

## **2** | **Using Motivational Strategies to Build Successful Change**

*Donna Martin loves to ride in the family car. She likes to go to fast-food restaurants but she does not like going to the mall. Her parents usually first take Donna to get a quick meal before going to the mall. Still, every time they park the car in the mall, Donna launches into a routine litany of complaints about how much she dislikes the mall and her behavior escalates until her parents take her out of the mall. Donna's parents have set a goal for their daughter to tolerate trips to the mall. However, they feel at a loss as to how to motivate Donna to enjoy going with them to the mall and other places in the community.*

Like many parents, the Martins have tried many ways to motivate their child to do things she isn't eager to do. Most of their attempts have been fruitless. One unsuccessful strategy that parents frequently try is appeasing the child by buying anything she wants. Of course, on the next visit to that same store, the child will expect to receive whatever treat was purchased the last time. Another common approach is to temporarily remove the child from the store, wait for her to calm down, and then reenter the store. But here, the child learns that a tantrum may lead to leaving or momentarily escaping from the store, which may be precisely what she wants. And when she reenters the store, there often are treats to help persuade her to stay calm.

Clearly, it's one thing for parents to set a goal for their child to achieve, and another thing to help the child achieve that goal without inadvertently teaching her something unintended. When children are

very young, we are used to helping them perform many tasks that we hope they will complete independently as they grow older. However, for some children the problem of motivation remains acute for some time. For example, if a child's parents have always tied her shoes, when they now expect her to do so on her own, she may be thinking, "Why should I do this myself? You've always done such a fine job of tying my shoes!" The key to getting your child to learn your lesson is to ensure that she is motivated to achieve that goal.

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## Reinforcers

How do we best motivate children to learn new skills? Everyone has observed coaches cajoling their players to "try harder" or urging them on by shouts and yells. However, the most important leader in the field of behavior analysis, B.F. Skinner, pointed out that learning is best achieved by the thoughtful use of certain consequences for particular skills. We call those outcomes reinforcers—and they are a teacher's best friends!

Formally, reinforcers are consequences that result in an increased likelihood of the same behavior occurring in similar situations. We often think of reinforcers as rewards, but we need to keep in mind that reinforcers are highly personalized. What works as a reinforcer for one child's behavior may not be effective for another's behavior.

There are two types of changes that might result in a reinforcing outcome:

1. positive reinforcers,
2. negative reinforcers.

**Positive Reinforcers.** Positive reinforcers are things or events that we introduce or add (and hence are considered "positive") into a situation. For example, you might praise your child for cleaning up the table and find she is more likely to do it again. Or you might give your child time to watch a TV show, read a story, or go outside to fly a kite together with you, or give her a cookie after she demonstrates a skill you are teaching her. Each of these might lead to improved learning.

**Negative Reinforcers.** Other reinforcers are effective because they take something out of the situation. We call these negative (as in "take away") reinforcers. For example, your child might put on a headset

to cope with a noisy mall—reducing the level of noise acts as a reinforcer for wearing the headset. Or your daughter might scream when you tell her to clean her room and you then decide to back off and “not push the issue”—then, after you stop nagging, she completes the task.

**Keep It Positive.** We advise that you work hard to create as many positive reinforcers as possible and use them frequently when teaching your child skills in and around the house. The frequent use of negative reinforcers is often associated with nagging and threatening. We prefer for you to aim for the development of new skills through positive approaches.

You may have observed your child working on a formal lesson at school (or within an in-home ABA program) and noticed that teachers provided some type of reinforcer following virtually every correct action by your child. At home and in the community, your aim will be to design reinforcement systems that permit you to take advantage of the more natural environment available. We will describe several ways of using powerful reinforcement systems within your home and while you are in your neighborhood. For more information about using reinforcement strategies, including how to figure out which reinforcers are most effective for your child, please read *Incentives for Change*, by Lara Delmolino and Sandra Harris (Woodbine House, 2005).

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## Taking Advantage of Natural Rewards

Whenever you are considering beginning a lesson, you should first try to identify reinforcers that are natural to the situation. Natural reinforcers are those that are commonly associated with successfully completing some activity. For example, a natural reinforcer to putting on sneakers is being able to run around outside; putting a CD into the CD player leads to the opportunity to listen to music; setting the table leads to eating a meal. In each of these cases, the reward for the task comes immediately upon completion.

