

Reinforcer Suggestions

Compiled from Scott Cross and the team at UCLA.

Here's a fun list of silly reinforcing social activities to try with your child. This list goes way beyond a simple "101 ways to praise" type of list, because every child is different and wants different reinforcers at different times. Many aren't as interested in what you say, but in how you say it. Remember that your excitement, smiles, laughter and interest in their success is often what is most important. Rely on engagement with observably effective reinforcers to result in positive motivation. Many of these ideas will work much better after the child has been able to sample them and build some anticipation for you to "do it again." Be sure to look for their reaction and adjust to use the ideas that get a positive response. Vary the exciting actions with quiet, gentle reinforcers, to suit the mood. Don't let these reinforcers go stale. Keep a list of effective reinforcers and rotate them off of the list before the child becomes routinely "bored" with them. They can be brought back several weeks later with renewed enthusiasm. Be sure to use them as reinforcers (the child earns them →) rather than only as entertainment (provided noncontingently to gain their interest).

- **Basket Airlines!** Put the child in a laundry basket and pick them up and fly them around the room as if they are the pilot of a jet plane (with sound effects).
- **Squirt Gun Attack!** Let the child squirt you with a squirt gun. Be sure to act up like you don't want them to get you. Let them chase you around the room.
- **To Infinity and Beyond!** The child is Buzz Lightyear. After hesitating to build anticipation, shout, "To infinity and beyond!" and then throw the child over your shoulder onto the bed.
- **Paper Spool Surprise!** Hide your hand in a large round wrapping paper spool and cover it with a towel. With mock suspense tell the child to look inside. When they lift the towel, push your hand out to "scare" them.
- **I'm Gonna Eat Your Toes!** Shout, "I'm gonna eat your toes!" Take the child's foot toward your mouth with pretend chomping sounds. Build anticipation with repetition.
- **Scare Me!** Say, "do this" and make a roar sound. When the child does, act terrified and fall off your own chair. Try other silly actions.
- **Washing Machine Vibrator!** When the washing machine is running, go sit on it to feel the vibration. Imitate drone noises to go with it.
- **The Big Dipper!** Hold the child in your arms in front of you and dip forward, lowering the child to the floor. Let them hold on tight while you unpredictably dip and pull. Pretend to drop them and act scared, like you can't hold them.
- **Whipped Cream Shower!** Have the child decide who gets sprayed with the whipped cream.
- **Scary Dinosaur Cave!** Build a cave with a table and blankets. Sit in the cave to run programs, while Dad stomps around outside like a dinosaur sumo wrestler. The reinforcer is getting to open the blankets and look out at the scary dinosaur.
- **Confetti Sneeze!** Put confetti in a shallow bowl and "sneeze" into it to blow it everywhere. A bonus reinforcer might be to vacuum up the confetti.
- **Get the Maid!** Try to pick up toys while bending from the waist. Let the child push you over whenever you try to bend over.
- **Whistle Praise!** Try to praise with a whistle in your mouth, which forces you to simulate talking with a whistle (or blow-out noisemaker, sound vibrator, guitar amplifier or microphone).
- **Magician's Chain!** Make a magician's chain of kerchiefs and stuff them all in your sleeve. Let the child pull them out. When will they end? Possibly tie a reinforcer onto the end of the chain.
- **Wind-up Hand!** Wind up your hand like it's a toy - use cranking sound effects - then let it go and flap your hand wildly over the table and child's tickle spots in a flip-flop motion.

