





Positive Opposites & Reinforcement

Green Chimneys Parent Training



Housekeeping

- We will be **recording** this presentation – please refrain from using your child’s name or additional identifying information.
 - Please **display your name** (or parent of: child’s name) for attendance purposes, or send via chat to presenters.
 - Please send **questions via chat** to presenters.
 - Please **mute yourself** to limit background noise when not participating in breakout groups or activities.
 - Please send us a private chat or email *if you do not consent* to this being recorded.
- 
- 

Objectives

- Understand what “positive opposites” are
- Explore how they apply to common behaviors
- Learn how DBT concepts like validation, mindfulness, and dialectics support this strategy
- Lead into the concept of reinforcement





*Positive Opposites are:
A behavior management
technique replacing
negative commands
("Don't" "Stop") with
specific constructive
actions, focusing on what
to do instead.*





Positive Opposites

By directing children toward desired behaviors (e.g. “walking feet” instead of “stop running”), they encourage self-regulation, improve cooperation, and reduce conflict by providing clear positive instructions.



Why positive opposites work: They provide guidance: Tells children exactly what to do rather than just what to avoid.

They reduce defensiveness: Positive language prevents the child from becoming defensive, which can happen with constant “no” commands.

Promotes safety: Reserving “no” and “stop” for real danger makes those words more impactful.

Encourages Success: It helps children learn appropriate conduct and provides opportunities for positive reinforcement.





Key Examples of Positive Opposites

*Instead of: “Stop yelling”
Try: “Please use a quiet
voice.”*



*Instead of: “Don’t run”
Try: “Use walking feet”*

DBT Lens: Behavior is Communication

DEAR TEACHER,
I AM NOT LISTENING TO
YOU BECAUSE...

MY CLOTHES ARE ITCHY

I DIDN'T SLEEP WELL

I AM HUNGRY

I AM WORRIED ABOUT
SOMETHING AT HOME

I AM DISTRACTED BY THE
BIRDS OUTSIDE

I
AM
THIRSTY

THE
CLASSROOM IS
TOO HOT

I DON'T
UNDERSTAND

I NEED A FIDGET TOY

I AM OVERDUE A
MOVEMENT BREAK

I AM SCARED YOU WILL
CHOOSE ME TO ANSWER
A QUESTION

EdPsychEd

ALL behaviors serve a function.

DBT says: Look with curiosity,
not judgement. Curiosity creates
space, judgement closes it.

“What need is this behavior
meeting? What is my child trying
to say or get with this behavior?”

Behavior Iceberg

THE BEHAVIOR ICEBERG

Behaviors

(we can see)

Aggression
Raging
Screaming
Low tolerance
Frustration
Verbal abuse

Screaming
Crying
Avoidance
Refusal

Hiding
Self Isolation
Running/fleeing
Violence
Threatening
Loss of self control

Internal Emotional States

(we cannot see)

Nervous
Exhausted
Trapped
Guilty
Scared
Insecure
Disappointed
Envious
Overwhelmed

Angry
Rejected
Alone
Embarrassed
Judged
Unloved
Fearful
Depressed
Anxious

Frustrated
Worries
Attacked
Shameful
Disrespected
Helpless
Disgusted
Offended
Sad



Validation Before Change

Validate their emotions before correcting their behavior. This will help your child feel seen and reduce escalation

EMOTIONAL VALIDATION LOOKS LIKE...

INVALIDATING

Statements



- ✘ "Just let it go"
- ✘ "Everyone suffers"
- ✘ "Yeah I have it even worse"
- ✘ "I bet they did not mean it"
- ✘ "You seem fine"
- ✘ "You are always so sensitive"

VALIDATING

Statements

- ✔ "I am here to listen"
- ✔ "I can see you are upset"
- ✔ "If you want to talk, you can"
- ✔ "How can I support you?"
- ✔ "What do you need?"
- ✔ "That must have been difficult"

Validation ≠ Agreement







Mindfulness in the Moment

In DBT, the “**WHAT**” skills describe what we do to practice mindfulness.

They are:

- 1. Observe:** Notice what is happening inside and around you. Pay attention to thoughts, feelings, and behaviors without trying to change them right away.
- 2. Describe:** Put words to what you notice: name the emotion, the behavior, or the event. (“I’m noticing my frustration rising.” “My child just rolled their eyes.”)
- 3. Participate:** Engage fully in the present moment, rather than being stuck in your head or reacting automatically

These skills help us respond **thoughtfully** instead of reacting **impulsively**. They build awareness and create the space between trigger and response





“WHAT” Skill Practice




To use positive opposites effectively, you must first notice and name what’s actually happening, and that’s where the WHAT skills come in.

Observe: Notice the behavior without judgment.


(“My child is shouting right now.”)

Describe: Label it neutrally and identify what you want instead. (“They’re frustrated and using a loud voice; I want to model calm problem-solving.”)

Participate: Respond in a way that reinforces the positive opposite. Use a calm tone, praise effort, or redirect gently.



When combining the two, their communication becomes less reactive and more effective. It moves the family dynamic from judgment (“bad behavior”) to curiosity and growth (“what skill does my child need right now?”)





Common Challenges




“But, my child knows better...”

It’s easy to feel frustrated when your child repeats a behavior you’ve already addressed. This mindset can slip into judgment (“They’re doing it on purpose”) instead of curiosity





“They don’t listen”

When children ignore directions, it can feel like positive language “doesn’t work. Check for timing, tone, and connection before giving instructions. Reinforce even small attempts at cooperation. The more your child experiences success and positive attention for doing the right thing, the more likely they are to listen next time.



“It feels unnatural to talk this way”

Shifting from “Don’t run!” to “Use walking feet!” can feel awkward at first, especially if you weren’t spoken to that way as a child, and like any new habit, it takes practice. Focus on progress, not perfection. You’re rewiring both your own and your child’s emotional patterns. Over time, this language becomes more natural.





When Positive Opposites Don't Work

Check if the skill was actually taught

Before expecting your child to do the positive opposite, ask:

“Have I actually shown or practiced what this looks like?”

Children don't automatically know what “calm voice,” “gentle hands,” or “asking nicely” means in real time. Telling them the positive behavior is just step one. They also need modeling, rehearsal, and support.

Is it developmentally appropriate?



Sometimes the positive opposite is beyond a child's current ability.

- A 3-year-old may not yet have the impulse control to “ask before grabbing.”
 - A 10-year-old who's dysregulated may not be able to “use a calm voice” until they've first calmed their body.

Is reinforcement in place?

Even when a child knows what to do, they need a reason to keep doing it. Positive opposites are most powerful when they're noticed and reinforced.

