Reinforcement vs. Bribery: What's the Actual Difference?

By Felicia Burgess, MS, BCBA · October 8, 2026 · 13 min read

This is the question every parent asks. The answer matters — and it's more nuanced than most guides let on.

Some people will tell you any reward is a bribe. Others hand out treats to end every standoff and hope for the best. Neither approach reflects how learning actually works.

I'm a Board Certified Behavior Analyst, and reinforcement is the tool I use more than any other. This guide walks you through turning one hard moment in your week, like bedtime or the grocery store, into a reinforcement plan. It includes scripts you can use word for word, a plan you can fill in, and what to do when things don't go smoothly.

The difference in one minute

A bribe is offered during a problem behavior to make it stop. Reinforcement is planned ahead and comes after the behavior you want. The reward can be exactly the same. What your child learns from it is not.

Part	Bribe	Reinforcement
Before (antecedent)	Your child is screaming in the checkout line. You say, "If you stop crying, you can have candy."	In the parking lot, you say, "If you stay by the cart and use a calm voice, you can pick one snack at checkout."
Behavior	Your child stops screaming, for now	Your child stays by the cart and talks calmly
After (consequence)	Candy follows the screaming	A snack follows calm shopping

In the bribe column, screaming is what led to the offer, so screaming is what gets stronger. In the reinforcement column, the deal was set before anything went wrong, and the reward followed the behavior you asked for. The steps below show you how to set up the reinforcement column for a moment in your own week.

Step 1: Pick one hard moment

Start with one situation, not your whole day. Bribes tend to happen in the same few places every week, which means they're predictable. Predictable moments can be planned for.

Good places to start:

- Leaving the park or ending screen time
- Getting dressed or out the door in the morning
- Grocery store or other errands
- Homework
- Bedtime
- Car rides with siblings

Pick the one that happens most often or causes the most stress. Once it's going well, you can use the same steps for the next one.

Step 2: Name the behavior you want instead

Decide exactly what you want your child to do, not just what you want them to stop doing. Describe it so clearly that anyone watching would agree whether it happened.

Too vague	Clear enough to reward
"Be good at the store"	"Keep one hand on the cart and use a talking voice"
"Don't fight at bedtime"	"Pajamas on and teeth brushed by 7:30"
"Do your homework"	"Finish one worksheet page, then show me"
"Leave the park nicely"	"Walk to the car within two minutes of the warning"

Make it something your child can already do on a good day. If the full task is too hard right now, start with a smaller piece, like five minutes of homework instead of the whole assignment. You can raise the bar once they're succeeding.

Step 3: Choose the reward

The best reward is small, quick to give, and something your child actually wants this week. It doesn't have to cost money.

- **Activities:** an extra story, picking the music in the car, five more minutes at the park, choosing dinner
- **Time with you:** a game together, a special handshake, helping you cook
- **Small items:** a sticker, a snack at checkout, a token toward something bigger

A few rules of thumb:

- Match the size to the effort. A small task earns a small thing.
- Let your child help pick from two or three options. What motivates them changes often. Choose rewards that fit your family's values, culture, and budget.
- Skip tangible rewards for things your child already loves doing. Praise is enough there.
- Always pair the reward with warm, specific praise, so your attention starts to carry the weight on its own.

Step 4: Set the deal ahead of time

This is the step that turns a reward into reinforcement instead of a bribe. Tell your child the deal before the hard moment starts, while everyone is calm. Keep it short and say it the same way each time.

Two phrases cover most situations:

- "First ___, then ___." ("First shoes on, then we go to the park.")
- "When you ___, you can ___." ("When your pajamas are on, you can pick the story.")

Here's what that sounds like in real life:

Moment	When to say it	What to say
Grocery store	In the parking lot	"If you keep a hand on the cart and use a talking voice, you can pick one snack at checkout."
Homework	Right after school snack	"First one worksheet page, then 20 minutes of iPad."
Bedtime	At dinner	"When your pajamas are on by 7:30, you get an extra story."
Leaving the park	Five minutes before leaving	"In five minutes it's time to go. If you walk to the car when I call, you can pick the music."
Car ride with siblings	Before buckling in	"If you both keep hands to yourselves the whole ride, you each get to pick a song next time."
Doctor's visit	The day before	"After the shot, we'll get a sticker and a smoothie."

