

Designing Effective Reinforcers: What Every Teacher and Humane Educator Should Know

By Lynn Loar and Hilary Louie,
Evelyn Pang, Michelle Ma,
Maya Rankupalli, Geoffrey Pott

When a humane educator visits a school, the children usually pay close attention and behave well because they are interested in the animal the humane educator brings. Versed in relevant topics like responsible pet ownership and positive reinforcement, humane educators provide a positive experience for their students and are reinforced by the students' participation and good behavior. Because these presentations tend to go well and be met with enthusiasm, humane educators may be generally pleased and not give focused attention to what specifically the children find reinforcing. We probably have a list of things we do, say and give that we believe are reinforcing to children – but has any of us asked an actual child what's reinforcing and why?

Psychiatrist Irvin Yalom and his pseudonymous client Ginny Elkin co-authored a book called *Every Day Gets a Little Closer: A Twice-Told Therapy* (NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1974) about their separate perceptions of their sessions together. They agreed that each would write a session summary after each meeting, but not share them until six months had gone by. The book publishes first Yalom's summary, then Elkin's of the same session, going session by session over the course of treatment. It's a fascinating read – if you didn't know the design, you wouldn't believe they were writing up the same meetings. There's virtually no overlap in their insights or remarks. Yalom talks about the clinical techniques he uses, the breakthroughs and changes he observes, how he chooses his words and interventions and gauges their impact. His client remarks on none of this. What matters to her are things like his showing up each week on time, his paying attention, and his incidental smiles and pleasantries (which he doesn't mention).

I try to reinforce with enthusiasm, descriptive praise and a dollop of hoopla the achievements large and small of my students. I point out accomplishments as they occur; write, email and mail notes of congratulations, letters to parents and teachers touting achievements; mark gains with certificates, candy, outings and whatever else I think will be reinforcing. How much difference does all this stuff make? Would other things matter more?

To find out what children find reinforcing, I've recruited five of them to co-author this article. Our names appear in the byline in descending order of age (with four decades separating the first and second author!). All of the authors have several years of experience with clicker training, tagging and reinforcers. Together we're going to figure out what children find reinforcing, but first, I'd like my co-authors to introduce themselves:

Photo: Ayumi Meegan



HILARY: Hi, I'm Hilary Louie and I'm in my third year of high school. I started clicker training at the age of 8 and have loved it ever since. Some of you may know me from another article I wrote for the *Latham Letter* about using clicker training and incremental steps in everyday life ("I just came to pet a dog: What clicker training taught me about everyday life," *Latham Letter*, Winter, 2009, pp. 6-7).

Photo: Ayumi Meegan



EVELYN: Hello, everyone. My name is Evelyn Pang, and some of you may know me from the book *Good Dog! Kids Teach Kids about Dog Behavior and Training* (Wenatchee, WA: Dogwise Publishing, 2008, www.dogwise.com) which I wrote with my co-author Hilary Louie. I started clicker training when I was 8 years old and I enjoyed it and stuck with it.

Photo: Tom Boat



MICHELLE: Hi! I'm Michelle Ma. I first encountered clicker training when I was ice skating, at the age of eleven. Besides being a 7th grader, I'm also a writer. Some of you may know me from the brochure that I wrote, along with Maya. It was about clicker training and how it could be applied to ice skating. With sports, it's called tagging. I also wrote a letter to Hilary and Evelyn about their book. It was published in the Winter, 2009, issue of the *Latham Letter* on page 7.

Photo: Barbara Boat



MAYA: Hi, I am Maya Rankupalli. I'm 10 years old and in 4th grade. I started clicker training and tagging with Lynn when I was 7. Michelle and I wrote a brochure about it called "Tagging: A New Way to Learn to Skate." It teaches you how to earn points and what to do with them. You can find it under materials for children on the Pryor Foundation's web page, www.thepryorfoundation.org. It's also included in the DVD *TAGs on Ice*. * (See page 11.)

Photo: Vivian Sam



GEOFFREY: My name is Geoffrey Pott and I am 7 years old. I am in first grade and have been ice skating with Lynn since I was 4 years old. I have three years' experience with tagging and the point system.

What's a reinforcer and why is it reinforcing?