Let's consider a number of common activities in and around the home and think about their potential for being associated with naturally occurring rewards. See what rewards you can think about for the end of the list and then try to add some activities and their natural rewards for your child and situation.

<b>Table 2-1   Areas, Activities, and Related Rewards</b>		
<b>Area</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Natural Reward</b>
Kitchen	Cook	Eat
Family Room	Turn on TV	Watch show/videos
Bathroom	Take a bath	Warm (not cold or hot water)
Library	Take out a book	Read on a bench outside
Playground	Climb the slide	Slide down
Grandma's house	Give Grandma a kiss	Smiles and hugs
The Mall	Walking calmly to store	<i>Your thought?</i>

**What Do We Do When We Can't Find a Natural Reinforcer?**

While we believe that natural rewards are best to use, they are not always motivating for children. For example, the primary benefits for brushing teeth are associated with long-term improvements in dental



health and a lower risk for dental problems. The benefit of putting the open milk carton in the refrigerator is associated with less spoilage (better taste) over time. These consequences only occur far in the future and thus may be ineffective in motivating young children to brush their teeth or put food away. Toothpaste producers are aware of this problem and try to make

their products taste as pleasing as possible. We also may try to make a special arrangement to bolster the immediate consequences, as when we say, “When you’re done brushing your teeth, I’ll read your favorite book to you!”

So, whenever possible, try to arrange for natural outcomes, but if you think these are too removed in time from the activity, then be certain to arrange for something rewarding to immediately follow your child’s completion of the activity. In either case, we will describe a “reinforcer first” strategy to help your child focus on the natural or arbitrary reward that she can earn by completing the task at hand.

Here is a list of some activities for which “natural” reinforcers may be difficult to identify or difficult to bring to bear immediately. Once again, we hope you’ll fill in the blanks and also add some others pertinent to your child:

<b>Table 2-2   Area, Activity, and Arbitrary Rewards</b>		
<b>Area</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Arbitrary Reward</b>
Kitchen	Put silverware away	Watch TV
Family room	Shut off the VCR	Dad reads a book aloud
Bathroom	Use a towel to dry hands	Play alone in bathroom
Library	Walk and look quietly	Points toward earning a book to take out
Playground	Takes turns on the slide	Praise and another chance on the slide
Grandma’s house	Sit at the table	<i>Your thought?</i>

**How and When Do We Make Our Child Aware of the Reinforcer?**

As we noted, reinforcers are consequences for certain actions, so perhaps you think you should wait until you observe your child doing that behavior before you introduce the reinforcer. It also may seem natural to start lessons with your instructions or demands. However, we ask you to think about what happened when you went to interview

for a new job. Did you agree to start the job without knowing what your salary and benefits would be? In all likelihood, you knew exactly what your reinforcer would be—your salary—for doing the job well before you started to work. We believe we should interact with our children in the same manner that we expect to be treated. We refer to knowing your potential reinforcer before you start the lesson (or job!) as the “reinforcer first strategy.”

For example, let’s say that Phil hates going to the grocery store and whines persistently whenever his parents make him go. Let’s further say that Phil’s parents know that he likes to eat bananas. They take him to the supermarket, and tell him (or show him) that they are going to get a banana. They take him directly to the bananas and pick one out. They then go to the checkout line (hopefully it is empty), buy the banana, and allow Phil to immediately eat the banana. Then they go home! This trip was not intended to complete the family’s shopping needs. It was only done to help teach Phil that he can go to a store and get something that he likes. Sometime soon, the parents return to the supermarket, again letting Phil know (via their spoken words or with visual cues) that they will buy a banana. This time, while they are walking to the bananas, Mom picks up a box of pasta before picking out the banana. They take both items to checkout, and allow Phil to eat the banana just after they leave the store.

**Table 2-3 | Gradually Increasing Skills and Goals in the Community**

Visit#	What to buy	Other skills to teach
1	Banana	Walk with Mom and Dad
2	Pasta, banana	Walk with Mom and Dad
3	Pasta, milk, banana	Walk with Mom and Dad Stand at checkout line
4	Pasta, milk, cereal, banana	Walk with Mom and Dad Choose cereal Stand at checkout line
5	Pasta, milk, cereal, cheese, banana	Walk with Mom and Dad Choose cereal Put cereal and cheese on checkout belt Stand at checkout line

Over the next several trips, Phil's family gradually adds more items to the cart before heading to pick up the banana. They also encourage Phil to select other items that he likes to buy. Furthermore, they prompt him to help with some of the items—putting them into the shopping cart, putting items onto the checkout counter, giving the salesperson some money, etc. Notice that each trip starts by reminding Phil about what he will get when he completes the shopping, consistent with our reinforcer first strategy.

