

Tips for Teaching Operant Conditioning
(Courtesy of Erin Hardin, Texas Tech University)
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▪ **Choose your language carefully**

To avoid confusing students further about what *positive* and *negative* mean in this context, refer to *pleasant* and *unpleasant* consequences.

▪ **Make the idea of *contingency* clear**

Students often get confused because they fail to recognize what behavior the consequence is contingent on. For example, a student might say that revoking a driver's license is positive reinforcement, because it increases the likelihood that people drive the speed limit. However, if you ask students, "What behavior is losing your license contingent on?" (or "What do you have to do to lose your license?") then it becomes clear that the behavior in question is *speeding*. Speeding → Losing your license → less speeding

▪ **Break down the process**

The following questions can be very helpful in guiding students through examples:

- What is the behavior?
- What is the consequence of the behavior?
 - Positive or negative: Is it adding or removing something?
 - Reinforcement or punishment:
 - Is it pleasant or unpleasant?
 - Does it increase or decrease the likelihood of the behavior occurring again?

EXAMPLES:

Every night after dinner, Pat sits down to watch TV, but before long Pat's dog Juno is barking and whining. Pat gives him a toy to chew on, and he quiets down. Now he whines every night until Pat gives him a toy.

How is *Juno*'s behavior being learned?

What is the behavior?

Barking and whining after dinner

What is the consequence of the behavior? or What happens when Juno barks and whines?

Getting a toy.

Is this consequence adding or removing something?

Adding something – the toy.

So, is this positive or negative?

Positive

Is this consequence (getting a toy) pleasant or unpleasant?

Pleasant

Does this consequence increase or decrease the likelihood of Juno barking and whining in the future.

Increase

So, is this punishment or reinforcement?

Reinforcement

**Juno is learning to bark and whine after dinner through
POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT**

How is *Pat*'s behavior being learned?

What is the behavior?

Giving Juno a toy

What is the consequence of the behavior? or What happens when Pat gives the dog a toy?

Juno stops whining.

Is this consequence adding or removing something?

Removing something – the whining.

So, is this positive or negative?

Negative

Is this consequence of making the whining stop pleasant or unpleasant?

Pleasant

Does this consequence increase or decrease the likelihood of Pat giving Juno a toy in the future?

Increase

So, is this punishment or reinforcement?

Reinforcement

**Pat is learning to give Juno a toy when he barks and whines through
NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT**

While playing with her friends, Maki gets upset and throws a toy at them. Her mother gives her a time-out by making her sit in the corner for a few minutes. After doing this several times, Maki now hardly ever throws toys anymore.

How is *Maki*'s behavior being learned?

What is the behavior?

Throwing a toy at her friends

What is the consequence of the behavior? or What happens when Maki throws the toy?

She gets a time-out.

Is this consequence adding or removing something?

Removing something – she doesn't get to play anymore.

So, is this positive or negative?

Negative

Is this consequence (getting a time-out) pleasant or unpleasant?

Unpleasant

Does this consequence increase or decrease the likelihood of Maki throwing a toy in the future.

Decrease

So, is this punishment or reinforcement?

Punishment

**Maki is learning to not throw toys through
NEGATIVE PUNISHMENT**

How is *Maki*'s mother's behavior being learned?

What is the behavior?

Giving Maki a time out

What is the consequence of the behavior? or What happens when she gives Maki a time-out?

Maki is quiet, doesn't throw things.

Is this consequence adding or removing something?

Removing something – Maki's bad behavior.

So, is this positive or negative?

Negative

Is this consequence (Maki not throwing things) pleasant or unpleasant?

Pleasant

Does this consequence increase or decrease the likelihood of Maki's mother giving a time-out in the future?

Increase

So, is this punishment or reinforcement?

Reinforcement

**Maki's mother is learning to give more time-outs through
NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT**