	pleasant	enhance desired
Negative Reinforcement	remove	aversive	enhance desired
Positive Punishment	add	aversive	deter undesired
Negative Punishment	remove	pleasant	deter undesired

Reinforcement aims to increase a behavior while punishment to decrease a behavior. Often, decreasing an undesired behavior can be achieved by increasing another desired behavior. For example, both punishing for being late for school and rewarding for being on time can incentivize a child to be on time.

Because of the negative side effects of punishment, parents should try to discipline by using reinforcement instead if possible. However, parents should also be careful not to overuse reinforcements because too much of a good thing can be a bad thing.

**References:** Mowrer, O. (1960). Learning theory and behavior.

<https://www.parentingforbrain.com/difference-between-positive-negative-reinforcement-and-punishment/>