Michelle: A reinforcer is something the learner likes; it encourages the learner to repeat a behavior to earn more reinforcers. Treats reinforce learning. For example, I give my dog a small treat for sitting down. The treat reinforces the dog's lesson. She knows that if she sits down again, she'll get another treat. That is how reinforcers work. Kids also like treats, especially candy.

Geoffrey: I like getting money. I can buy what I like with it. I also like getting candy because it's sweet.

Michelle: I like getting money for reinforcers because then I can save it up and buy what I want. Small snacks are yummy and serve as a small treat. My younger brother likes candy and toys as reinforcers. At his young age, he is not that concerned with saving money or cashing in points. Rather, he prefers something he can get instantly, like candy. Toys are important to him because he likes to play with them a lot. He especially likes Pokemon cards.

Hilary and Evelyn: We both started clicker training with dogs and learned about them as we continued teaching them. The dogs that we trained had different reinforcers. Some dogs liked cheese; some liked chopped hot dogs and some liked dried liver. It doesn't always have to be food though; some dogs enjoy toys more than food.

When we play the clicker training game, it doesn't always have to be

with dogs or other pets. Humans can enjoy the game too. We get candy as our reinforcers.

There are other reinforcers that we work for. At school, we do our homework and study for tests to earn good grades. Teachers also give us extra credit for doing extra work. Friends or family members may also give us food, drinks or other treats. All these reinforcers drive us to work harder than we normally would. It's reinforcing when a teacher asks us for help with chores because it makes us feel that the teacher trusts us and believes that we are responsible. This not only makes us feel better about ourselves but also gives us a better opinion of our teacher.

Lynn: Parents and teachers often ask me – with frustration, exasperation or dismay – when they can stop giving candy and other rewards for good behavior, things they think their children should be doing anyway. I hear a different message, “I’m busy and this takes a lot of time and attention. How long must I do this?!” Breaking things down into small steps, marking each with a click or tag, and following that click or tag with a treat is how you teach a new behavior – coming when called, riding a bicycle, putting clothes in the hamper. You don’t need to do this for the same behavior once it’s learned, but you’ll want to do this with every new behavior to make learning fun and easy. You’ll also want to do this so that you come across as a generous and involved teacher, or, as Hilary and Evelyn put it, so your kids will have a better opinion of you.

Step back from your hectic and pressured daily routine for a second. If something serious is bothering one of your children, if that child feels threatened or at risk in some way, wouldn’t you want that child to come to you for help? Children won’t unless they’re sure they can count on a patient and supportive reception. They don’t distinguish between being brushed off because their point is trivial and you’re busy and how you would respond if they said, “Somebody tried to lure me into a car after school today.”

“The candy matters” is the general consensus of all the children I’ve worked with over the years. This is a currency that has meaning and value to them. You can substitute pennies or points to be cashed in for other things (there’s a good list at the end of Michelle and Maya’s brochure), but candy adds a celebratory and playful feeling the other treats don’t.

Hilary and Evelyn completed their first brochure, “Teaching with a clicker: How to train people and animals with a clicker and treats” (posted in English, Spanish and Chinese on www.thepryorfoundation.org in the section on materials for children), shortly before Karen Pryor’s first Clicker Expo conference, which happily for us was held in nearby Berkeley. Karen and I planned to give the girls a reinforcing thrill – the girls would distribute copies of their brochure to the participants, then be called to the front of the room, be given clickers and congratulations by Karen, and applause by one and all. Karen and I put thought and planning into this celebration and it went well. The girls seemed pleased and the applause was generous. Because I was teaching a workshop inappropriate for children immediately before, my colleague Elaine

McKellar took Hilary and Evelyn to Denny’s for lunch and then brought them back for their ceremony. Evelyn later remarked that the best part of the day was lunch at Denny’s.

Written reinforcers:

Certificates, letters (to you, about your accomplishments to parents, grandparents, teachers), emails. What makes written reinforcers meaningful?

Geoffrey: I like the letters and emails to my teachers and my parents because they make me feel good about myself.

Maya: I get to see what I have done well and so do the other people the letter or email got sent to. Also, I feel good about me, and the people who see the certificate or letter can be proud of me too.

