

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER



This Week's Topic:

Forced-Choice Reinforcer Assessment: Guidelines

Introduction

The teacher of a child with severe or profound developmental disabilities may want to motivate the student by rewarding his or her work performance and effort with classroom items, events, or activities that the child likes. Because of communication deficits, though, the student may not be able to make his or her preferences clearly known. The forced-choice reinforcer assessment technique allows the teacher to discover what potential reinforcers a child actually prefers and even permits the instructor to rank those reinforcers in the order of apparent student preference.

Below are guidelines for completing a 'forced-choice' reinforcer assessment (Berg, Wacker, & Steege, 1995). (**NOTE:** Be sure also to view the Reinforcer Assessment Grid [[pdf file](#) on **NASET**], a compact form which contains the main steps of this assessment process.)

1. Collect information about the child's preferences. Use information collected from interviews with the student's teaching staff and care-givers--as well as results of direct observations of the student--to create a list of reinforcers that are likely to motivate the child. Possible choices might include food items, social interactions with specific people, access to toys, and preferred activities (e.g., computer time). **NOTE:** Reinforcers are best when they are feasible, easy to supply, and help to advance the child's educational goals.

2. Prepare for the assessment survey. Narrow your reinforcer list to no more than 6 items or activities that can easily be obtained and given out in a classroom setting. Be sure to have these items on hand for the reinforcer assessment. Choose a time to conduct the assessment when there are no distractions in the room and you can give the student your complete attention. If necessary, use two or more sessions to complete the reinforcer assessment.

3. Allow the student to sample reinforcers. At the start of your assessment, give the child a brief opportunity to sample each reinforcer.

(a) If the reinforcer is a food item, the child is given a tiny taste of the food or beverage.

(b) If the reinforcer is an activity such as working on the computer, the child has 5-10 seconds to engage in the activity.

(c) If the reinforcer is access to a preferred object (e.g., stuffed toy), the student has 5-10 seconds of access to the object.

4. Conduct a 'forced-choice' assessment. You are ready now to move to the next phase of the reinforcer assessment. Randomly pick 2 of the 6 choice-items, present them together in front of the student and allow the child 5-10 seconds to select one of the two. (Depending on what is most convenient, the examiner can hold choice-items in his or her hand, or display them on a table.) **NOTE:** the child may signal 'choice' by touching or picking up an item, looking fixedly at the item, pointing to the item, or engaging in any other behavior that he or she typically uses to indicate preference. If the student selects an item within the time limit, record the child's choice. If the child fails to choose before the time expires, remove the two reinforcer choices and record that the child did not choose an item.

Continue to present sets of two reinforcer choices to the child until all choices have been paired with one another. Record the child's preferences.

5. Rank-order student preferences. Analyze the student's choices to determine the most preferred and least preferred items. You can compute a 'preference percentage' for any item by:

(a) calculating the number of times that the child selected item X

(b) dividing that figure by the total number of pairs in which item X appeared

(c) multiplying the answer by 100 (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Formula to calculate 'preference percentage':

Number of times **item X** selected / total number of choice-pairs that include **item X** = (____ / ____) X
100 = ____ %

Rank-order the child's 'preference percentages' to determine which items the student most preferred and those which the student least preferred.

6. Verify that student choices are true reinforcers (OPTIONAL). Once you have assessed the child's reinforcer preferences (Steps 1-5), you may choose simply to use the 2 or 3 most preferred reinforcers as classroom rewards to increase the student's work effort, improve behaviors, etc. Or you may want to test the reinforcers first in a real-world setting to see if they are actually potent motivators:

(a) Have the child start a task that you would like to motivate them to complete (e.g., matching letters to corresponding picture cues as a pre-reading task). Using a highly preferred reinforcer, give the child brief rewards at several points during a 10-minute period and measure the child's attention to task and work completion. Then repeat the process, this time rewarding the child with the least-preferred reinforcer from your list.

(b) Over several days, repeat the reinforcer trials. (Vary your use of reinforcers, though, so that sometimes you start with the least-preferred reinforcer and sometimes you start with the most-preferred reinforcer.) Then analyze the data that you collected on student engagement during these trials.

If the student shows notable improvements on your goal behavior (e.g., increased attention, more work completion) when completing the task for the preferred reinforcer but does not show the same gains with the non-preferred reinforcer, you can be reasonably sure that you have found a motivating reward that you can use as part of your instructional or behavioral program.

References

Berg, W.K., Wacker, D.P., & Steege, M.W. (1995). Best practices in assessment with persons who have severe or profound handicaps. In A. Thomas & J.Grimes (Eds.), Best practices in school psychology-III (3rd ed., pp.805-816). Washington, DC: National Association of School Psychologists

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