- **Laughter Zone!** Bury your head into the child's stomach, burrowing your head in a wiggly way. At the same time laugh and shout, "it's the laughter zone!"
- **Let's Not Go Play!** When you tell the child, "let's go play," surprise them by pulling them back to you by the back of their shirt. Do several times. It usually builds a smile and a lot of times when you don't grab the shirt the child will back up to you to do so.
- **Tell Me What to Do!** Model an instruction to do something silly, and then comply with the child's instruction when they say it. For example, give the instruction, "say, 'walk like a duck.'" When the child says so, start crouching on the floor and struggle around while quacking like a duck. Try other silly actions, like falling down or imitating "Barney."
- **Train Ticket Tokens!** For a child who likes trains, wear a conductor's cap and punch their ticket as token reinforcement. Print up tickets with a train on them to look like train tickets.
- **Wake Up!** Fall asleep and snore loudly on the child's lap. Then wake up suddenly for the school bell — "ding ding ding!"
- **Emotional Clown!** Act out silly, exaggerated emotions like sad — with a real sappy "boo hoo hoo" and drip water on your face for tears (all very fake) or happy - with a silly song and dance.
- **Paper Cup Shower!** Poke some holes in a paper cup. Then sit Dad in a chair with the empty paper cup balanced on his head. Pour water into it until...
- **Keep My Arms Down!** Put one of your arms out and when the child pushes it down, make a cranking sound, and raise the opposite one up. If they try to hold both down, raise a foot.
- **Milk Carton Spray!** Punch holes in a milk carton, and pour water into it. Pour water in until the shower starts.
- **Where's My Hand!** Say, "Give me five" but lose your hand in your sleeve - have child help you find it and then lose the other hand.
- **Keep It Up!** Cooperate keeping one balloon floating in the air.
- **I'm Pouring!** Hold a spring water bottle above the child's head - tilt ever so slightly in anticipatory way — drop droplet. Fair play, however, is allowing them to get you. But they are usually less reserved about the amount they drop!
- **Drink from the Squirt Gun!** Put juice in a squirt gun to deliver it that way.
- **Where'd He Go!** Take the child's arms in yours behind your back, and then lean over until the child leans on your back. Then pick them up, hanging behind you, and start calling out, "where is (child)?" "(Child's name)--where aaaarrreeee you?"
- **Lost in the Hood!** Wear a hooded sweatshirt with a drawstring and make your head disappear as you tighten the string. Ask the child to help to get you out.
- **Crack an Egg!** Crack a pretend egg in their hair. Put the fingertips of your hand together and touch them to the top of the child's head. Then gently bop the top of the hand to simulate "cracking the egg." Then slowly drizzle your fingers down their hair.
- **Bubble Gum Bubble!** Blow a big bubble of bubble gum and pop it with a big pop.
- **Hand Grenade!** Deliver reinforcers like a hand grenade. Instead of giving an M&M, pretend to send it through the air with a whistling sound until it gets to child's mouth then explodes (i.e. you make an exploding sound). Run from the child and toss the (soft) reinforcer back to them.
- **Reinforcer Presents!** Wrap the reinforcer like a real present. Sustain the anticipation by gradually unwrapping across many trials.
- **Treasure Hunt!** Hide the reinforcer and go on a treasure hunt, giving out clues for each trial.
- **P-U!** Smell the child's feet with a dramatic "P-U" and pass out on the floor. Most children will proceed to put their feet in the proximity of your nose. Then wake up and chase after them.
- **Break Dance!** Put the child on a table or slippery floor for some break dancing. Lay the child's stomach on the table with their head toward you and feet away. Put your left hand by their feet and your right by their head to generate a pretty good spin.
- **Foot Flying!** Make the child fly on your feet. Then say, "Its Barney's turn" and make Barney fly on feet, then child again.