At home, it is helpful to avoid beginning interactions with a demand. For example, do not say to your child, “Go clean up your room and then we'll play a game” or “Put the ball away and let's go inside and then we'll look for a movie that we can put into the video machine.” By starting with the task, you alert the child to the work to be done. You also may be signaling the end of whatever enjoyable activity the child is currently doing. If you try starting this way, you may not even get to finish your sentence! The demand may immediately lead your child to protest what she has lost or is about to give up. Rather, start with, “Hey, let's play a game! Oh, by the way, we need to clean up first,” or, “Want to watch a video? Great! Let's put the ball away and go inside,” or, “Let's get a book! Remember, we have to walk quietly to the shelf.” In each case, we began by telling the child what the point, or goal, of the activity will be and then said how to get that goal.

If your child does not understand what you are saying, you can show her (via the object or a picture, depending on her level of understanding) what she can earn before you visually indicate what task she will need to complete.

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## **Let's Make a Deal**

There may be times when you feel hard pressed to come up with the right deal at the very instant you want your child to do something. In these situations, you may want to remember why you go to work, even at times when you simply aren't thrilled with the idea of working! That's right—we tell ourselves that if we do our work, we will earn a paycheck and then we can use the money for something we want later. That is, we use money in situations where we can't or simply don't want to specify exactly what we are trying to achieve by completing the job. When we earn money, we can choose what we want when we have a

chance to spend the money. For some children, earning money—via household chores and other responsibilities—is commonplace. But it only works when the child understands the value of money. If your child does not yet understand money, it won't help to simply give her some when she does a job well. First, children have to learn to appreciate money by learning why it is useful—to buy things. So, before you use money to help motivate your child, you must arrange for her to want to have money.

If you are uncomfortable with using real money at home or in the community, you may want to use some type of point or token system. However, just as with money, you must first teach your child the value of the points or tokens before you try to use them to motivate her.

### ***Teaching the Value of Tokens***

To teach the value of the point or token (or real money), start with a simple activity—one that your child can already accomplish. At this stage, the goal is to teach your child that you are trustworthy. When you make a deal, you will hold up your end of the bargain. Let's assume your child can sort the forks from the spoons. Have several of each with you. Before showing them to your child, find out—either by asking or having your child choose directly—what she would like at the moment. It may help to offer her a limited range of choices rather than risk her requesting something you do not have available at the moment or something that is currently impractical. Whether you present these choices verbally or visually will depend upon your child's skill level.

You may want to use a simple visual aid such as the one in Figure 1 or one of your own design. The key elements will include information about what is to be earned, how much work needs to be done or how long the job will last, and some way of monitoring progress toward the goal. You can use pieces of a puzzle (as in Figure 2) or, for some children, simply have them earn a letter toward spelling out the name of what they want to earn.

Once the child selects what she wants (remember, reinforcer first!) put some type of visual symbol representing her chosen reward on the “work” card that has one open circle on it (or one place for the puzzle piece, etc.). Then have her do something very simple and very quick, such as put one fork in one container and one spoon in another. Immediately give her a token while you praise her hard work. Have her



