**How is negative reinforcement for kids a great strategy when used right**

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## **Understanding Negative Reinforcement:**

Remember when your kids made up their own bed for the first time, or when they first showed tantrums for not having vegetables. What did you do in such situations?  
  
Did you praise them in both situations? Or scolded them? Or did you just ignore their actions and behaviors?

How do you generally decide what works best for such instances? Do you consider the impact of your actions and words on your kids?

For decades, parents and teachers have unknowingly used positive and negative reinforcement strategies, to bring out the best in children.

### **Positive Reinforcement:**

[Positive reinforcement is an extremely powerful behavior management strategy that focuses on changing existing behaviors or creating new ones by rewarding or praising the child, which increases the probability of the desired behavior.](https://www.splashlearn.com/blog/find-out-how-positive-reinforcement-can-help-kids-learn-better/)

Is negative reinforcement the opposite of positive reinforcement? Well, not at all!  
  
Even though they differ in quite a few ways, both of these aim at the same outcome i.e. increasing the likelihood of the desired behaviors. Let’s dive deeper into negative reinforcement.

### **Negative Reinforcement:**

Have your kids ever cleaned their room, just to avoid your nagging?  
  
This is a perfect example of negative reinforcement.

Negative reinforcement occurs when something unpleasant or uncomfortable is removed or taken away in order to increase the likelihood of the desired behavior. Kids want to avoid the nagging, so they do what needs to be done. Thus, taking away something unpleasant, in this case, nagging, results in the desired behavior.

**Just like positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement is an equally effective behavioral management strategy that aims to create or change behaviors by removing undesirable actions or responses, thus increasing the likelihood of desired behavior.**

## **Examples of Negative Reinforcement:**

Here are some real-life examples:

* Giving a pass to the car behind to avoid its honking
* Getting up from the bed to avoid the noisy alarm
* Taking an antacid before having a spicy meal
* Applying sunscreen before heading to the beach to avoid getting sunburned
* Leaving early from the house to avoid traffic jams
* Feeding the baby to stop them from crying

**Few examples of negative reinforcement in the classroom:**

* Doing away with homework for the weekend if students behave well in class
* Freedom to escape extra classes if students perform well in exams
* Removing the code of silence in the classroom once everyone completes their tasks
* Studying for an exam to avoid getting poor grades
* Escaping from an early morning practice session, if students perform well in their sports match

## **Reinforcement & Punishment:**

## **Similarities and Differences**

Primarily, there are two types of reinforcement:

**Positive reinforcement:** adding a factor to increase the likelihood of the desired behavior.

**Negative reinforcement:** removing a factor to increase the likelihood of the desired behavior.

The main point to be noted is that in both strategies, the goal is to increase the likelihood of desired behavior.

The main difference lies in whether something is being added or removed. We can surely see that negative reinforcement is not the opposite of positive reinforcement, as both the strategies aim to increase the likelihood of desired behaviors.

However, there are certain misconceptions among parents and teachers that negative reinforcement means punishment.  In reality, that is not the case.

### **Negative Reinforcement and Punishment**

The most obvious difference between punishment and negative reinforcement lies in the fact that punishment, whether positive or negative, aims at decreasing or weakening a behavior. Whereas reinforcement, whether positive or negative, aims at strengthening the behavior. Now, this may be done by either adding or removing a factor.

Let’s consider the following example for better understanding:

Jack is supposed to take his dog for a walk every morning. This morning he woke up late and was not able to take the dog for a walk. Because of this, his mother made him do other chores around the house in addition to taking the dog for a walk in the evening.

This is an example of punishment because his mother punished him for not taking the dog for a walk in the morning. The mother’s objective was to weaken the irresponsible behavior portrayed by Jack.

Another way to distinguish between negative reinforcement and punishment is to note whether an unwanted outcome is being added as a consequence of behavior. If it is being added,  then it is an example of punishment. But if something is being removed in order to avoid unwanted behavior, then it is an example of negative reinforcement.

In addition, punishment tries to make the unwanted behavior stop whereas negative reinforcement tries to make the wanted behavior more likely to occur.

In the above example of Jack and his dog, extra work has been added as a consequence of not doing what was expected. Hence, we can say that this is an example of punishment.