- **Silly Telephone Calls!** Make a ringing noise and pick up the telephone and say, "it's for you, (child)!" Add in silly praise dialog. Alternatively say that you've got to call Mickey Mouse to praise the child's performance.
- **Face Machine!** Have the child push your nose to make your tongue come out, or pull left ear to move your tongue right and vice versa. Have them push your stomach to make you blow air in their face.
- **Barney's Working!** Make Barney, Buzz, or Woody doll do trials.
- **Where'd the Tickles Go!** Look for the "tickles." Be surprised, asking, "Where'd they go?" Then find them: "Oh, there they are!"
- **Intense Edibles!** Try out intensely flavored edibles, like red hots, war heads, pop rocks, breath-mints, or taco sauce.
- **Hide Behind the Table!** Turn the table on its side with the legs toward you. Hide until the child stands up to find you and then either roar or act scared.
- **Stayin' Alive!** Break out your best John Travolta Disco imitation.
- **I Won't Drop You!** Hold the child, worry and say, "I hope I don't drop you..." Then drop and catch them pretty low to floor (without letting go) with a, "Whew! Thank goodness!"
- **Table Tent!** Use the table for a tent with a blanket over it; crawl underneath for chasing or quiet hiding.
- **Cardboard Fan!** Swing cardboard in front of the child to create wind.
- **We're So Quiet!** Sit close to the child and whisper gently next to their ear. Keep it up till they talk back in a whisper. Get a simple conversation going, or just echo each other's whispers.
- **Sock Imitation!** Put socks on the child's hands then say, "do this" and clap or other wacky commands.
- **Banana Ears!** Say, "Ohhhhh, you want a (food) in your ear?" "Nooooooo." "In your nose?" "Noooo." "On your head?" "Noooo." "Oh, in your mouth!" In an unpredictable fashion.
- **Mr. Froggy!** Put the child on your lap and say, "Mr. Froggy's sitting on a rock, along comes (therapist), and the Froggy goes "kerplop!" Throw the child on couch or beanbag chair. (Or let the child fall through your legs).
- **Thumb Wrestle!** Thumb wrestle by hooking fingers together with the child, with your thumbs on top. See who can trap the other person's thumb. Do it with both thumbs sticking out a large, stretched-out sock, or through a cardboard wrestling ring.
- **Puppet Teacher!** Have a stuffed puppet praise and tickle the child. Have the puppet give the instructions.
- **Mandy!** Sing Barry Manilow songs with either a good or an outrageously bad voice.
- **Funky Dancing!** Sing and dance to really funky songs. Hold the child in your arms, or on your feet.
- **Cookie Monster Praise!** Practice your imitations of kid show actors, such as Barney, Goofy, or Cookie Monster. Give praise in their voices.
- **There's a Monster at the End of This Book!** Play with the Sesame Street Book, "There is a monster at the end of this book." Ham up the Grover parts. Use each page as a reinforcer.
- **Blow Raspberry's!** Give Raspberry's (blowing and making noises) to the belly or fake tickles kissed to the ticklish part of the neck.
- **Hair Torture!** Lay the child down and gently sweep your hair over their face with "oh, no" or whatever to let them know it is coming.
- **Pillow Fight!** Have pillow fights.
- **Let Me Draw!** Try to draw on paper with the child pushing your hand to wreck the picture.
- **Motor Cycle Racer!** Put the child on your lap, facing away from you, for a motorcycle ride. Use your fists as handlebars and rev up. Go around curves by leaning the child left or right with all important motorcycle sounds. Then crash!

- **Monster Palm!** Draw a monster on your palm. Use the other hand to hold the wrist of monster palm so it can't get you. However, we all know monster palm is stronger. Elicit the child's help to get rid of monster palm.
- **Feed Me!** Have the child feed you. Will he smear you?
- **Shall We Dance!** Sing, "shall we dance" from the King and I with the Tango, where you hold the child cheek-to-cheek, then walk one way, then turn your body and cheeks and walk the other way. Freeze and play up the anticipation of lunging to "Shalala... Weeeee... DANCE! Dum Dum Dum!
- **It's Time to Mambo!** Do the "Mambo," with your best John Candy imitation. Head upstairs to get Dad in on the dance. Dance a chain through the house to get Mom and siblings into it.
- **I'm Trying to Talk But Nothing's Happening!** Put tape over your mouth and try to talk - or pretend you're trying to keep your hand from covering your mouth but can't.
- **Macarena!** Dance the Macarena. Learn all the moves in gross-motor imitation and build it together.
- **Who Let the Dogs Out!** Sing, "Who let the dogs out?" with exaggerated arm motions.
- **Media Player!** Work with the computer on, and Microsoft Media Player turned on. Set it to a song or punch line that the child likes to hear, and click start to play it while the child watches the light show.
- **Tower Disaster!** Set up a tower ten feet away and let the child run at it.
- **Who Let the Boy Fall!** Hold the child up in the air and sing, "Who let the (boy) fall?" (to the tune of "Who let the dogs out?") While pretending to drop the child.
- **I've Got a Secret!** Tell the child, "I have a secret," and when they listen up close, blow quiet raspberries to the ear.
- **Soft Tickles!** Give soft ticklish back, arm, leg or foot rubs by slowly drizzling your finger tips over their skin.
- **Jump!** Sing, "Jump" by Van Halen with a model and jump when the song tells you to.
- **I'm Shocked!** Fall completely over with surprise and shock that the child answered the question correctly.
- **Car Ride!** Line your chairs up next to each other and go for a car ride. Put seat belts on. Checks left and right for traffic, beep the horn, etc.
- **Electro-Glide!** Do a line dance such as the "Achy breaky heart dance."
- **Blanket Pull!** Pull the child by a blanket wrapped around their waist in circles then tease, "Nope we got to go left, no right, no left..."
- **I'm a Little Teapot!** Sing, "I'm a little teapot" and act it out, but have water to tease that you will pour on the child.
- **Aladdin's Magic Carpet!** Put the child on a towel or blanket and pull them across floor.
- **Chest Vibrator!** Hit the child's chest gently with your palms while they vocalize so they can hear the funny reverberation.
- **Kick the Can!** Play kick the can by racing to be the first one to kick the can over. The child doesn't know which trial you'll let him go on, so you've got a head start. The anticipation of trying to race you keeps his attention. (But don't cheat by going when he's not attending!)
- **Water the Plants!** The child helps water plants with a small pitcher.
- **Imitate the Child!** The child says, "Uh" and puts their hand on table and you imitate. After a while the child realizes he can run the show in reinforcement.
- **Elevator Rides!** Pick the child up - "First floor!" - Higher - "Second floor!" - "Do you want to go to the third floor?" Then, "Oh no! The elevator is going sideways!"
- **Chair Rides!** "Fasten your seatbelt! Hold on to the chair!" Begin to lift chair off ground slowly. Then take off like a racecar!
- **Chair Tipping!** "Fasten your seatbelt! Hold on to the chair!" Tip back just a bit at first. Next time a bit more, unpredictably.