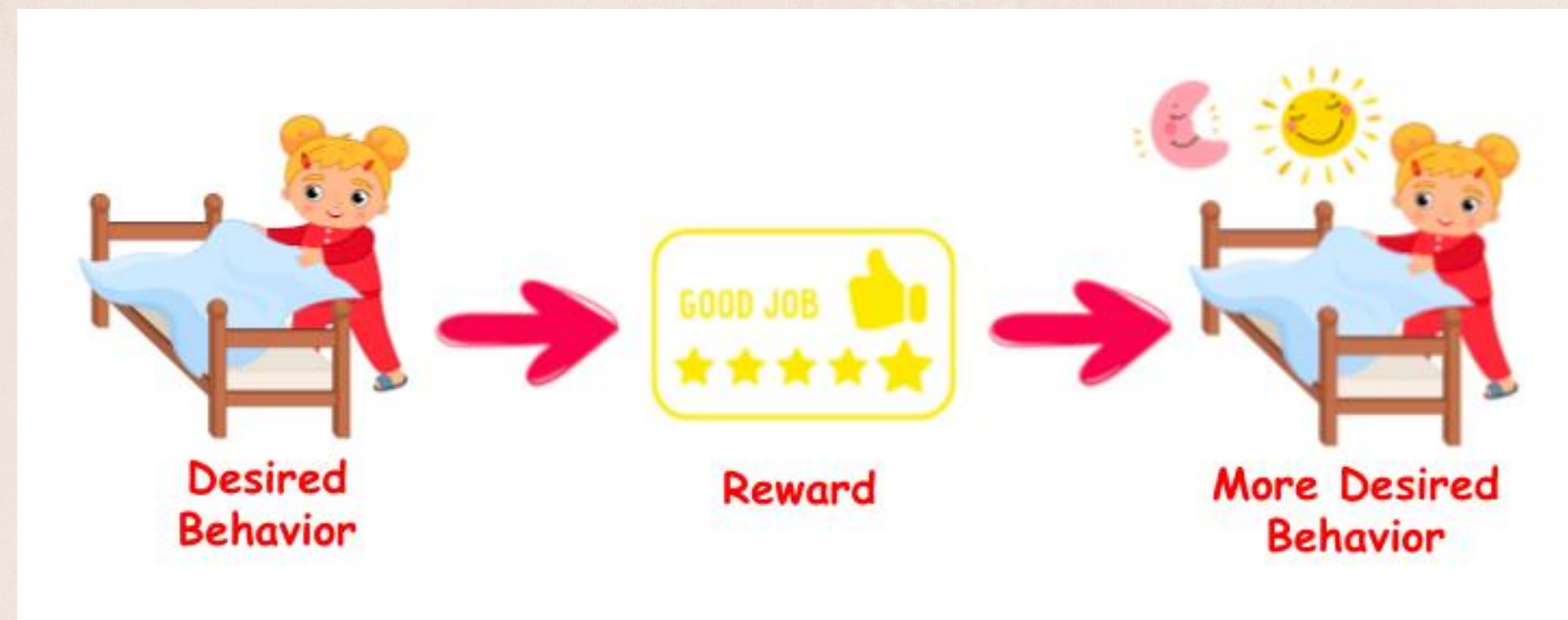
Children are more likely to repeat behaviors that get positive attention. Smiles, praise, connection, or small rewards. Without reinforcement, the effort of change may not feel worth it.



Reinforcement: Helping Skills Stick

We talked about positive opposites: teaching children what to do instead of what not to do.

Now, we'll look at how to make those new skills last through the power of reinforcement, which is a concept that connects with DBT principles of mindfulness, validation, and change.





Why Reinforcement Matters





- Behavior that gets attention, continues.
- Reinforcement = “Noticing and rewarding what’s working.”
- Builds connection, not control.

Reinforcement is about giving attention, praise, or positive feedback when a child uses a skill we want to see more often.

It’s not bribery or manipulation. It’s communication: *‘That worked! Do that again!’*

Reinforcement strengthens both the behavior and the relationship.”







Understanding the Function of Behaviors

There are 4 main functions of behavior:

1. Seeking Escape/Avoidance
2. Seeking Attention
3. Seeking Access to Materials or Privileges
4. Seeking Sensory Stimulation or
Reduction

Note: “Learned Behavior” is behavior that has been reinforced over time. Behaviors are maintained because they serve a function. They work or have worked in the past







Example

What is going on?

- Parent told child to hand in electronics before going to bed. Child does not want to.

Behavior: Tantrum (screaming, cursing)

What might be the function of the tantrum (what is the child seeking)?

- Access to materials or privileges (Electronics)
 - Sensory (Release of frustration, anger)
 - Escape/Avoidance (Bedtime)
 - Attention (Engaging parent in argument)
- 
- 





Supporting Behavior Change

Main Goal

- Replace problematic behaviors with behaviors you want to see. (Positive opposites)
- A child needs Explicit and Direct teaching in how to do the positive opposite. They might not know what you expect from them!

How To

- Pick a reinforcer that matches the function (what are they trying to get?)
 - **CONTINGENCY:**
FIRST the behavior, THEN the reinforcement
- 
- 

Types of Reinforcement

Getting Something Pleasant

- Spending time together
- Reward points
- Money
- Approval
- Acceptance
- Food
- Access to time on electronics
- Activities

Removing Something Unpleasant

- Remove a demand/limit
- Chore pass
- Remove annoying/unpleasant sounds/stimuli
- Press snooze button
- Homework pass

Types of Reinforcement

Token Reinforcers

Token Reinforcers are items that can be exchanged for more valuable reinforcers.

