

## **The Power of Immediate Reinforcement**

A basic tenet of behavioral psychology is that the closer the consequence is to the behavior, the more powerful the effect has on that behavior. For example, if one could eat a sensible nutritious meal, immediately step on the scale and be down two pounds, dieting would be easy. Unfortunately, one has to eat healthfully for an extended period before any appreciable weight is lost. Thus, even though most adults know they should eat better (and exercise more) the delayed reinforcement sabotages their efforts.

If delayed reinforcement interferes with proper behavior in adults, imagine the effect on children. Consider these typical scenes: A pre-school age child is given a reward (or punishment) in the late afternoon, after coming home from school, for some behavior they exhibited in school that morning. A 7-year-old is provided a reward (or punishment) on Saturday for some act they committed on Tuesday. A 10-year-old “loses all electronics for a week” for some misdeed. Finally, a middle-school child misses several assignments and earns lower grades on their report card several weeks later.

In all the above examples the period of time between the behaviors and their consequences is far too long to have any effect. Parents must understand the power of immediate reinforcement and strive to respond to their children’s behavior in a much more immediate and systematic manner.

Larry F. Waldman, Ph.D., ABPP is a licensed psychologist who has practiced in the Paradise Valley area of Phoenix for 32 years. He works with children, adolescents, parents, adults, and couples. He also provides forensic consultations in the areas of family law, personal injury, and estate planning. He speaks professionally to laypersons, educators, and fellow mental health professionals. He teaches graduate courses for the Educational Psychology Department for Northern Arizona University. He is the author of “Who’s Raising Whom? A Parent’s Guide to Effective Child Discipline,” “Coping With Your Adolescent,” “How Come I Love Him But Can’t Live With Him? Making Your Marriage Work Better,” and “The Graduate Course You Never Had: How to Develop, Manage, Market a Flourishing Private Practice—With and Without Managed Care.” His contact information is: 602-996-8619; 11020 N. Tatum Blvd., Bldg E, Suite 100, Phoenix, AZ 85028; [LarryWaldmanPhD@cox.net](mailto:LarryWaldmanPhD@cox.net); [TopPhoenixPsychologist.com](http://TopPhoenixPsychologist.com).