

Skinner's Theory of Operant Conditioning in the Classroom:

Using Reinforcement and Punishment to Support Positive Student Behavior

Read the Full Article Here:

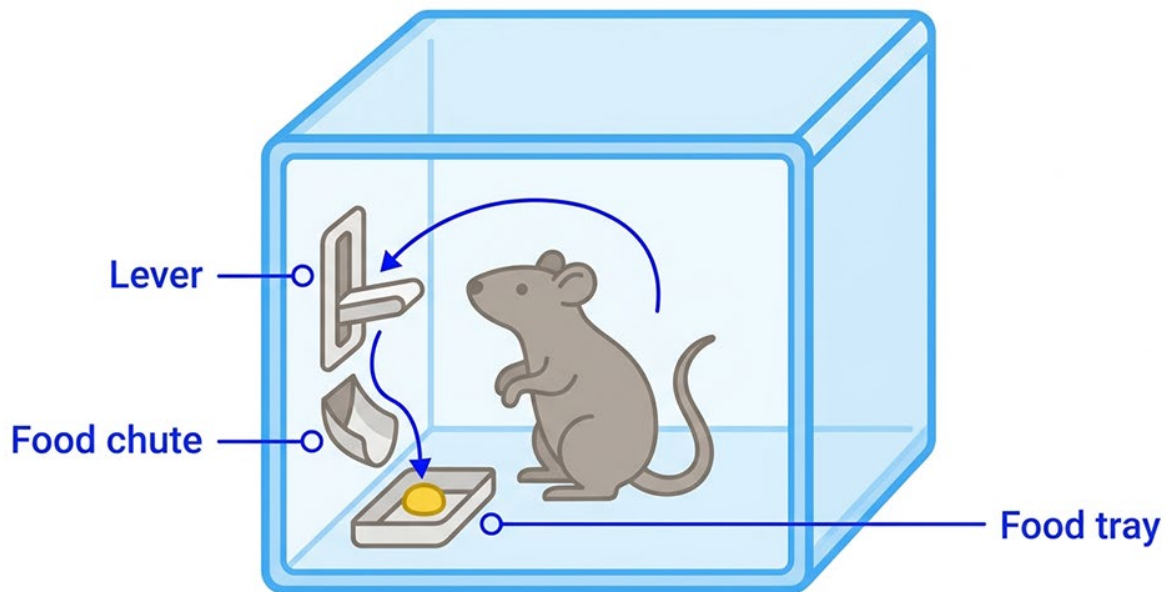
<https://www.modelteaching.com/education-articles/classroom-management/skinners-theory-of-operant-conditioning-in-the-classroom>

You have likely used, or seen, teachers transform and improve behaviors using a simple sticker chart as a rewards system. You might have also seen how a student's behavior improves after you focus on providing consistent and specific praise. Positive and negative behaviors in your classroom don't typically come out of nowhere, and much of what your students do is actually shaped by what happens before they do it and whether the behavior is followed by something like a reward, a consequence, or a specific action. One well-studied framework for understanding student behaviors comes from B.F. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning, which describes how what comes after the behavior is what makes that behavior more or less likely to happen. In this article, you will learn about operant conditioning and why it can be beneficial to understand in your classroom. You will also explore Skinner's four types of reinforcement and punishment and determine which are the most likely to impact behavioral change.

What is Operant Conditioning?

In 1938, psychologist B.F. Skinner published a book about his theory of operant conditioning. In this theory, he claimed that behavior could be modified through positive and negative reinforcement and punishment. As was common in early behavioral research, his work was first done with animals; in this case, rats.

To summarize the experiment very simply, he placed a rat in a box with a lever. When the rat pressed the lever, food would be released. Of course, the rat did this randomly at first until it became conditioned to recognize that pressing the lever resulted in a reward, the food. There were other elements to the experiment, such as implementing a mild electric shock or using sounds and light, but those details are not critical to understanding the basic implications.



The box that he used in his experiments allowed him to visualize how different consequences affected behavior. The general idea of operant conditioning is that a behavior followed by a favorable outcome tends to be repeated, while a behavior followed by an unfavorable outcome often tends to decrease over time (<https://www.simplypsychology.org/operant-conditioning.html>). What this means for you in your classroom is that how you reinforce a certain behavior is a powerful tool for how that student will act in the future. Decades of classroom research identify operant conditioning, when strategically using reinforcement to improve student behaviors, as one of the most reliable and research-based strategies teachers can use to support student behaviors. So, knowing what consequences will be most likely to decrease undesirable behavior and reinforce a desirable behavior is a critical component of your classroom management strategies.