Examples of tokens for children: star/sticker/point charts, coins...

For an adult they might look like: your paycheck, credit score, sky miles, reward points ...



Types of Reinforcement

Behavior Chart

Day by day way of keeping track of and displaying:

1. Positive behaviors accomplished
2. Rewards that can be earned

My Jobs

Day/Job	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Keep My Hands to Myself From Wake Up to Lunch							
Keep My Hands to Myself From Lunch to Dinner							
Keep My Hands to Myself From Dinner to Bed Time							
Take My Medication							


For each box checked, I will earn \$0.10. I can earn up to \$2.80 dollars a week to spend at the dollar store etc.

Types of Reinforcement

Material Reinforcement

Material Reinforcers are tangible items such as toys, clothes, food, prizes, candy, etc.

Reinforcer Menu

ball 	candy 	puzzle 	book 
dolls 	video game system 	computer 	music 
crayons 	iPad 	cookie 	bubbles 
chips 	board games 	trampoline 	drinks 

Types of Reinforcement

Privilege/Activity Reinforcement

- Taking a special trip together
- Playing a game
- Driving
- Staying up late
- Getting out of doing a chore
- Getting extra time on the computer
- Choosing dinner or dessert
- Manicure/Pedicure



Types of Reinforcement

Social Reinforcement

Social reinforcement refers to reinforcers such as smiles, acceptance, praise, and attention from other people. In some cases, simply being in the presence of other people can serve as a natural social reinforcement.





What to Reinforce

Reinforce ANY behavior other than the problem behavior

Behaviors that physically can't be done at the same time as the problem behavior

- Example: In the house by 10pm (you cannot also be out with friends)

Alternative Behavior

Serves the same function as the problem behavior, but it is positive.

- Example: Ask to take a walk outside instead of going outside without telling anyone
- 

How to Reinforce

Reinforce for exhibiting the behavior:

- More or Less Often
 - More or Less Intensity
 - For a Shorter or Longer Duration
- Sometimes behaviors we want to work on happen **all the time!**
- Sometimes complete absence of the behavior is not realistic. Reward a child for doing the behavior less often, rather than not at all

Example: To get through *one* dinner without swearing



When and How to Reinforce





It is important to decide beforehand not just **WHAT** will be reinforced, but **WHEN** a behavior will be reinforced.

Different strategies can be used depending on the goal/purpose of the reinforcement

Continuous schedule:

- Provide reinforcement every time the behavior occurs
- Used for teaching or strengthening a behavior

Intermittent schedule:

- Provide reinforcement **only sometimes** when the behavior occurs
 - Used for maintaining behavior
- 
- 

Putting It Together

Teach the Positive

Opposite

This is the moment where you set the stage. Instead of “Don’t yell,” you say, “Use a calm voice.”

You’re naming the positive behavior clearly and simply.

Remember: kids can’t do what they can’t picture. Your words paint the picture of what success looks like.

Reinforce the Effort

Reinforcement isn’t just praise for perfection, it’s recognition of effort and progress. Instead of focusing only on what’s missing, we notice what’s working, even if it’s small. Use “I noticed you started to calm down before you finished your sentence, that shows self-control.”

Repeat with Curiosity

“Change takes repetition, not just from kids, but from us too.

When things don’t work right away, DBT teaches us to stay curious instead of judgmental.

Ask yourself, “What skill is my child still learning?” instead of “Why aren’t they getting this?”

That curious mindset helps you adjust expectations, stay consistent, and keep reinforcing growth rather than perfection.





Reinforcement Bloopers



Sometimes we inadvertently reinforce behaviors that we do not want to see...

Example: Child tantrums over food choices at dinner and demands a specific item; child gets the special food as a result of the tantrum. The parent gets a little peace and quiet (for now...)