- **Music Video Shots!** Set up a music video on the VCR. You control the remote to dole out parts of the song as a reinforcer.
- **Butterfly Kisses!** Put your eye next to their cheek and blink your eyelid onto it.
- **Piggyback Ride!** Go some place fun (imaginary!). Watch out for the potholes in the road! Weave around drunkenly. Run unexpectedly. Be sure to bounce the child on your back.
- **Hand Spiders!** Run your hand around on the table like spiders. Then let the child SPLAT them. Run at him and crawl onto him, if he'll let you.
- **Removing body parts!** "I got your nose (holding your thumb between two fingers, to look like a nose) - I'll put it in my pocket - want it back?"
- **Big Bear Wants In!** Stuff stuffed animals down the back of the child's shirt, up the pants leg, in the sleeves.
- **The Big Spin!** Pick the child up by the armpits for a big spin (don't fall over!).
- **Pump Me Up!** Say, "It's time to pump me up!" Mimic two-handed bicycle pump while inflating your cheeks. Now you can't talk, but hold the child's hands and have them POP your mouth. You can also mime inflating your entire body by slowly lifting up onto your toes, and expanding your arms and stomach (in rhythm with the child's pumping action).
- **Hot Hands!** Place the child's hands on yours. They have to pull them away before you can gently slap them.
- **Choosing Firsts!** Take turns putting your hands hand over hand over hand over hand with the child - flat or on a pole, as you would do when choosing 'firsts' with a baseball bat.
- **Science Tricks!** Baking soda dropped into vinegar makes a nice fizz volcano!
- **Cornstarch!** Play with cornstarch and water. It makes a terrific tactile effect.
- **Musical Chairs!** Play musical chairs, marching, or silly dancing and then FREEZE when the music stops. Be impressed by the child's frozen poses.
- **Magic Tricks!** Pull a candy out of the child's ear. Transfer a reinforcer magically from one hand to another closed fist (the child doesn't know you had it there already). Or even into a sealed container (where it already was).
- **The Glomulator!** Draw buttons on paper, have him press one - it makes you "glom" (make something up!) press another one, you stop, another, you hop. The child never knows quite what will happen.
- **Horsy Ride!** Ride the child on your back while you crawl on all fours. Be sure to vibrate the child. Try a bucking bronco ride, or just a very gentle ride.
- **Echo Cup!** Blow or say silly things into a cup to hear the echo.
- **Why Are You Stomping!** Hold the child's ankles and gently stomp their feet on the floor. Or stomp onto your feet, and complain, "Ouch!"
- **Pavarotti!** Sing lines of a favorite song, especially with a bombastic silly voice.
- **Earthquake!** Shake the child's chair like an earthquake.
- **Creep-a-Mousey!** Crawl a "mouse" hand up the child's leg, tummy, and arm and then quickly tickle them under the chin while making sounds that indicate, "I'm coming to get you..."
- **Massage!** Practice gentle or pressure massage the way the child likes it.
- **Train Ride!** Line up the chairs, one behind the other and go for a train ride. Who's the engineer? Who's in the caboose?
- **Go Swimming!** Manipulate the child's arms and legs so they are "swimming" or doing a "cheer".
- **Blast Off!** Turn the chair into a "rocket" which lifts off after a countdown.
- **Musical Bounces!** Sing silly songs while you bounce the child on your knee.
- **Singing Your Song!** Sing songs using the child's name within the song. Imitate a favorite character as you sing.
- **Puppet Nibbles!** Use a puppet to nibble on toes and fingers.
- **Secret Joke!** Whisper something silly in the ear.
- **Eskimo Kisses!** Rub noses with the child or on their cheek gently.

