

## Building on Your Student Relationships

### Recognition and Reward

Student motivation in therapeutic programs relies heavily on specific reinforcement programs (the Credit Program <https://kevinplummerphd.com/credit-program/>, the Green Zone <https://kevinplummerphd.com/the-green-zone-a-recognition-based-program/> and other systems) that enable students to access an incentive period (such as a credit check) based on what they were able to earn by meeting expectations during their work periods. Now, with students attending virtual classrooms, we have to look for other ways to motivate students.

It is important to remember that the most powerful reinforcer available to teachers is their approval, especially when this approval comes from a teacher who has a close and caring relationship with the student. This is also the case in a virtual classroom.

When students are convinced that teachers genuinely care about them and believe in them as individuals, students believe in and care more about themselves, they care more about their class, and strive for greater achievement in school. Students will care for a teacher who cares about them. They will care about what interests the teacher and what the teacher values, what the teachers thinks, what will impress the teacher. The quality of the teacher-student relationship is the most significant factor in determining the extent to which teacher approval is a powerful reinforcer. The relationship with the teacher can be a source of inspiration and is very often the reason students to show up in the morning and do their best.

Students learn about adults based on the frequency and quality of reinforcement and recognition provided by those adults. Students welcome people who are impressed with them, people who reinforce them, people who notice even the small moments of success. A good therapeutic relationship is based on meeting or exceeding a ratio of recognition to correction of 4:1. When people are too negative, when they fail to see the positive, when they withhold reinforcement but too easily dispense criticism and correction; students work on disengaging from these people and devaluing their input, investing less trust, and reducing the importance of the relationship. That's human nature and self-preservation with all of us, but especially with children who are impacted by significant emotional challenges.

Reinforcement is worth more when it is given because the student has impressed the teacher, not just met expectations and been compliant with the rules. Reinforcement is worth so much more when it provides clear evidence that the student is capable, competent, or has accomplished something very difficult, when it is connected to specific success. It is also important to remember that relief (from hard work) is also a reinforcer, and there are many ways to incorporate that into the work schedule. Taken together, we have many ways to incorporate reinforcement into a virtual classroom.

### Quality Engagement, Focused Attention, and Specific Feedback

A small moment of quality engagement, focused exclusively on the student, free from other distractions and delivered in a way that convinces students that you have nothing else to do and nothing else to think about right now, is a tremendous relationship builder and highly reinforcing. Use the recommendations from the relationship article on Staying Attuned in a Virtual Classroom to comfort and reassure, to encourage, to listen attentively, to keep in mind what

concerns the student and get back to it, and to frequently check for comprehension and mood in a way that convinces the student that you genuinely care. Staff caring is a huge student reinforcer.

([https://kevinplummerphd.com/wpcontent/uploads/Relationship\\_Development-Attunement.pdf](https://kevinplummerphd.com/wpcontent/uploads/Relationship_Development-Attunement.pdf)).

Quality of engagement is increased when you comment on the experience you are having with the student while you are with the student (like a brief commentary). This commenting process also ensures that the student stores the memory of the experience that you want the student to have because their focus is brought to what you consider important. While reading a book to the student you could comment,

"I am really enjoying this chance to read with you. I'm finding out a lot about \_\_\_\_ that I never knew. I'm glad you're interested in this too. I like finding out what you think, what you like about the story. You have some great ideas. Right now we don't have anything else to think about, we can both just enjoy reading the story together."

Reinforcement can be embedded in the enjoyment of the task. So rather than adding external incentives to encourage the student to engage, focus on putting more fun into the task, such as making a game out of it. Reinforcement can also come in the form of relief, so create rest periods within the work. A rest can be a break or time to figure out a riddle or puzzle. Students will engage more if they know their effort is moving them closer to relief or rest. Show this visually so they can see that their effort is moving them through the task (see <https://kevinplummerphd.com/visual-systems-to-increase-motivation-and-support-better-decision-making/>). Long tasks diminish motivation, so break tasks down into a series of short completion points. Completion points are reinforcing in the form of relief as well as a sense of accomplishment.