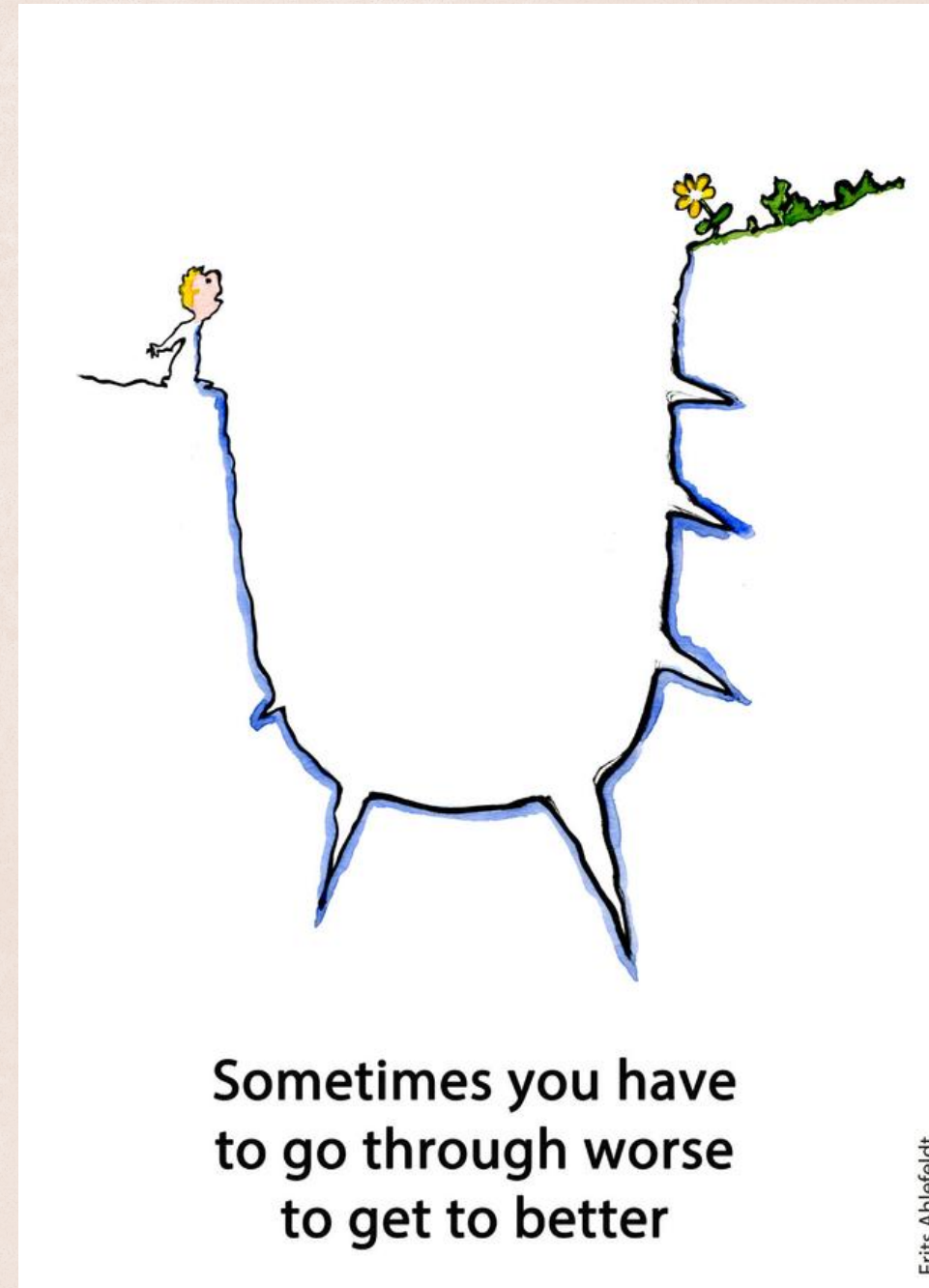
Example: Smiling or laughing at inappropriate behavior



Extinction Bursts

- Removing reinforcement will likely create an *extinction burst*.

- Fading out reinforcement may be a good option when extinction bursts are severe.






Final Thoughts

As we wrap up, remember: you don't have to catch every behavior, just start noticing one small thing your child does right and name it.

**WHAT YOU
FOCUS ON
GROWS**





*We Appreciate
Your Time*

Thank you for coming!