RBT® CHEAT SHEET · BEHAVIOR ACQUISITION AND BEHAVIOR REDUCTION · C.1, D.5

Reinforcement vs. punishment

Two questions decide it: was something added or removed, and did the behavior go up or down?

The quadrant

	Behavior goes up: reinforcement	Behavior goes down: punishment
Something is added (positive)	**Positive reinforcement** **Added, and the behavior increases.** Leo labels a color and gets a sticker and "You said *blue*!" right away. Labeling increases.	**Positive punishment** **Added, and the behavior decreases.** After knocking items off a shelf, an adult client puts them back and tidies the rest of the shelf (overcorrection). Knocking items off decreases.
Something is removed (negative)	**Negative reinforcement** **Removed or reduced, and the behavior increases.** Noah hands over his break card and gets a 2-minute break from work. Asking for breaks increases.	**Negative punishment** **Something valued is removed, and the behavior decreases.** Devon loses one token each time he throws materials (response cost). Throwing drops.

Defined by the effect C.1, D.1

- A consequence is a reinforcer only if the behavior it follows becomes more likely. A treat the learner does not care about is not a reinforcer.
- It is punishment only if the behavior decreases, however unpleasant it looked.
- Attention can reinforce even when it is a reprimand. If "No throwing!" follows throwing and throwing goes up, that is positive reinforcement.
- Deliver reinforcement right away. A late reinforcer can strengthen whatever happened in between.

Punishment procedures you may see D.5

Procedure	Type	What happens
Reprimand	Positive	A statement of disapproval is added.
Overcorrection	Positive	Restore the setting (restitution) or repeat the correct behavior (positive practice).
Response cost	Negative	A set amount of a reinforcer is lost, such as tokens or minutes.
Nonexclusionary time-out	Negative	Stays in the setting but loses access: planned ignoring, contingent observation.
Exclusionary time-out	Negative	Leaves the area for a short time. More restrictive; the adult keeps the learner in view.

Exam traps

Removed plus up is negative reinforcement, not punishment. Ending a hard task after a polite break request makes asking more likely.

Negative punishment or negative reinforcement? Both remove something. If the behavior decreases, it is punishment; if it increases, it is reinforcement.

Extinction or punishment? Extinction withholds the specific reinforcer that maintains the behavior. Removing a different one, like a toy when attention maintains it, is negative punishment if behavior decreases.

Time-out for escape-maintained behavior can reinforce it: leaving the task may be exactly what the learner wants.

Time-out needs a time-in worth coming back to, or it removes nothing of value.

Your role

- Punishment is never the first or only tool. A qualified supervisor adds it only when needed, with informed consent and the least restrictive effective option.
- A sound plan pairs it with reinforcement for a replacement behavior.
- Run it exactly as written. Do not lengthen a time-out, add warnings or lecture; a lecture can deliver attention.
- Follow the release rule, record what happens and report concerns. Never use punishment out of frustration.

Read the free lesson

D.5 Carry out positive and negative punishment procedures, such as time-out

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