The Four Types of Operant Conditioning

In his work, Skinner identified four ways that consequences can shape behavior. Two are forms of reinforcement, which increase a behavior, and two are forms of punishment, which decrease a behavior [<https://genmindful.com/blogs/mindful-moments/positive-vs-negative-reinforcement?srltid=AfmBOoq5aZ1cJ1dZUChKd83nPmGtik-gHlReo8QOphlMX0tKNRotbhS9>]. In the list below, you will review positive reinforcement

and negative reinforcement, and positive punishment and negative punishment. The words “positive” and “negative” here do not mean “good” and “bad.” Positive simply means that something is added, while negative means that something is taken away.

Type of Reinforcement	Definition and Classroom Example
Positive Reinforcement	Giving a reward to encourage behavior. Example: a sticker on a behavior chart in a preschool classroom, where a student earns a sticker when they do well.
Positive Punishment	Giving a punishment to discourage a behavior. Example: a child has to write a behavior reflection when they have broken a class rule.
Negative Reinforcement	Removing something unpleasant to encourage behavior. Example: a teacher takes away a weekend homework requirement because the whole class exhibited good behavior during a school assembly.
Negative Punishment	Removing something pleasant to discourage a behavior. Example: a student loses 10 minutes of recess time for a misbehavior.

Note that while all four kinds of conditioning methods are shown to change behaviors at least in the short term, positive reinforcement is consistently shown to produce longer-lasting positive behaviors in children (<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-positive-reinforcement-2795412>). Prioritizing positive reinforcement can be an important part of your classroom management systems.

Which Types Are Most Effective?

Not every type of conditioning produces the same results. Note that while all four kinds of conditioning methods are shown to change behaviors at least in the short term, positive reinforcement is consistently shown to produce longer-lasting positive behaviors in children. You can use the guide below as an overview of how effective each approach tends to be in your classroom.

Approach	What research shows	Recommendation
Positive reinforcement	Studies show that giving a reward to encourage positive behaviors is the most effective way to improve behavior and also has the longest-lasting effects for improving and maintaining positive behavior.	Use frequently in your classroom.
Positive punishment	Studies show that giving a punishment to discourage a behavior is the least effective for long-term results, and typically only stops the behaviors temporarily. It can also lead to other negative consequences, like anxiety in the child.	Avoid using when possible.
Negative reinforcement	Removing something unpleasant to encourage positive behaviors is shown to be somewhat effective by research when used carefully.	Use sparingly.
Negative punishment	Removing something pleasant to discourage behavior is shown to work to address poor behaviors in the short term but doesn't promote long-term positive behaviors.	Use sparingly, paired with positive or negative reinforcement.

Applying Operant Conditioning in Your Classroom

Understanding the theory is only the first step to a strong classroom management practice. The most important piece is actually implementing these ideas with efficacy. A focus on positive reinforcement will be the most effective at improving student behaviors long-term. While this article does not go into depth on the specific steps and strategies you can take to affect student behavior, to start, you can consider these simple and practical ways to apply operant conditioning in your classroom:

- Focus on positive reinforcement, as that is most effective.
- Consistently verbally and publicly praise good behaviors or write positive notes.
- Use reward systems like sticker charts for younger elementary students.

- Reward good behavior in older students with a “no homework” pass or extra recess time.
- Provide favorable activity options to students as a reward for certain behaviors
- In all of the above suggestions, provide the reward immediately after witnessing the positive behavior you wish to reinforce.
- In all of the above suggestions, be specific in your praise rather than simply saying “good job” and make sure students can connect the reward or praise to the behavior.
- Use punishment sparingly. Punishment often stops a behavior in the moment, but it doesn’t teach the correct behaviors, so students will often revert to the old undesired behavior.
- Remember that consistency is key! Students need to understand what the result of a behavior will be every time it is exhibited.

Operant Conditioning in Action

The two classroom scenarios below show operant conditioning at work. As you read each one, consider which type of reinforcement or punishment the teacher is using.