Feedback can be extremely reinforcing, but it can also be completely void of reinforcement, so take care to deliver feedback in a way that will reinforce the student. There are two common mistakes we make in providing feedback to students that we can avoid in a virtual classroom, 1) feedback is not delivered in timely fashion (sometimes work is not corrected and handed back for days) and 2) feedback is not specific enough. With both mistakes we are diminishing the reinforcement aspect of the feedback, which might be okay in a regular classroom with several other forms of reinforcement available, but we cannot afford to do that in a virtual classroom.

Don't wait until the task is complete to provide feedback. Use the frequency and the timing of your feedback as you would a reinforcement schedule. If you wait too long to reinforce, the reinforcement won't be connected well enough to what you are trying to reinforce.

Create categories of feedback so it is specific enough to be meaningful. "Good job" is a nice thing to say, (and there's nothing wrong with telling students that) but it is not a very powerful reinforcer. What made you say that? What specifically was well done and why was that impressive? Here are some feedback categories that can shape your feedback to be more specific, more relevant, more meaningful and more reinforcing.

Where specifically did the student show an improvement?

Where did the student exceed the expectation?

What part showed a strong effort?

What was particularly creative?

What part showed thought?

What showed patience?

What was difficult, but they didn't give up?

Make a list of these categories and others, so can be thinking of these things while you're working with the student. In addition, consider creating a similar list for students so they can share their own feedback about their work with you.

Consider writing an occasional brief note and send it electronically as a comment. A note shows that you've been thinking about the student and it's likely to be accepted as a very caring, thoughtful, meaningful gesture, and a very powerful reinforcer. The note may mention something you noticed, something that impressed you, something you enjoyed related to your experience with the student.

"I really enjoyed reading your spelling sentences. I could tell you gave each spelling word a lot of thought and put a lot of effort into your writing, because your sentences were very descriptive."

### Success and Accomplishment

Success is a reinforcer in at least two ways. First, it creates a sense of mastery or competency. Feeling capable is highly reinforcing. Second, success also creates a sense of accomplishment and a sense of accomplishment is highly reinforcing.

We should consider ways to document mastery. Think about how motivating video games are to children and why that is. Video games have lengthy missions that are broken into smaller quests, each quest creating a sense of mastery along the way, and players can keep trying again until the small step of mastery is achieved. How can the work be presented in a way to give students small steps of closure and mastery? There are a multitude of ways of doing this, but if we want mastery to be a tool of reinforcement we need to be creative about small enough steps so that the pace of mastery is encouraging rather than discouraging.

It's easy to get discouraged about how much there is to do and how difficult it might be. Furthermore, when students get things done we're encouraged to give them more to do. In this way, it's easy to lose sight of what's already been accomplished, but it's the accumulated accomplishment that often reinforces us to keep going. Levels of accomplishment can be created and shown visually. Certainly, the embedded visual work schedule can show this (items crossed off after completion and the growing list of completed items making the amount that's remaining seem smaller). In addition, keep track of completed assignments in all subject areas, building layers of accomplishment (visually) that can be referenced often to reinforce effort. At designated points of accomplishment (also marked on the visual display) a celebration can be scheduled. Perhaps the student can pick from a choice of games to play with the teacher and take a rewarding and enjoyable rest instead of moving on to the next assignment. Electronic certificates can also be created and dispensed as well.

### Visual Praise and Recognition

Use emojis for reinforcement. There are countless emojis that signify great job, well done, congratulations, yay, wow, confetti, thumbs up, way to go, hands clapping, etc. These can be selected and displayed or sent electronically to students, and some come with sound effects (applause, cheering). In addition, awards of excellence and/or awards of successful completion,

awards for effort or patience or creativity can be created and given out, albeit much less frequently than the emoji reinforcement.