Michelle: To me, the design of the certificate doesn’t really matter, but it’s very nice if it is pretty. It’s meaningful if you get a certificate for something you worked hard on and believe you did well. Certificates remind you of your accomplishment and can make you feel proud of yourself. I like letters to me or my family (mostly from teachers writing about good grades). A letter, something that the other person took time to do, seems more personal. Written reinforcers are meaningful because they express feelings in words.

Hilary and Evelyn: There are many different types of certificates. Some are printed from a computer.

We like the ones that don't look mass produced, ones that are embellished with beautiful designs or made out of fancy paper. Once we got a plaque! That people took time to make unique certificates tells us that people care about our work and that we accomplished a lot.

Lynn forwards emails from people saying why they liked our book. This lets us see the different kinds of people who are reading our book even though we may not know them. Knowing that our book is getting people's attention gives us a sense of accomplishment.

We like getting mail specifically addressed to us. We feel very excited because kids rarely get mail. Getting letters with our names on them makes us feel older, more mature and important. We also got to make rules about our mail – that other people (our parents and siblings) could not open our mail!

What about praise as a reinforcer?

Michelle: Reinforcers could be praise, or encouragement. These words are meaningful and effective. As long as they are sincere and well meant, I will be happy. Oh, and smile! A smile is worth a thousand words.

Hilary and Evelyn: When people say, "You did great" or "Good job," it's nice, but adding how we did well, giving us the details of why they like the work, is better. For example, many people have said they like our book and brochures because we explain principles of clicker training in clear, straightforward, simple language.

When we hear the reason, we understand the kinds of things they look for and can expand on so they'll like the next thing we do even more.

We believe that teachers should pay attention to what they say to their students and their tone of voice. Spoken praise is good if the teacher speaks without sarcasm. Kids can hear the encouragement in the tone of voice. It's OK for teachers to be strict. Sometimes it's a good thing so students don't think the teacher is a push over, but it's also important for teachers to show their soft side and be approachable so students will open up and talk. If teachers always maintain a strict façade, it makes it difficult for kids to walk up and talk to them.

Writing as a reinforcer

Lynn: Michelle, you wrote letters to Hilary, Evelyn and Karen Pryor asking permission to use their materials as sources for your writing. How reinforcing was it to write these letters? To get their answers? How reinforcing was it to complete your brochure? To get congratulatory letters from Hilary and Evelyn? To see your writing in the DVD *TAGs on Ice*?

Michelle: When I got the letters back from Hilary, Evelyn, and Ms. Pryor, I felt that I had accomplished something, that I was important enough for them to write back and give me their answers. I'm really glad that they let me use their materials as sources for my brochure. When I completed my brochure, I felt relieved that it was done. I also learned a lot in the process of writing my brochure. The letters from Hilary and Evelyn were very encouraging and happy. Of course, when I saw my writing in the DVD, I felt proud of my work. I knew that I was the one who wrote it.

Hilary and Evelyn: We felt a sense of accomplishment when our first brochure was published. We were happy to know that we were able to pass our work on to others. We also liked letting people see our project, and watching them brag about how good we were as writers and how good our future would be. Hearing this encouragement from relatives, friends and even strangers gave us motivation to continue our writing. Now, we've published several articles in two languages, English and Chinese, and a book! (These articles are included in "Materials for Children" at www.thepryorfoundation.org.)

The point system

What makes a point system effective? When do you choose to cash in your points? For what?

Geoffrey: I like the point system because I make money with it and it sort of makes me do stuff I am supposed to do. I like to save my points and then cash

them in when I have a lot of points. I wait till I have a lot of points because I will get more money and then spend it on stuff I really, really like.

Michelle: With a point system, I learn and have fun at the same time. The fun makes it worthwhile for me to keep learning. The points that I get I can save for a bigger prize.

When I ice skate, there is a point system. For something done right, you get points. Later you can exchange the points for treats (snacks, drinks, money, little prizes, play time ...).

Lynn: How do you earn points?

Michelle: Well, let's say you're trying to skate backwards. In the beginning, for even just the tiniest move in the right direction you would earn one tag and one point. The teacher clicks the tagger (something that makes a short sharp sound) whenever the learner does something right. Then when the learner gets more experienced, the tags get less frequent, so the learner has to do more steps to earn the tag and point. This continues until the learner gets the movement completely correct.

