

Reinforcement vs. Bribery

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Melissa Druskis, MS, BCBA



Reinforcement and bribery are one of the most misunderstood topics by parents, teachers, and those new to ABA therapy. And bribery is a natural, though unconscious, go-to tactic for many parents when dealing with tantrums, especially when in public. So, what is the difference between reinforcement and bribery and why does it matter?

Bribery

bribe /brīb/

verb: persuade (someone) to act in one's favor, typically illegally or dishonestly, by a gift of money or other inducement.

The difference between reinforcement and bribery greatly depends on the timing. Reinforcement needs to be set up ahead of time, before any behaviors occur, while bribery occurs in the middle of challenging behaviors. Let's take a look at a typical bribery scenario:



Did the bribing work? Yes, in the short term bribing does work, but it's important to consider the long term pattern that you are setting up for the child. Let's look at the end result of bribery:

What did the child get for throwing a tantrum? A trip to McDonalds!

What did the child get for being good? Nothing.

It would not take too many times of bribing a child for them to figure out that behaving badly is being rewarded and behaving good is not. And as a child gets older a trip to McDonalds will not continue working and if you begin negotiating you are making the consequence to of the challenging behavior more rewarding.

10 yr old: *(Begins tantrum)*

Parent: "If you behave the rest of this shopping trip I'll take you to McDonalds"

10 yr old: "No!" *(continued tantrum)*

Parent: "You can get a milkshake"

10 yr old: "No! I want an x-box!" *(continued tantrum)*

Parent: "That's on your birthday list, you might get it then. We can't buy an x-box right now."

10 yr old: (*continued tantrum*)

...15 minutes later the parent leaves the store with a happy, well behaved child carrying his brand new x-box.

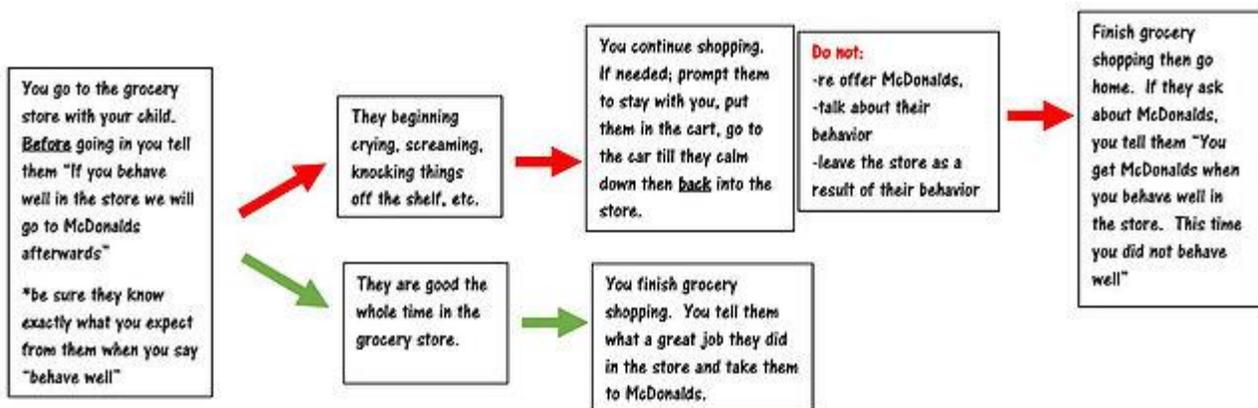
It's easy to think "I would never let it get that bad", but by using bribery you are teaching children to use bad behavior to get what they want. As they get older and bigger, that behavior is going to get worse and when it gets to the point of them asking for something outrageous they will likely be too big to just remove them from the store. If you are already using bribery, stop immediately, but don't worry, there is an alternative....

Reinforcement

re·in·force·ment /rēin' fōrsmənt/

noun: the process of encouraging or establishing a belief or pattern of behavior, especially by encouragement or reward.

We saw the slippery slope that bribery can lead use down, let's look at how a scenario using reinforcement plays out:



Did the reinforcement work? Yes, by definition reinforcement increases the behavior it follows. Reinforcement following good behavior in the store will increase good behavior in the store.

Did it immediately stop the tantrum? No, and it's not designed to be an immediate stop to challenging behavior. What I described to do during the tantrum is a procedure called *extinction*.

Extinction is when reinforcement is no longer given for challenging behaviors, whether that be attention, an item, or getting out of a task or situation. So in this example, when the child engages in a tantrum you will not give attention by talking about his behavior or giving them 'the look', you will not offer any items like a candy bar, toy, or re-offer the trip to McDonalds, and you will not provide escape from the situation by leaving the store until you're done (unless for safety reasons, then have them calm down in the car and go back into the store). Let's look at the end result of using this combination of reinforcement and extinction:

What did the child get for throwing a tantrum? Nothing. No attention, items, or escape from the situation.

What did the child get for being good? A trip to McDonalds and attention from the parent.

Fading the Reinforcement

Are we going to have to go to McDonalds after every trip to the grocery store? No, that would not work well in real life and you risk the child getting tired of the reinforcer which would make it less effective.

First, set up a *generalized conditioned reinforcer*. A generalized conditioned reinforcer (also called a token system) is an item that, in itself, has no value, but it can be exchanged for things that are valuable. Money is a good example of this, paper money has no value, but we use that money to pay bills and buy things. For kids, you can use pennies, stickers, points, or any other item that is easy to carry around with you or keep track of that can be saved up to 'buy' a trip to McDonalds, get a toy from the dollar store, have 30 minutes iPad time, choose where to go for dinner, etc...

The next important thing to do is fade the reinforcement and *pair* it with natural reinforcers. For most typical developing kids, praise and attention are naturally reinforcing, but for our kids with autism or other developmental or social disorders, we need to teach praise to be reinforcing. Every time they earn a reinforcement, give them lots of verbal praise (assuming they don't hate verbal praise) and attention. Pairing the reinforcer with praise and attention, eventually makes praise and attention reinforcing on its own and sets up more functional and natural reinforcement contingency. As kids

become more successful with what you're working on (like decreased tantrums in the grocery store) we want to increase the time or difficulty of the target behavior and decrease the amount and frequency of the generalized conditioned reinforcer, but always provide praise and attention.

It's too hard!

If the behaviors are too intense or severe to get through a whole shopping trip (or whatever the situation is that you're working on), break it up into smaller chunks and work on them outside of the natural situation.

How long does a shopping trip typically take? 30 minutes to 1 hour? That can be an eternity for some of our kids. Start with 5 minutes or less if needed. Use the same procedure of setting up the reinforcement before entering the store. Stay in the store for 5 minutes, you don't even need to buy anything. Then leave and provide the reinforcement. If you are using a generalized conditioned reinforcer or a small reinforcer, like 5 minutes on the iPad or a piece of candy, you can practice this multiple times in one go.

Also remember to consult with a BCBA for severe or intense challenging behaviors.