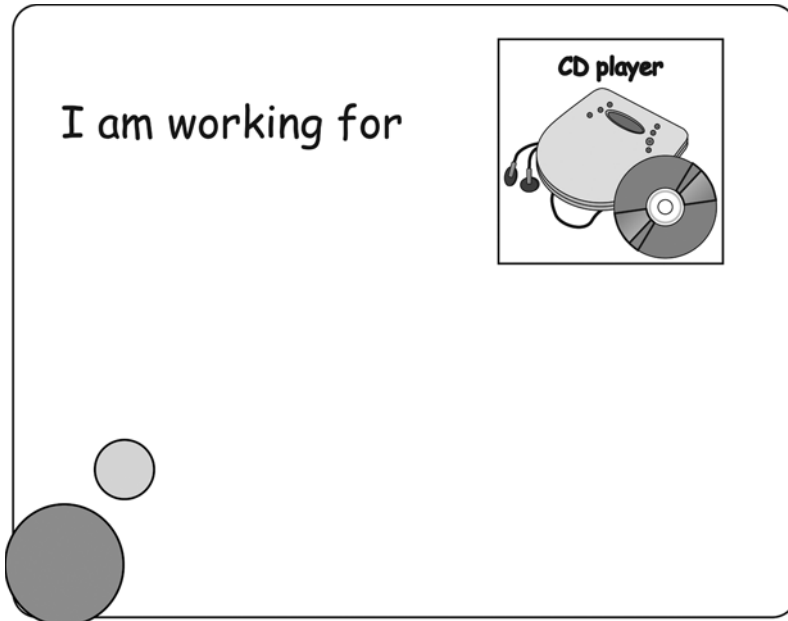


Figure 1: Token-type reinforcement system

put the token on the open circle. Since there is only one open circle, she has now completed the deal! Have her cash out by giving you the token that's on the card and immediately give her whatever she was working for. She does not have to ask for that item again because she already indicated what she wanted (but don't stop her if she does ask on her own). Practice earning and redeeming tokens with this and

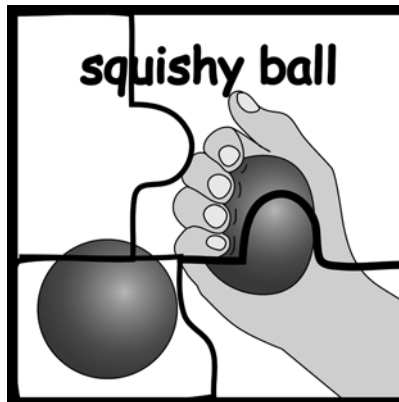


Figure 2: Puzzle-type reinforcement system

other simple tasks until she independently gives you the token when it is placed on the card. You also can add a small amount of work required to earn that single token. At that point, your child will have shown you that she understands that the token leads to the reward.

You then can stretch the deal by placing two open circles on the card. You can stretch this two-circle deal by having her do somewhat

more work for the first token but slightly less work for the second. When she seems to catch on to the fact that she can cash out when both circles are full, then you can gradually add a third, fourth, and fifth circle (see Figure 3 for an example). We often stop when we have reached five circles and continue to stretch how much work the child needs to do for each token rather than keep on adding circles, although for some children, adding circles will work just fine. For example, if you are using the system to help your child clean up her toys, at first you may want to give her a token after each toy is put away. However, by the time you are using several tokens, you can wait until she puts two or three toys away before giving her the next token. While you want to gradually increase how much “work” she will do for each token, do not make the demand so high per token that she quits!

In general, we do not recommend taking a child’s tokens away once she has earned them. When managing some behaviors, however, it may be useful to start out with a number of tokens and then gradually remove them. See the section on “Fines” in Chapter 7 for information on this strategy.