For younger children, a picture or a simple chart helps them remember the deal. You can also ask them to say it back: "What do you get to do when you finish?"

Step 5: Follow through

How you deliver the reward matters as much as the reward itself.

1. **Deliver** it right away. For young children, seconds matter. The closer the reward is to the behavior, the clearer the lesson.
2. **Name** what they did. "You kept your hand on the cart the whole time!" teaches more than "Good job."
3. **Add** your warmth. A smile, a hug, or a high five alongside the reward.
4. **Hold** the line if they didn't earn it. Calmly say, "Not this time. We'll try again tomorrow." No lecture, no second chance in the moment, and no new deal.

Holding the line is the hardest part, and it's the most important. If crying after a missed reward leads to getting it anyway, you're back to a bribe. Be kind and brief, and keep going.

Step 6: Fade the reward

Rewards are scaffolding. They help your child practice a skill until it gets easier, and then they come down. Fading on purpose is what keeps you from ending up with a child who expects a prize for everything.

Once your child is succeeding most days, thin it out gradually. For example:

1. **Reward** every time for the first week or two, until the new routine is solid.
2. **Thin** it to most times, then some times, so your child doesn't know exactly when a reward is coming.
3. **Swap** tangible rewards for privileges and praise.
4. **Let** natural payoffs take over: getting to the park faster, an easier bedtime, feeling proud.

Keep the praise going even after the rewards fade. If things fall apart, step back to the last level that worked and fade more slowly.

Adjusting for your child's age

The steps work at every age, but what they look like changes as your child grows.

Age	What works best	Example
Toddlers and preschoolers	Instant, simple rewards and very short deals. Pictures help more than words.	"Shoes on, then outside!" with a picture of shoes and the park.
School-age kids	Charts, stickers, or tokens that add up to something bigger. They can wait a little longer for the payoff.	Five tokens for homework finished on time earns a family movie night.
Teens	Privileges and a real say in the deal. Write it down together, like a simple contract.	Weeknight chores done earns later curfew on Saturday, and they help set the terms.

At every age, the younger or less experienced your child is with a skill, the faster the reward needs to come. Many children with developmental differences also do best with the instant, visual approach, whatever their age.

Keeping it respectful

Reinforcement is powerful, which is exactly why it should be used with care. A reward plan is meant to help your child build skills that make their life easier. It should never be used to pressure them past their limits.

- **Respect a real no.** If your child is scared, in pain, or overwhelmed, a reward shouldn't be used to push them through it. Address what's making it hard first.
- **Leave harmless differences alone.** Stimming, avoiding eye contact, intense interests, and different ways of communicating aren't problems to reward away.
- **Choose goals that help your child, not just the adults.** A good goal makes your child's life better, not only the household quieter.
- **Never take away basic needs.** Regular meals, comfort when upset, sleep, and your affection aren't rewards to be earned. A treat can be a reward; dinner can't.

If you're not sure whether a goal is the right one, ask yourself: "Who does this goal help most, my child or the adults around them?"

If you're already in the middle of a meltdown

Plans help with the moments you can see coming. For the ones you can't, here's what to do instead of making an offer:

1. **Keep** everyone safe. Move your child or other children away from danger if you need to.
2. **Stay** calm and use few words. "I'm here. We'll talk when your body is calm."
3. **Skip** the new deal. No candy, no screen time, no "if you stop crying."
4. **Notice** the calm when it comes. "You calmed your body down. Thank you."
5. **Plan** for next time. If this moment keeps happening, it's your Step 1.

If you do end up offering something to get through a truly hard moment, that's okay. One bribe won't undo anything. Patterns are what teach, so focus on making the plan the usual way things go.

Your plan

Fill this in for the moment you picked in Step 1. The example column shows a finished plan for bedtime.

Plan step	Example: bedtime	Your plan
The hard moment	Stalling and arguing at bedtime	
What I want to see instead	Pajamas on and teeth brushed by 7:30	
The reward	An extra bedtime story	
When I'll set the deal	At dinner	
What I'll say	"When your pajamas are on by 7:30, you get an extra story."	
How I'll follow through	Read the extra story right away and say what they did	
If they don't earn it	"Not this time. We'll try again tomorrow."	
When I'll start fading	After two weeks of most nights going well	

Try the plan for at least a week before judging it. Change one thing at a time, so you can tell what's helping.

