

# Positive Reinforcement Versus Negative Reinforcement

Steven G. Rise, PhD, LCSW-R

This point seems logical and simple, but may be more difficult to apply than one may think. Some times, when angry, parents may say things impulsively and punitively to instruct and correct misbehavior. When used as our first line of defense, children often feel hurt, angry, misunderstood, falsely blamed and resentful. This approach ultimately hardens their hearts against you!

As adults, we know positive reinforcement is much more effective than the negative. This is why we work hard for monetary compensation. Sometimes that pat on the back from ones supervisor creates a greater motivation to be the best; it simply makes us feel validated, appreciated and good! Conversely, how would a supervisor that is always riding you to produce make you feel? Typically this type of management only produces anxiety and a spirit of rebellion—the desire to push back or get over on him. Why should we think the cause and effect would be different with our children?

An example I often use is one that measures the intention of ones heart to determine which method would be most applicable. We live in a country that has many laws and rules. When we live within the constraints of the law, we are allowed to enjoy a clear conscience, freedom and many social privileges. The hope is that people will follow the law simply because it is right, and if everyone tries to live within the limits of the law, society will be a nice place.

But, if I choose to be selfish, disregard the rights of other people or break the law, there are clear penalties. Those penalties range in degree from violations to A felonies, depending on the crime and the motivations of the perpetrator.

Negative reinforcement still needs to be on the back burner, but it should not be the first option we choose. Positive reinforcement is a clear motivator that encourages children to strive to please you from their hearts. It builds up a child's self-image and reinforces doing what is right by motivating him or her to do their best and to be their best from the sincerity of their innermost being. Negative reinforcement creates limits and boundaries by using fear, control, power and threats. Which would you prefer to be used with you? Which approach would reap the improved motivation from the heart to do rightly?