

What Is It?

Pre-specified reinforcers is a strategy where a teacher tells or shows a student the reinforcer that will be delivered upon the completion of an activity or task. This strategy ensures the student knows what the reinforcer is for completing the task appropriately and creates a verbal contract between the teacher and the student.

When to Use It

- Pre-specified reinforcers is most effective for behavior that is maintained by escape from an activity or task
- Pre-specified reinforcers is most effective when the student has the skills to do the task but instead engages in challenging behavior
- Use pre-specified reinforcers only with tasks that are well defined and can be easily completed.
- Use pre-specified reinforcers only when the teacher can provide the reinforcer immediately after the student completes the requested task.

Steps to Implementation / How to Do It

After identifying a task or activity the student is trying to escape:

	1. Determine a variety of preferred items that are student-specific, highly desired by the student, and likely to increase the appropriate behavior in the future.
	2. Select an activity or task that typically results in escape-maintained challenging behavior.
	3. Deliver the request for the activity or task, and state the reinforcers to be delivered upon the completion of that activity or task (e.g., "When you walk quietly to the carpet and sit down, you can be my calendar helper", "First work, then computer time").
	4. Deliver the pre-specified reinforcer upon appropriate completion of the activity or task.
	5. If a challenging behavior occurs, the student should not get the reinforcer. Also, do not remind the student of the reinforcer after a challenging behavior occurs. Once the challenging behavior occurs, even if the students stops it, the student should not have access to the reinforcer.

Example

Kylie typically gets out of her seat during the daily 15-minute independent reading block in Mr. Zimmerman's class. The intervention team uses a functional behavior assessment to determine that Kylie is trying to escape the reading activities. The team works with Mr. Zimmerman and he decides to implement pre-specified reinforcers during that activity. Mr. Zimmerman identifies several preferred items that are likely to increase Kylie's engagement in the activity. Before the independent reading block, Mr. Zimmerman tells Kylie, "When you finish the 15-minutes of independent reading, you may play a game on the tablet". As soon as Kylie finishes reading, Mr. Zimmerman provides her with five minutes on the tablet. Mr. Zimmerman continues to pre-specify the reinforcer while changing what Kylie is able to earn after she completes her work. After Kylie begins to stay in her seat during the independent reading time, Mr. Zimmerman fades the intervention by pre-specifying the reinforcer about every other independent reading time.

How to Increase Effectiveness

- State the pre-specified task requirements in positive terms, encouraging the child to engage in the activity or task.
- Clearly define the expectations for the activity or task and the parameters of the reinforcer for the student (e.g., how long it will last, where the activity will occur).
- Deliver the pre-specified reinforcer *immediately* following successful completion of the activity or task.
- Never add additional task requirements to the initial request before delivering the pre-specified reinforcer.
- Use a variety of reinforcers to maintain the value of the selected reinforcers.
- Be sure to use items that are reinforcing at that moment. Sometimes an item that usually is reinforcing may not be powerful enough to motivate the student to engage in the task. If this occurs, try other reinforcers or reassess the student's preferences.
- When possible, give the student a choice of reinforcers and have the student select the reinforcement for the specified activity or task.
- Once you have a pattern of success with the strategy, fade the intervention by varying how often it is used.

Resources

Cosden, M., Gannon, C., & Haring, T. G. (1995). Teacher-control versus student-control over choice of task and reinforcement for students with severe behavior problems. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 5*, 11-27.

Raschke, D. (1981). Designing reinforcement surveys – let the student choose the reward. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 14*, 92-96.