Scenario One: Positive Reinforcement

Pre-kindergarten teacher Ms. Dobbs has a student diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This young boy often has trouble focusing on tasks and staying at his carpet spot during read-alouds and morning circle time. Ms. Dobbs has made it a habit to publicly praise him immediately when he comes to the carpet. “Friends, look how Chase is sitting crisscross applesauce so quietly. I can tell he is ready for the story.” Additionally, she creates a weekly chart where he can earn small smiley face stickers for every 15 minutes spent on task. If he gets 10 stickers in one week, she makes a positive phone call home to brag about his behavior to his parents.

Ms. Dobbs is using two strategies for positive reinforcement: verbal praise and a tangible reward system. Both of these strategies reinforce Chase’s good behavior as soon as she catches it, encouraging him to keep it up. She knows that scolding him or raising her voice might temporarily curb his off-task behaviors, but it will not teach him the right thing to do.

Scenario Two: Negative Punishment

Middle school math teacher Mr. Reyes has his students working in partnerships and trios to solve some complex algebraic equations. In general, his students enjoy this opportunity to work with their peers, both for the social aspect and for the academic support they get

from bouncing ideas off each other. However, one pair of students is consistently off task and does not complete their work. They also spend their time trying to distract other groups, so Mr. Reyes knows he needs to take action. During the next class period, he has those two students work independently on opposite sides of the room, while all other students remain paired up.

In this case, Mr. Reyes took away something pleasant (working with a peer) as a form of punishment for the inappropriate behavior. This form of negative punishment will ideally encourage better future behavior, so that the group work can be reinstated. However, note that Mr. Reyes should potentially use other forms of conditioning instead of or in combination with the negative punishment. For example, he could also implement a whole-class point system to earn rewards for on-task behavior, positively reinforcing the behaviors he wishes to see in class.

Try This Task

As you plan your next unit, consider your own classroom management systems through the lens of operant conditioning. What routines and systems can you implement that will condition your students to exhibit desired behaviors? How can you increase your use of positive reinforcement and limit your use of positive and negative punishments? Choose one behavior you would like to see more often, and decide how you will reinforce it immediately and consistently over the next two weeks.

A comprehensive understanding of behavioral theories for your classroom

The strategies described a simple overview of Skinner's operant conditioning, and this concept is only one of many behavioral theories that can strengthen your teaching and classroom management. To explore many more theories and how they can impact your classroom practice, you can take the Model Teaching course Applying Developmental Theories to Teaching Practice. (Insert the course link here.)

References

Delgado, Danielle, et al. "Operant Conditioning of Animal Behaviour Using Positive Reinforcement." (2024).

Skinner, Burrhus Frederic. *The behavior of organisms: An experimental analysis*. BF Skinner Foundation, 2019.

Simonsen, Brandi, et al. "Evidence-based practices in classroom management: Considerations for research to practice." *Education and treatment of children* 31.3 (2008): 351-380..

Hayes, Lynda B., et al. "The Effect of Token Economies on Student Behavior in the Preschool Classroom: A Meta-Analysis." *Perspectives on Early Childhood Psychology & Education* 7.1 (2022): 83.

Pérez, Paloma, et al. "Supporting educators to implement behavior-specific praise: a research synthesis." *Frontiers in Education*. Vol. 10. Frontiers Media SA, 2025.

Frequently Asked Questions

Common questions about Skinner's operant conditioning for teachers

What is operant conditioning?

Operant conditioning is a theory of learning developed by psychologist B.F. Skinner. It explains that behavior is shaped by its consequences. A behavior followed by a reward is more likely to happen again, while a behavior followed by an unfavorable outcome is less likely to be repeated.

What are the four types of operant conditioning?

The four types of operant conditioning are:

Positive reinforcement, which is giving a reward to encourage behavior.

Positive punishment, which is giving a punishment to discourage a behavior.

Negative reinforcement, which is removing something unpleasant to encourage behavior.

Negative punishment, which is removing something pleasant to discourage a behavior

What is the difference between negative reinforcement and punishment?

Negative reinforcement increases a behavior by removing something unpleasant, while punishment decreases a behavior. For example, canceling a quiz because students worked hard is negative reinforcement, because by taking away something unpleasant (negative), students are more likely to increase the positive behavior of working hard (reinforcement).

Which type of reinforcement is most effective in the classroom?

Positive reinforcement has been shown to be most effective in increasing the positive behaviors you wish to see, and ensures that the behavioral change lasts. Most teachers get the best results by using positive reinforcement frequently and reserving punishment for situations sparingly and only when they truly require it.