REINFORCEMENT

I. What is reinforcement?

Reinforcement is something that occurs daily in all of our lives. It means getting something that we like. We are reinforced for working by getting a paycheck. We are reinforced for exercising by feeling healthy. We may not enjoy exercising or working but we do it because we know that there will be a reward after we do it. In the field of education, the “rewards” that are given to students after exhibiting desired behaviors are called reinforcers.

**DEFINITION:** a reinforcer is anything that occurs after a behavior that increases the likelihood of that behavior occurring again.

II. Two types of positive reinforcers:

We believe that positive reinforcement is the most important and powerful technique that can be used to teach new behaviors. It is the only kind of reinforcement that we use here at Rosedale and it is usually delivered in the form of praise, approval and attention for appropriate behavior.

There are two types of reinforcers that are commonly used in the classroom. The first type are called primary reinforcers. Primary reinforcers have biological significance, such as food, drink, sleep and shelter. Secondary reinforcers are reinforcers whose value must be learned or established. Examples of secondary reinforcers are praise, social interaction, engaging in preferred activities and getting paid.

III. Hints for presenting effective reinforcement.

A. **Individual Preference** – Before you begin to use reinforcement with a student, you must know what that student likes and doesn’t like.

B. **Satiation** – Satiation results when a reinforcer is used too often.
The student has gotten the same reinforcer so many times that it is no longer reinforcing. You should try to change the reinforcer often so that the student does not become satiated. Instead of saying “good job” every time, you could vary the reinforcer by saying “great work”, “very nice” or “perfect”. You might also choose to use handshakes, pats on the back, or “high fives”.

C. **Range of tone** – Vary the intensity of the reinforcers to match the degree of correctness of the student’s response. If you are using verbal reinforcers, you should vary the tone of your voice from warm and pleasant to very strong and enthusiastic depending upon the degree of accomplishment shown by the student.

D. **Contingency** – The use of reinforcers must be contingent upon correct responses only. If you reward a student for an incorrect response, then it is likely that the student will repeat the incorrect response. It is, however, appropriate to reward attempts at correct responses or responses that are partially correct.

E. **When to Reinforce** – With more severely challenged students, reinforcement needs to happen immediately after the student demonstrates the desired behavior/response. It is critical for the student to associate the reinforcer with the performance of the correct response/behavior.

IV. **Shaping**

One instructional method that can be used to teach new behaviors by using reinforcement is called shaping. As used here, the term shaping is synonymous with the term building. The first time a student practices an unfamiliar behavior, her performance of it may be rough or imperfect. This is true for classroom behaviors, such as participation or paying attention, which may not have been exhibited often by a particular student. Therefore, even a partial or flawed performance should be reinforced during early sessions. As the student becomes more confident and skilled in performing the
behavior, rewards/reinforcers are given for the improved approximations of the target behavior and eliminated for the earlier, less adequate approximations. Gradually, the rewarded performance will closely approximate the target behavior. The student’s behavior is thus “shaped” by the teacher. Behavior can be shaped by using the following guidelines:

1. Find some behavior (e.g. movement) in which the student is currently engaging that is a better approximation of your goal for him than his usual behavior. Reinforce this approximation each time that it occurs.

2. When an approximation has become more frequent for several days, select a slightly better one for reinforcement and stop reinforcing the first one.  
   Note: Each approximation should differ only slightly from the last.

3. Let a new approximation receive many reinforcements before moving on to another one.

4. Never look a gift horse in the mouth. Reinforce any behavior that is better than that which is currently required.

**EXAMPLE:** Paul would be reinforced for lifting his head half-way up with the goal being a full head lift. When he has consistently lifted his head half-way up for several days, weeks, or months, the reinforcement for this behavior would be lessened. Reinforcement would then begin for a higher head lift. By reinforcing his smaller attempts, he can be shaped toward the target behavior.

V. Reinforcement Schedules

When we choose to address inappropriate behavior by giving it attention, we are actually reinforcing it and increasing the likelihood that it will occur again. Your attention, whether positive or negative, should be reinforcing to your student because he/she should
be valuing his/her relationship with you. Instead of telling a student to stop exhibiting a certain behavior, you should redirect the student to choose a behavior that is incompatible with the inappropriate behavior. Be sure to reinforce the student for making a good choice.

Another way a student can be reinforced inadvertently for inappropriate behavior is by confusing punishment with negative reinforcement.

**Definition** – negative reinforcement means reinforcing a behavior by removing an unpleasant stimulus.

**Example**: A group of students is participating in a cooking activity in the apartment. Don, a student, begins engaging in disruptive behavior. The teacher becomes frustrated and directs Don to sit quietly on the couch while the rest of the students continue with the activity. Don complies and stops displaying the disruptive behavior. The next time the class begins the cooking activity, Don immediately becomes disruptive.

The teacher thought that she was punishing Don by making him sit on the couch during the cooking activity. In fact, Don was being negatively reinforced for his disruptive behavior because he would much rather sit on the couch than participate in the cooking activity (an unpleasant situation for Don). The confusion between punishment and negative reinforcement is one of the many reasons that we do not condone the use of punishment here at Rosedale.

**VI. Reinforcement Schedules**

A reinforcement schedule is a pre-determined pattern for administering reinforcement to a student for engaging in a specific behavior. Research and experience have shown that when a behavior is first learned by a student, it is best to reinforce the behavior every time that it occurs. This is referred to as continuous reinforcement. After performance of the behavior has been well-established, it is best to reinforce the behavior intermittently.

There are four types of intermittent reinforcement schedules that are commonly used – two that are based on time
intervals and two that are based on the number of correct responses. When using a fixed interval schedule, the teacher reinforces the student for the first correct response following a set time interval (e.g. every three minutes). A variable interval is the same, except the time interval is varied (e.g. after three minutes, after five minutes, after two minutes, etc…) When using a fixed ratio schedule, the teacher reinforces the student after a set number of responses (e.g. after every sixth correct response). A variable ratio schedule differs from a fixed ratio schedule in that the student is reinforced after a varying number of correct responses (e.g. after the third correct response, the fifth, the tenth, etc…). Research has shown that the use of a variable ratio schedule is especially desirable because it usually results in a very high response rate by the student.