Getting other caregivers on board

A plan works best when every adult follows it the same way. If one parent holds the line and a grandparent gives in after ten minutes of crying, your child learns that crying works with grandma. Parent training programs that build consistency tend to show larger effects (Kaminski et al., 2008).

1. **Share** your filled-in plan with everyone who cares for your child: a partner, grandparents, babysitters, teachers if it applies.
2. **Agree** on the exact words for the deal and for "Not this time."
3. **Agree** on what happens mid-meltdown, especially that no one makes a new offer.
4. **Check in** after the first week. What's working? Where did things slip?

It's fine if other adults have different house rules. What matters is that within your plan, the deal stays the same no matter who's there.

Troubleshooting

"It got worse before it got better."

That's common, and it can be a sign the plan is starting to work. When a behavior that used to pay off stops working, children often try harder for a little while. This is called an extinction burst. Stay calm and consistent, and keep rewarding the behavior you want. If the behavior becomes unsafe or keeps escalating, see the next section. Bursts are less likely when you're teaching a better behavior at the same time, which is exactly what this plan does.

"The reward stopped working."

Your child may be tired of it. Offer a new choice from your menu, or let them pick. Also check the timing: a reward that comes too late, or not every time early on, loses its pull.

"My child keeps asking, 'What do I get?'"

That's a sign rewards are showing up after resistance instead of being planned ahead. Set deals before the moment, not during it, and start fading rewards for routines that are already going well.

"Isn't this just paying my kid to behave?"

Adults work for paychecks, praise, and a good cup of coffee. Wanting something for effort is normal. The goal is to help a skill get easier, then let the reward fade, as in Step 6.

"I have more than one child."

Each child can have their own goal and reward. Fair means each child gets what they need to succeed, not that everyone gets the same thing.

"I've been bribing a lot. Did I mess this up?"

No. Patterns can be relearned at any age. Start with one moment, expect a rough patch, and stay consistent.

When to get extra help

This guide works well for everyday challenges. Some situations call for more support. Talk to your pediatrician, or ask about a referral to a Board Certified Behavior Analyst or another qualified professional, if:

- Your child's behavior puts them or others at risk, such as hitting, biting, running into traffic, or hurting themselves
- The behavior changed suddenly, or came with changes in sleep, eating, or mood
- You've followed a plan consistently for a few weeks and nothing has improved
- The behavior is keeping your child from school, friendships, or daily routines
- You're feeling overwhelmed. That's a reason to ask for help, not a failure

A sudden change in behavior can sometimes have a medical cause, like pain, an ear infection, or poor sleep, so it's worth ruling that out first.

This guide is general education, not individualized treatment advice. Every child is different, and a professional who knows your child can tailor a plan to them.

Why this works

Reinforcement is anything that follows a behavior and makes it more likely to happen again. It's defined by its effect, not our intentions. That's why a bribe backfires: it's still reinforcement, but it follows the problem behavior. The adult gets reinforced too, because the crying stops, so both people get pulled into the pattern. (For more on how behavior analysts think about behavior, see What Is Applied Behavior Analysis? A Clear, Honest Explanation.)

The research supports the approach in this guide, with one honest caveat. Parent training programs that increase positive interactions, build consistency, and have parents practice new skills with their child tend to have larger effects on children's behavior (Kaminski et al., 2008). The caveat: promising tangible rewards for an activity a child already enjoys can reduce their interest in it (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Praise did not show that effect, and in one large review, rewards overall did not reduce motivation (Cameron & Pierce, 1994). That's why Step 3 saves tangible rewards for things that are hard, not things your child already loves.

The rough patch in the troubleshooting section is well documented too. In one review of 113 cases, behavior got temporarily worse in 24% of them, but only 12% when a better behavior was being taught at the same time (Lerman & Iwata, 1995).

Quick reference

Print this or keep it on your phone.

Before the moment

- [ ] I picked one hard moment to work on
- [ ] I know exactly what I want my child to do
- [ ] I chose a small reward my child wants this week
- [ ] I told my child the deal while we were both calm

After the moment

- [ ] I gave the reward right away and named what they did
- [ ] If they didn't earn it, I stayed calm and didn't make a new deal
- [ ] I'm starting to fade the reward once things are going well

The one-line test: If the reward was offered during the problem to make it stop, it's a bribe. If it was set up ahead of time and followed the behavior you asked for, it's reinforcement.

Sources

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