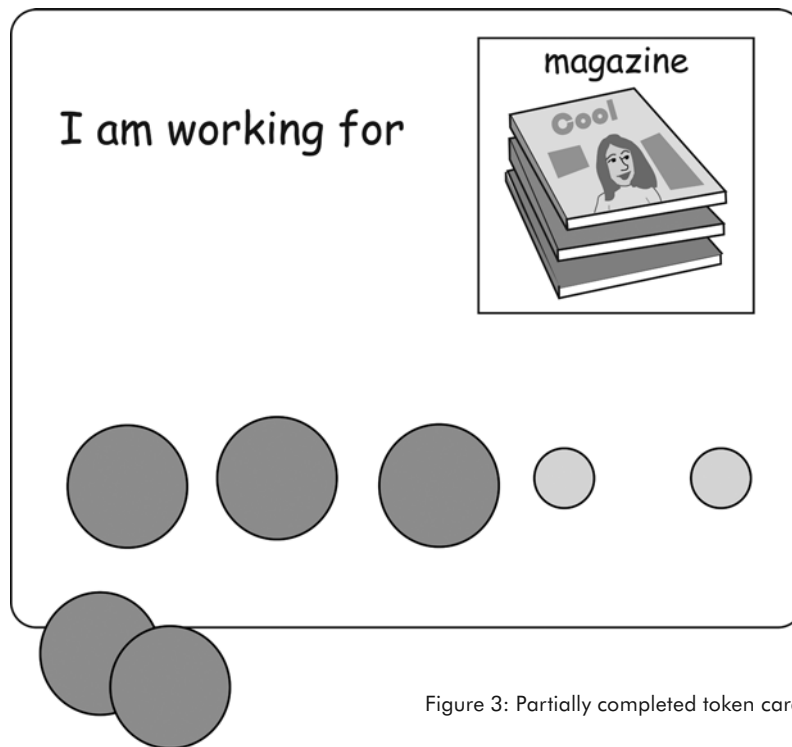


Figure 3: Partially completed token card

Remember, we are not saying that you should use money or tokens all the time. In fact, you may only need to use them infrequently at home or in the neighborhood because there should be an abundance of natural rewards available. But if you teach your child to use tokens properly, they can provide powerful and consistent systems to motivate her in situations where it may be difficult or impractical to find an immediate reward. You can take work cards and tokens with you when you go out of the house in case you need to set up some quick deals while visiting neighbors, playing in the park, or shopping. Also, these systems can act as a type of clock for the child who cannot tell time. For example, rather than telling her she will be able to watch TV in 10 minutes, you may be able to set up a deal in which she can turn on the TV after she has earned 5 tokens. Then, all you do is arrange for a simple activity for her and pace handing out the tokens so that you give her the last one after about 10 minutes.

### ***Catch 'Em Being Good!***

Everyone agrees that it is a good idea to catch our children being good— the hard part is doing it often enough! Several factors make this good advice tough to follow. For one thing, who decides what's "enough?" Well, we should gauge this on our children, since it is their needs that we are trying to meet. And what does "being good" mean? Sometimes, it is simply a matter of not getting into trouble! Think about times when you've been busy with something— balancing your checkbook, cooking a meal, or just sitting and relaxing a bit. While you're doing that, your child is quietly playing or doing something nondestructive and nondemanding. Most of us would sit there as long as we can, enjoying the quiet opportunity to do what we want to do. If you think about it, you'll realize that eventually your child is likely to do something that forces you to pay attention. She may scream, knock something over, break something, etc. At that point you are forced to pay attention and stop what you are doing. In the long run, it would have been more helpful to pay attention to your child while she was doing something positive or at least nondemanding.

Sometimes we adults may need some help to remember to do things that will benefit our children in the long run while involving some effort in the here and now. What are some options to help us remember to reinforce our children for good behavior?

In school situations, we have advised teachers to use tape recordings (or CDs, if that's the technology you use) that play a nonirritating tone on a planned basis. We call these Audio Reinforcement Reminder Tones. For example, a tape may be set to play a tone, on average, every one to five minutes. When the teachers hear the tone, their job is to catch some student doing something positive as quickly as possible. We have found that rates of praise rise dramatically while these tones are in use and are sustained over long periods of time. Furthermore, without any direct suggestions, the number of negative or corrective comments from these same teachers noticeably drops. Some families who have observed this positive classroom atmosphere like it so much that they use a similar system during their most chaotic times at home—those times when it is easy to forget about their quiet child. Other parents have found this strategy somewhat out of place within their home.

An alternative to using reminder tones at home is to use a token system and set a goal of handing out a set number of tokens for positive behavior every hour. For example, put 10 tokens in your pocket with the goal of having none left in an hour's time. Carrying around the tokens helps to remind you to give them out.

You may have some other way to cue yourself, but we promise it's not easy to remember when you are very busy with your own activities unless you plan to give yourself a helpful reminder. For instance, you might cut up a picture of your child's favorite fast food meal and hand out pieces of the puzzle throughout the afternoon, ending up at the restaurant when the completed puzzle is exchanged for the real deal!

### ***Better Work—Better Pay!***

Sometimes, parents ask us what to do when their child tries something but doesn't do it very well. Perhaps your child has cleaned up her room but has left several toys on the floor. Perhaps she set the dinner table for four instead of five. Perhaps your child asked for something but you expected a polite "please" that was omitted. Or, perhaps you know you have to help your child while she is still learning a skill but she certainly has tried hard to perform the task. How can you encourage your child to continue trying while letting her know that improvement is still warranted?

When people compete during a track meet (or some other related competition), the top three racers may all win ribbons, though only

one wins the race. In some sense, we can look at the different ways that a child performs a task as several actions competing with each other. Some attempts should earn ribbons even if they aren't the best, while others may not earn anything distinct other than, "good try." For example, if your child sets the table for all five family members, she will certainly earn high praise and some time to watch a favorite TV show. However, if she sets the table for four, rather than five, you could praise her, then follow up with some assistance to help her complete the job, and then give her access to either some less-preferred activity or a shorter time to watch TV. In contrast, if your child just puts one spoon on the table, you might make a short, positive comment about starting the task, then provide lots of assistance to complete the task, and finally give her some modest reward. In other words, if putting one spoon earned the same outcome as completing setting the table for five, why would anyone work harder to complete the job independently?

