

Using Rewards as Part of Speech Practice Sessions

It may be helpful in some situations to introduce structured rewards or reinforcement into the speech practice sessions. Rewarding or reinforcing a behaviour can be a powerful way to encourage more of that behaviour. When considering generalization of speech sounds, rewards could be used to reinforce or encourage the use of certain speech sounds, for cooperating with a speech practice session, or for specific behaviours as part of the session, such as joining the session appropriately or staying seated for a set period of time. A reward does not need to be big or expensive; often the most effective reward can be verbal praise, stickers or ticks on a chart. To make rewards as effective as possible there are a number of things to bear in mind, as set out below:

- If the child is happily working with the facilitator and seems to be enjoying the practice sessions, it may not be necessary to use any formalized system of reward or reinforcement. In this case the intrinsic motivation and the naturalistic feedback in the form of facial expressions and praise may well be sufficient.
- Before you start using rewards, it is important to be very clear in your own mind about what behaviour you are wanting to see more of. It is important to know what behaviour specifically you are going to reward and, by extension, what behaviour will fall outside of this and will not lead to a reward. Where possible, it can be helpful for the child to understand this also. For example, if you plan to use a reward to reinforce the behaviour of the child remaining seated for a 10-minute session, it will be important to decide in advance what will be the limits of this – will you reward the behaviour of sitting for 8 minutes, 9 minutes, 9½ minutes? If you plan to use a reward to reinforce the behaviour of the child cooperating with joining you for the session, it will be important to decide in advance what will be the limits of this – are you looking for the child to join the session the first time they are asked?
- It is important to make sure the reward is 'contingent' on the behaviour. In other words, the child needs to clearly understand exactly what behaviour is being rewarded. It can help to make this as clear as possible if you say it aloud. For example, rather than just saying "Good girl, well done", you might say "Good girl, that was a brilliant b sound, well done".
- It can be important to give the reward as close as possible, in terms of time, to the behaviour occurring. This makes the strongest connection between the behaviour and the reward and makes sure that a different behaviour does not get reinforced by mistake. For example, using verbal praise or a sticker as a reward immediately after a successful speech practice session is likely to be more effective than promising to reward the child with a new comic at the weekend.
- When deciding on what to use as a reward, the important thing is to use a reward that will motivate the child. For example, some children may be motivated by a quiet sticker, others may be motivated by a lot of verbal praise. It may be necessary to vary the reward if the child starts to lose interest. For example, if you are using stickers in a book or on a chart, then vary the type of sticker, or switch to a different mark such as using ticks, colour in shapes, invite the child to choose a mark, design a colourful chart together to record progress and so on.
- Where children are not motivated by stickers or marks alone (perhaps older children), you can use a two-tier system of reward. For example, they could be rewarded at the time with a sticker or a tick, but they know there is an added level, for example once they have earned six ticks, they can choose a comic, choose what is for dinner, or choose a film for the family to watch.

- For rewards to be effective you have to be prepared not to give a reward when the child has not shown the behaviour you want to see more of. It is really important not to give the reward just because you feel it would be mean not to. This will make it unclear what behaviour is being rewarded and will make the process of rewarding or reinforcing a behaviour lose its power.
- Once a reward has been earned, do not take it away, even if the child behaves in a naughty way. Use a separate, unrelated strategy for managing difficult behaviour. If a reward can be taken away, it will lose its power to reinforce the desired behaviour. Furthermore, the enjoyment of the session is likely to be lost, along with the collaborative, working together approach.
- You do not need to reward every time the desired behaviour occurs. Rewards will still be powerful in encouraging more of a certain behaviour if they are used intermittently.
- You can decide to reward improvement in a behaviour or progress in the right direction. Doing this means you will need to gradually and regularly reset the threshold for receiving a reward. For example, if you want the child to cooperate with a 10-minute speech practice, you might start off by rewarding them for achieving 5 minutes. Once they are achieving this more often than not, you would increase the threshold to 6 minutes to achieve a reward, and so on. To set the initial threshold for reward, aim for something that the child is likely to achieve initially 50% of the time.