

Reinforcing small changes for improved behavior

An easy and extremely effective way to change a child's behavior is to note the small improvements or steps that he takes. The psychological term for this is "successive approximations." Successive approximation, or reinforcing small changes, as we refer to it in my practice, involves picking a single misbehavior, determining the smallest sign of change, and then noting when the child has displayed that behavior. For many inappropriate behaviors, or misbehaviors, this is an effective tool to instigate change.

For instance, many parents hate the insolent and disrespectful tone with which their adolescent often talks to them. "How do I make him stop talking to me like that?" is often the response of a parent. Instead of just telling your sullen adolescent not to talk to you that way, find a time he is talking to you with a respectful and appropriate tone, and then say, "Jeff, see how you're talking to me now? That's how I want you to talk to me when you are angry or upset with me. I can hear you much better. Please do more of that." Even if your teenager is talking to you about new computer games or a sports event, he is less defensive and better able to register what he is doing and how he is communicating with you so he can replicate it.

Now just commenting on better behavior once will not ensure that all future problems are solved. Remember, kids don't go from F's to A's in one quick motion but rather with persistence, encouragement, and over time. Hence, you will have to find several times over the course of many days that your adolescent is talking in a respectful tone. Also, the next time he is upset, note after the argument any slight changes you may have perceived; i.e., "Brett, I noticed earlier today when you were upset with me, you didn't use any cuss words. Keep going on that track. You are in the right direction." Your adolescent not only hears what you want him to do more of, but he doesn't get discouraged.

How to reinforce a small change

- **Decide what behavior you would like to change.**
For example, a child has awful table manners, including wiping his mouth on his sleeve and using his hands instead of utensils.
- **Determine the smallest sign of change.**
For example, the child uses his napkin or fork once or twice. (Note: Here is where most parents and teachers fail. They set the bar too high and look for a moderate, not small change, such as good table manners most of the time. In effect, this is expecting your child to go from F to B+. Not looking for smaller changes will be a guaranteed lesson in demoralization for your child.) Also, remember that a sign of change doesn't necessarily have to be a behavior your child has never exhibited before. Your child may have used his napkin or fork. You just want to increase the likelihood that he will do it more.
- **Let your child know what the problem is and what behavior you eventually want to see.**
For example, "Cory, your father and I would like to see your table manners improve. We

would like to see you use your napkin and your fork and chew with your mouth closed.”
(Tell your child what you want to see, not what you don’t want to see. Be specific.)

- **Notice the smallest sign of change that you can comment on.**

For example, “Thank you, Cory. I noticed that you used your napkin.” (Even if he only used it once or twice the entire meal.)

- **At a later date, let your child know the positive behavior change you observed with a message that you want him to continue and you want to see more of it.**

For example, “Cory, again I noticed that you were trying to use your napkin more. Also, there were several times that you were chewing with your mouth closed. You are on the right track; do more of that!”

Small behavior changes become big changes

Remember, big behavior changes are a conglomeration of smaller changes and don’t occur without those building blocks. In the earlier example of Ryan violating his curfew, what could his mother have done differently? First, she should continue to ground him for violating curfew. Reinforcing small changes does not mean allowing misbehavior to slide. Second, she could have noted the small changes that he exhibited, such as, taking the cell phone with him, having his girlfriend answer it, or coming in 1.5 hours late instead of his usual 2.5 hours late. Acknowledging any or all of these steps towards better behavior would have amounted in continued, but slow, improvement with Ryan instead of his abject resentment and demoralization.

While improved behavior doesn’t occur instantly, we often inadvertently discourage it by not noting small changes. By setting the bar lower, and raising it consistently over time, we are much more likely to get better behavior from our obstinate youngsters.

<https://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/reinforcing-small-changes-in-your-childs-behavior/>

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