- **Human Broom!** Hang the child upside down and pretend that they are a broom.
- **I'm a Real Character!** Imitate lines and characters from the child's favorite movies or cartoons, i.e. Pumba saying, "Hakuna matata," Donald Duck saying, "That was just wonderful," or Curly saying, "I'm trying to think but nothing's happening!"
- **Kissing Machine!** Have the child push an imaginary button to turn on a "kissing machine."
- **Chase!** Play chase games, especially when on the way outside or to a favorite activity.
- **Jack-in-the-Box!** Crawl into a large box and pretend to be "jack-in-the-box." "Pop goes the weasel" is a great song for this.
- **Lady and the Tramp!** Suck strands of spaghetti quickly into your mouth.
- **The Big Sneeze!** Fake a long build up into an exaggerated sneeze.
- **Commando Attack!** Plan a commando attack on Dad. Sneak up and throw water at him.
- **The Pokemon Polka!** Dance to Weird Al's Pokemon Polka. Try to sing as fast as he does.
- **Rubba Ribs!** Tickle the child's ribs by rubbing your knuckles on them. Say, "Here comes the big one! Rubba Ribs!"
- **Domino Disaster!** Set up a domino chain to knock over.
- **Balloon Chase!** Blow up ten balloons and chase them all around the room simultaneously, with lots of laughter.
- **Calling Daddy!** Call Dad for praise on an intercom or walkie-talkie.
- **Nesting Rewards!** Place a treat inside multiple nesting boxes and lift each as a reinforcer.
- **Adjective Search!** Teach colors or other adjectives by hiding a reinforcer under one of many colored boxes. Tell the child, "It is under the "red" one, for example. In this way, the child is motivated to find the correct color to find the reinforcer more quickly. This works for other adjectives as well.
- **Hide and Seek!** Have someone hide and go find them. They can leap out to "scare" the child.
- **It Wasn't Me!** Simulate the sound of passing gas, and act embarrassed.
- **Go Ahead and Get It!** Cut two holes in each end of a box. "Secretly" put one hand in the box. Then drop a reinforcer in the box with your other. Let the child reach in to get it, but grab their hand when they do.
- **I've got ya!** Trap the child in your legs and let them struggle to get out.
- **Jumping Animal!** Squeeze a wet foam animal tightly into your hand and open it to let it spring out to the child.
- **Pan Parade!** Hold a parade with pots and pans.
- **Garden Hose Surprise!** Spray Dad outside with a garden hose for each correct trial. Go outside to do the trials.
- **Dryer Time!** Have child sit on the dryer while it is running.
- **It's Coming Baack!** Hang a soft toy from a long rope and let the child hit it away from them. "It's coming baaack!"
- **Dancing to Ernie!** Get a mechanical musical toy (Ernie, or the fish, or the sunflower) and dance to its song.
- **Chattering Teeth!** Get chattering mechanical teeth and throw them on the table by surprise.
- **Watch it Go!** Set up a remote control car and tell the child to "look at the car." When they look, turn it on to reinforce compliant eye contact. When they turn away, stop the car, and repeat the instruction to turn it on again.
- **Get Her!** Tie a stuffed animal to a string and place it on the table. Let the child race you to grab it before you yank it off the table and vice-versa.
- **What's So Funny!** Find a suction toy that will stick to your forehead.
- **I'm Batman!** Give praise while wearing a new mask.
- **Bombs Away!** Drop water balloons from the second story.
- **Hula Dad!** Have Dad dress up in a grass skirt and lei's and dance the hula for the child.
- **The Limbo!** Set a broom handle across two chairs and do the limbo to Caribbean music.
- **Ham It Up!** Do your favorite silly actions and noises from your childhood