Our general rule is to reinforce all appropriate behaviors but to reserve our big rewards for the best performances. If we need to help our children, then their reward should not be as powerful as when they complete the task independently. The procedure of rewarding different levels of independence with different size rewards is described as using *differential reinforcement*. This strategy will encourage persistence while also promoting greater independence in your child.

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## Is Everything a Lesson?

In this book, we describe many ways that parents, other family members, and professionals can teach various skills to children with autism and related disabilities within their own homes and neighborhoods. While reading this book, you may feel that we want you to spend every waking moment creating and implementing lessons! That's not our goal! First, we hope that you will encourage your child to participate in independent recreational or leisure activities—ones that you will not have to closely supervise or participate in.

Furthermore, there are many activities in and around the home that do not involve lessons. For example, your child must take a certain medicine at a set time. While you would like your child to cooperate, your parental responsibilities demand that you assure that the medicine is taken at the prescribed time. Or, you hear one of the

house fire-alarms blasting and it may well signal a real fire. No one would expect your child to follow a 22-step task-analysis and put on her coat independently—your sole goal is to get the child out of the house safely! In this situation, there is no lesson to be taught regarding putting on a coat.

How do we distinguish between times we teach as opposed to times we take care of our children? In part, this depends on how much active participation we expect from the child and whether the degree of participation will alter the outcome. In the examples from the last paragraph, parents assure the outcome—taking the medicine and getting safely out of the house—regardless of how much or how little the child participated. On the other hand, you may be teaching your child a skill, such as making toast. While you'd like her to learn to do it on her own, for now, even if she simply takes the bread you hand her and allows you to guide her to put the bread into the toaster, you will still give her the toast when it's ready. As her skills improve, you may decide that she needs to complete more of the task independently. So, unless she helps push down the toaster-arm, you let her eat cold bread rather than warm toast. That is, you decide to use differential reinforcement to encourage greater independence. This strategy implies that you are teaching a lesson and not just feeding your child.

Whenever you decide that you are teaching rather than taking care of your child, then you must consider your child's motivation to complete the chore that you believe she should complete. As we noted earlier, we support the general strategy of making deals in such situations. That is, make sure your child knows ahead of time what she will earn or receive for completing the lesson.

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## **What Is the Ultimate Goal for Using Reinforcers?**

As we have noted, it is important to gradually reduce how often you reinforce your child's appropriate actions so that you see more and more action for fewer and fewer reinforcers over time. But will we ever totally eliminate reinforcers? This question can lead to interesting philosophical debates! But at a practical level it may be best to expect that reinforcement will most likely continue at some level, although it may become quite rare.

Think for a moment about how you learned to read. When you were very young, your teacher most likely reinforced very small actions—naming letters and saying their sounds. Then, the teacher changed the deal so that you needed to read individual words before she reinforced you, and then you needed to read short phrases. Gradually, you needed to read longer and longer sentences, then paragraphs and chapters, and finally entire books. Over time, the number of times that you received direct reinforcement for reading books greatly diminished. But has reinforcement disappeared entirely? Most likely, you still read books and occasionally you talk about enjoying (or hating!) a particular book—the conversation you have about the book is a type of reinforcer for reading the book. In addition, you sometimes read something that provides information that helps you solve a problem or provides insight that helps you address an important issue more effectively—each of these outcomes is likely a reinforcer for reading. Although a teacher is no longer dispensing reinforcers for your reading, the natural community provides for this arrangement. So too, many of the skills you teach your child will eventually be reinforced by society at large and you will no longer have to make explicit plans to reinforce all skills.

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## Review

In this chapter, we have reviewed the next element of the Pyramid Approach by focusing on motivational factors. Properly motivating your child to learn important skills in the home and community is crucial if she is going to achieve independence. We have emphasized the use of powerful reinforcement systems that accentuate the use of positive reinforcers. Our first choice within any lesson is to try to use reinforcers that seem natural to the circumstances. However, that may not always be practical. In these situations, we need to develop systematic reinforcement systems that help remind our children about the reinforcers available for doing many different skills. Gradually reducing the frequency of reinforcement is another important goal that parents can achieve both within and around the home. The next area of the Pyramid Approach involves social and communication skills, areas that are crucial for children to fully participate in our society.