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# **SOCIAL REINFORCEMENT**

**by Zdenko Radic**

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## **Introduction**

Social reinforces are the feedback (praise and criticism) that coaches give, either verbally or non-verbally, to an individual or a team. Praise and criticism refer to particular types of evaluative feedback given in response to a child's performance and express the adult's approval of or disappointment in the child's performance or behavior. Expression of praise or criticism, then go beyond simple provision of performance feedback because they also contain the adult's affective evaluation of the worth or merit of the child's performance. Thus, in an achievement setting, praise and criticism can actually be considered to be rewards or punishment that may operate like other rewards/reinforces (candy, money, toys, trophies, award, etc) (T. S. Horn, 1987).

Positive social reinforcement can be defined as an event following a response that increases the likelihood that the performer will repeat the response again under similar circumstances; similar to a reward. Negative reinforcement can be defined as an event following a response that removes an aversive condition and increases the likelihood that the performer will repeat the response again under similar circumstances. Punishment can be defined as an event following a response that decreases the likelihood that the response will be produced again under similar circumstances (R. Schmidt, C. Wrisberg, 2008).

If children receive consistent, positive social reinforcement of their performance, they develop a high regard for their abilities and competencies, which can cause them to "develop and exhibit other positive attributes and behaviors such as intrinsic motivation, high self-esteem, low performance anxiety, and persistence at achieving task mastery" (T. S. Horn, 1987). Coaches use positive and negative social reinforcement to change behavior and motivate their athletes to achieve their goals.

## **Method**

### **Coach Rebbekah**

Rebbekah, 28, is a full-time PE teacher at Mohave High School where I also work as a PE Teacher. She graduated from MSU and moved to AZ in 2005 to teach. She has been Girls JV Volleyball Coach from her first year here. She played volleyball at high school in Jackson and intramural leagues at MSU.

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## **JV Volleyball Players**

There are 13 players on the team. 12 of them came to practice and one of them was excused due to the family matter. There are 2 juniors, 9 sophomores, and 2 freshmen on the team. The excused player is a sophomore. Most of them have at least 4 years experience of playing volleyball.

## **Procedures**

I asked Rebbekah if it would be OK for me to come and observe her practice. I explained to her my assignment and what I am looking for, and she gave me a green light to come. Usually, they practice together with a freshman team, but that day freshman team had day off, which made it easier on me. I did not have to introduce myself to the team. They all know me from either PE class, or I coached them volleyball at Junior High, or sometimes Rebbekah would ask me to come and help with the practice. So, after talking a couple of minutes with the girls and explaining to them what my job is, they went to practice. I believe that I did not miss a lot of coach's feedback as I could stand close to the volleyball court.

## **Social Reinforcement Classification**

When observing Rebbekah's practice, I put tally marks in one of eight relevant categories: specific positive reinforcement, general positive reinforcement, specific negative reinforcement, general negative reinforcement, specific technical instruction, general technical instruction, keeping control, and organization.

- 1. Specific positive reinforcement** was marked whenever Rebbekah positively reinforced a single girl with remarks like "good try".
- 2. General positive reinforcement** was marked whenever Rebbekah positively reinforced the whole team with remarks such as "good job" but to no one specifically.
- 3. Specific negative reinforcement** was marked whenever Rebbekah negatively reinforced a single athlete. This category included instances such when a player had a bad pass.
- 4. General negative reinforcement** was marked whenever Rebbekah negatively reinforced the team with remarks such as "pick up your game girls".
- 5. Specific technical instruction** was marked whenever Rebbekah instructed a girl with the comments like "follow through".
- 6. General technical instruction** was marked whenever Rebbekah instructed the team about volleyball skills (passing, spiking, or blocking).
- 7. Keeping control** was marked whenever Rebbekah had to correct girls' behavior.

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**8. Organization** was marked whenever Rebbekah had to instruct them in organizational chores like picking up volleyballs, making lines.

## Results

I observed a total of 191 instances of reinforcement. The following is a breakdown and comparison of my findings:

### Total Positive vs. Total Negative Reinforcements

With a total of 97 positive reinforcement and 24 negative reinforcement, the ratio of positive to negative reinforcement was 4.04 to 1. For every 4.04 positive reinforce there was 1 negative.

### Specific Positive vs. Specific Negative Reinforcements

With a total of 54 specific positive reinforcement and 13 specific negative reinforcement, the ratio of specific positive to specific negative was 4.15 to 1.

### Specific Positive vs. General Positive Reinforcement

There were 54 instances of specific positive and 43 instances of general positive reinforcement, resulting in a ratio of 1.25 to 1, so for every 1.25 instances of specific positive there was 1 instance of general positive reinforcement.

### Specific Technical vs. General Technical Instruction

With a total of 29 specific technical instructions and 21 general technical instructions, the ratio of specific technical to general technical instruction was 1.3 to 1. So for every 1.3 specific technical instruction there was 1 general instruction.

### Specific and General Technical Instruction vs. All Other Behaviors

With a total of 50 instances of technical instruction and 141 instances of other reinforcement( 9 instances of keeping control and 11 instances of organization), the ratio of technical instruction to all other feedbacks was 0.35 to 1. So, for every one instance of technical instruction there were 2.8 instances of other feedback.

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## Discussion

In my opinion I observed well organized practice. It was a relaxed yet hard working atmosphere. Coach Rebbekah was very good at encouraging girls, giving them a right type of a feedback whenever needed. The most observed type of reinforcement were positive reinforcement (total of 97), with a ratio of 1.25 to 1 for specific vs. general positive reinforcement. The reason that a ratio was so close, I believe, was the focus of the practice. Entire practice was spent on the transition from defense to offense and from offense to defense. They did about 7-8 different drills for the transition, first with the small groups and later with the team. So, as much as coach would give a feedback to a single player, there was equal number of feedbacks to the team as whole due to a team work and the focus of the practice.

Coach Rebbekah did a lot of motivation during the practice. Her reinforcement was focused mostly on motivation, but a lot of them were motivated and informed. Comments like “nice swing and follow through” were at the same time motivational and instructive as they mixed praise (nice swing) with an instruction (follow through). Girls worked really hard and they looked to coach so many times to assure that their hard work doesn't get unnoticed.

The feedbacks Rebbekah used were contingent on the behavior of the players. As I mentioned previously the girls paid close attention to Rebbekah's feedbacks. Coach was not shy in giving them feedback wherever needed and I could see that after most feedbacks the focus and intensity would go up. Coach would reward them with the positive reinforcement and the girls would respond with harder work. There were instances of negative reinforcement, but Rebbekah never lost her control or raised her voice, so it did not affect the practice atmosphere.

Rebbekah practice ran smoothly. I was impressed with the organization and the transition from one drill to other. There was not much time lost in transition, giving instructions or feedbacks, water breaks. Coach's instructions were short with the key points and not too much explanation. She was firm yet friendly and girls seemed to be comfortable around her.

The relationship between the coach and the girls was a relationship of a mentor and mentees. There was a lot of respect to each other on both sides. The girls saw their coach as a leader, someone to look up, and to follow. Rebbekah also showed respect to the girls and her voice and body language where in the sync. She never lost her temper, was relaxed during practice, but kept the practice under control. Although, I know Rebbekah personally as a coworker, I think that I am being very objective in stating that I observed a very efficient practice.

I currently coach boys' soccer, and although I consider myself a patient coach and like discipline, keeping under control 20-22 teenage boys seems sometimes almost impossible. I probably could get some good tips from Rebbekah about control and organization.

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