

**Down Syndrome
Advocates in
*Action***



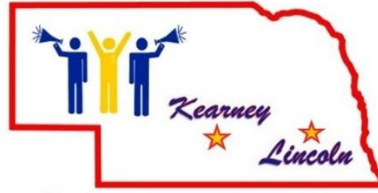
Using Positive Supports to Get Results

A guidance document for
educators and parents of children
with Down syndrome



dsaane.org
info@dsaane.org

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Positive reinforcement is more than rewards

When people hear **positive reinforcement**, they often think of stickers, candy, prizes, or token systems. While those tools can be useful in some situations, **positive reinforcement does not require physical rewards**. In fact, much of the reinforcement that shapes behavior in homes and classrooms happens naturally—through attention, tone, body language, timing, and emotional connection.

Understanding how reinforcement works allows adults to be more intentional about encouraging the behaviors they want to see again.

Many children with Down syndrome are:

- Highly **empathetic**
- Strong **visual learners**
- Very attuned to **nonverbal communication**

They often notice frustration, stress, or impatience even when adults say nothing at all. Facial expressions, posture, sighs, pauses, and tone of voice all communicate powerful messages. Because of this, children with Down syndrome frequently learn to read the emotional climate around them long before they can fully express themselves verbally.

This means adult behavior matters—a lot.

Behavior change starts with adults

One of the most important principles of behavior support is this:

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The only way to change a child’s behavior is to change the behavior of the adults around them.

Children do not exist in isolation. Their behavior is shaped by:

- How adults respond
- What gets attention
- What gets ignored
- What feels emotionally safe

Before asking, “*Why is the child doing this?*” it is often more productive to ask:

- What response is this behavior getting?
- Is the response bigger than the one we give to positive behavior?

Respond, don’t react

Negative behaviors often trigger fast, emotional reactions from adults. Raised voices, repeated instructions, lectures, or visible frustration can unintentionally reinforce the very behavior we are trying to stop.

Instead:

- **Respond** calmly and consistently
- Keep reactions **neutral and brief** for negative behavior
- Save energy and emotion for **positive behavior**

Children—especially those with Down syndrome—will often repeat behaviors that get a *big response*, whether that response is positive or negative.

React to the behavior you want to see again

Positive behaviors should receive:

- Immediate attention
- Warmth
- Specific feedback
- Positive enthusiasm

Examples:

- “You waited so patiently—thank you.”
- “I noticed you tried even when it was hard.”

- A smile, thumbs-up, nod, or gentle touch

These responses are powerful reinforcers. **They tell the child: *This works. Do this again.***

Gentle guidance works better than pressure

Children with Down syndrome often respond best to **gentle guidance**. When adults push, rush, or apply pressure, children may:

- Shut down
- Refuse
- Become passive or oppositional
- Double down on the behavior

This is not defiance—it is communication.

Gentle guidance includes:

- Predictability
 - Clear expectations
 - Calm follow-through
 - Respect for processing time
-

Use “when-then” instead of “if-then”

Language matters.

If-then statements can unintentionally suggest that the child has a choice when they do not:

- “If you clean up, then we’ll go outside.”

Many children default to saying **no**, especially when overwhelmed. If *no* is not an acceptable answer, we should not present it as an option.

When-then statements are clearer and more supportive:

- “When the toys are cleaned up, then we’ll go outside.”

This communicates:

- The expectation is firm
 - The adult is calm and confident
 - The sequence is predictable
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Take “no” out of choices when it isn’t an option

Choices are helpful—but only when both options are acceptable.

Instead of:

- “Do you want to do your work now?”

Try:

- “Do you want to start with the top or the bottom?”
- “Do you want to sit here or here?”

This preserves autonomy **without setting up power struggles**.

This is not PBIS

This approach is **not the same as PBIS** (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports), though there may be overlap in language.

This guidance focuses on:

- Everyday interactions
- Adult awareness
- Natural reinforcement
- Emotional safety

No charts, tokens, or reward systems are required.

Behavior Reinforcement is already happening all the time. The goal is to use that knowledge intentionally

Reinforce what you want to see again

Ask yourself:

- What behaviors do I want repeated?
- How do I respond when I see them?
- How can I adjust my response?

Then:

- Change the behaviors you notice
- Acknowledge them consistently
- Keep your response bigger than the response to negative behavior

Small changes in adult behavior can lead to meaningful changes in child behavior over time.

A note about excitement and reinforcement

Enthusiasm matters.

When a child with Down syndrome learns a **new skill**, it is absolutely appropriate to make a **big deal** out of it. Smiles, praise, excitement, shared joy—these emotional responses help lock in learning and communicate:

This is important. This matters.

Over time, however, it is **crucial to fade the over-the-top excitement** as the skill becomes more familiar and expected. This supports independence and helps prevent children from becoming dependent on constant praise or external validation.

The key is flexibility.

Be ready to **bring the excitement back** when:

- A skill hasn't been used in a while
- Expectations increase
- The environment changes
- The child is tired, stressed, or overwhelmed

Skills that are not regularly practiced may weaken over time. That does not mean the skill is gone—it simply means it may need **short-term reinforcement** again when it is required. This pattern can occur repeatedly throughout an individual with Down syndrome's life.

Reinforcement is not a failure. It is a support

Final thought

Children with Down syndrome thrive in environments where adults are calm, predictable, emotionally present—and appropriately enthusiastic. When we celebrate new skills, fade support thoughtfully, and reintroduce reinforcement when needed, we honor how learning truly works over a lifetime.