

Operant Conditioning: Primary and Secondary

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover operant conditioning, discussing the different types of reinforcers. You will learn about:

1. Reinforcers
2. Primary Reinforcers
3. Secondary Reinforcers

1. Reinforcers

You may recall that operant conditioning refers to learning that occurs as a result of the consequences of behaviors or actions, which makes it more or less likely for that action to occur. Recall also that reinforcers are anything that follows a response and makes it more likely for that response to be repeated.

There are two different types of reinforcers:

- Positive reinforcers, which are anything that is given to or presented to the subject, like candy or stickers or a high five, that makes it more likely for that subject to repeat whatever action they had previously done.
- Negative reinforcers, which are anything that is taken away from a subject that makes it more likely for them to do what the desired behavior is, such as taking away a grounding punishment from a child to make it more likely for them to do their chores.

Reinforcers can be used in more abstract and complex ways to explain how all of human behavior occurs. This tutorial will explain how some of those higher-level reinforcers help to create a wide range of human behaviors.

There are different levels of reinforcers, which have gradually become more abstract and more complex in the way that they are applied. This tutorial will focus mainly upon positive reinforcers as examples, but keep in mind that negative reinforcers also apply to these concepts.

2. Primary Reinforcers

Primary reinforcers are basic types of reinforcers that are rewarding and desirable in and of themselves.

These are things that people don't have to learn to like, but rather things that people typically innately like.

Primary reinforcers are generally very basic things related to biological needs, such as:

- Food
- Water
- Sex

🔗 **EXAMPLE** If somebody offers you a piece of candy, even as a small child, you would instinctively know that you like it because it's a sweet thing, and you're programmed biologically to love sweet things.



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Primary Reinforcers

A reward that fulfills a biological need/desire

3. Secondary Reinforcers

Secondary reinforcers are reinforcers that people have to learn to value. These are things that are rewarding and desirable generally because they're related to a primary reinforcer. They're not necessarily something that, as a child, you would automatically know that you should like and want.

There are different categories of secondary reinforcers:

- **Tokens:** Things that are not valuable in and of themselves, but can be used by a person to enable them to get primary reinforcers.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** For example, money is a secondary reinforcer because it's not something that you necessarily value in any way on its own, because it's just paper. However, you know that you can use it to buy things like food or other things that you want.

- **Social reinforcers:** Comprise reinforcement from other people, like praise or attention or affection.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Children tend to associate attention with biological primary reinforcers like food or physical contact. However, it's not necessarily something that they innately know they should like or want.

- **Feedback:** Any information that is given to a person about the results of their behavior. This isn't necessarily rewarding in and of itself, but it is a type of social reinforcer.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** If you're playing a video game, elements like the background music or the flashing colors let you know exactly how you're performing in the game. Thus, this feedback improves the likelihood of you modifying your behavior to do what you're supposed to be doing.

It is important to note that secondary reinforcers are not less powerful than primary reinforcers; the desire for

things like money or social attention can oftentimes be more powerful.



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Secondary Reinforcer

Reward that the subject has learned has value to them

Feedback

Information offered to the subject regarding the results of a behavior



SUMMARY

Reinforcers are part of operant conditioning. They refer to specific experiences that follow a behavior, making that behavior more likely to be repeated. There are positive reinforcers and negative reinforcers, each with specific aspects. These reinforcers can be specific or abstract but they are always reinforcing behavior and making it more likely for that behavior to reoccur. A **primary reinforcer** is a reward that fulfills a biological need or desire, whereas a **secondary reinforcer** is a reward that one must learn has value.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Erick Taggart.



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Feedback

Information offered to the subject regarding the results of a behavior.

Primary Reinforcers

Reward that fulfills a biological need/desire.

Secondary Reinforcer

Reward that the subject has learned has value to them.