## **What is Positive Punishment?**

Now, it may surprise you to know that there is also something as positive punishment. Yes, punishment can also be positive or negative.

Let’s clear this out by understanding the basic terms:

Positive = Addition

Negative = Subtraction/Removal

Reinforcement = Strengthening or increasing behavior

Punishment = Weakening or decreasing behavior

Another term that needs to be understood here is **stimulus**.

Stimulus is something external that influences behavior. This can either be pleasant, unpleasant, internal or external.

Now, using these terms we can easily define each of these:

1. Positive Reinforcement: The act of **adding a pleasant stimulus** with the aim of **increasing desired behavior**.

For example: Receiving a new toy after taking the dog for a morning walk.

1. Negative Reinforcement: The act of **removing an unpleasant stimulus** with the aim of **increasing desired behavior**.

For example: Taking the dog for the morning walk to avoid mother’s scolding.

1. Positive Punishment: The act of **adding an unpleasant stimulus** with the aim of **decreasing undesired behavior**.

For example: “No playtime” for 1 week for not taking the dog for the morning walk.

1. Negative Punishment: The act of **removing a pleasant stimulus** with the aim of **decreasing undesired behavior**.

For example: Doing extra household chores for not taking the dog for the morning walk.

Whether positive or negative, [research](https://source.wustl.edu/2015/05/carrot-or-stick-punishments-may-guide-behavior-more-effectively-than-rewards/) has time and again proven that reinforcement is more effective in moulding behaviors than punishment as the latter leads to more negative outcomes and impacts.

## **Negative Reinforcement vs Negative Punishment**

Even though both of these remove a stimulus, be it pleasant or unpleasant, the former aims at increasing the desired behavior, while the latter attempts to decrease the undesired behavior.

Another way to understand the difference is that negative reinforcement is most useful when you are aiming at increasing the likelihood of positive behavior, while negative punishment is most useful when aiming at decreasing the negative behavior.

Let’s understand this with two situations.

Suppose a child misbehaves in a class. Now, what do you think will work best in this situation?

In this case, we would want the child to not repeat the behavior. Thus, we want to decrease the likelihood of undesired behavior. Hence, negative punishment would work best in this case. For example: taking away their favorite toy.  Here, the “favorite toy” is a pleasant stimulus and its removal will bring a decrease in the likelihood of them misbehaving.

Let us consider another case where the child behaves well in the class, just to avoid their teacher’s scolding.

Now, in this case, behaving well is the desired behavior and teachers’ scolding is the unpleasant stimulus. Thus, taking away the unpleasant stimulus will result in an increase in the likelihood of the desired behavior. Hence, negative reinforcement would work well in this case.

Hence, each of strategies have its own purpose and which one works better would depend entirely on what we want to achieve.

## **Is Negative Reinforcement bad?**

Using negative reinforcement as a behavior management tool isn’t necessarily bad.

The word ‘negative’ refers to the act of taking something away, like a minus sign in a math equation, which of course has no negative effect on the child or the person.

Moreover, the thing or factor that is taken away is something that the child or the person finds uncomfortable or unpleasant, so its removal results in a desirable outcome, thus turning it to a favorable condition. So, negative reinforcement is not a negative thing but it’s about removing the ‘negative’ thing.

## **Negative Reinforcement & Educational Games**

[Just like positive reinforcement](https://www.splashlearn.com/blog/find-out-how-positive-reinforcement-can-help-kids-learn-better/), negative reinforcement also plays a major role in shaping kids behavior through educational games.

This is because it is very important to make the learners do what we want them to do, instead of something else. For example, if the game is about teaching a [multiplication strategy](https://www.splashlearn.com/math/multiplication-games), it becomes important for the learners to modify their actions to be able to apply the strategy. Hence, using reinforcement strategies for shaping the learner’s behavior proves to be an effective tool.

Using the basic idea of negative reinforcement i.e. taking away something to promote behavior proves to be an effective strategy in games. For example, the longer kids don’t use the multiplication strategy, the more obstacles they will get in the way and the more lives they lose in the game.

So if the little learners want to avoid the obstacles and save their lives, they will be encouraged to use the strategy. Also, temporary loss of particular skills due to bad in-game choices is another good example of negative reinforcement.