I really like this kind of system because it is effective. The system works because there is a source of motivation for all learners, the points. And, the learners have the choice of cashing in their points whenever they want (they can build up their number of points, spend a little at a time, or spend their points all at once) and for whatever they want, as long as they work out an agreement with their parents/teachers/guardians.

Earning money is a big reinforcer

Michelle: Money definitely is a big reinforcer that has a huge impact on kids and adults (of course, it wouldn't work with animals). Getting money for writing the brochure was a big reinforcer. It motivated me to keep writing because now I know that there might be a reward waiting for me.

Maya: My brother likes candy, computer games and movies. Usually, I don't use my money to buy candy or toys. I like to get money to donate to charities. When I got \$25 from the Pryor Foundation for writing the brochure, I donated it to Penny Power at my school. The goal of Penny Power is to help children who don't have as much as we do or children who are sick. Last year we donated money to buy mosquito nets in Africa to protect people from mosquitoes that carry malaria. This year our goal was to give clothes to children who didn't have good clothes through the organization My New Red Shoes.

Hilary and Evelyn: When we were young, we got a small amount of money from our parents and we only got it because we were being good kids. Our

parents usually offer us an allowance when we do chores like washing the dishes and doing the laundry. This is similar to having a job. But when we do a real job, we earn money.

Joan Orr included our first brochure, "Teaching with a Clicker: How to Train People and Animals with a Clicker and Treats," in her DVD, *Clicker Puppy*,** which teaches children to clicker train puppies. Joan pays us royalties for including our brochure in her DVD. When we got our first royalty check for more than a hundred dollars we were really excited because we knew we earned it with hard work over a long time. We also worked harder on our projects when we knew that we were being paid. Earning money gave us motivation to continue and pushed us to do better work in the future.

We expanded this material into our book with Lynn's help. *Good Dog! Kids Teach Kids about Dog Behavior and Training* came out in the fall of 2008 with great success. We received our first royalty checks from Dogwise, our publisher, a few months ago.

About a year ago, we agreed to work on the Pryor Foundation's web site, www.thepryorfoundation.org, and helped Lynn make a new website for a different project, www.safehelpinyourhome.org.

For all these projects we earned money and a large amount of experience.

Lynn: Hilary and Evelyn have not only earned money for writing, which has made them take writing seriously, but have become good business women. They know the terms *royalties* and *honoraria* because they

have earned them. They have created savings accounts for college.

One royalty check arrived a few days before Hilary and her family were taking a trip to China to visit relatives – Hilary’s first trip back since she was a toddler. Hilary asked her mother to deposit her royalty check in the bank before their departure and was under the impression that her mother had done this on the eve of their trip. Instead, two days later when all the relatives were assembled to see what sort of young lady Hilary had turned into, Hilary’s mother pulled the check from her wallet and showed it to each person, explaining in Cantonese how much money the check was for and that Hilary had earned it through writing. Then 13-year-old Hilary told me, “It was SO embarrassing!”

Having recovered from her acute embarrassment, Hilary now reflects on earning money for writing and other academic endeavors:

Hilary: When we reach the end of our education, we’ll get a job and earn money. With a better education, we’ll get a better job with better pay which leads to a better life.

Lynn: So, there you have it. Be generous, sincere and specific. Use candy and money as reinforcers, even if you prefer other things. As Maya shows, children move on from candy, pennies and toys to more mature and altruistic reinforcers when they are ready. Clicker trainers know to let the learner set the pace; let your students develop this broader perspective at their own pace and don’t begrudge the candy and pennies in the meantime. Notice and point out individuality in learning styles and incremental

achievement. Attention to detail is more effective than vague platitudes, and the kids will notice that you made the effort – for them. And, write to them, about them, and with them. Have them write back, write about their accomplishments, write to each other. Start by asking your students to write about the reinforcers they’d like to earn and how they want their accomplishments to be noted. Ask them to supplement the suggestions we’ve made in this article with other things they’d like as reinforcers. Send us your feedback (email to l.loar@comcast.net) and we’ll reinforce your writing by responding promptly and specifically.

*** TAGs on Ice** is a documentary by Lynn Loar and Libby Colman about an ice skating program for children with special needs and their families. It can be purchased from www.clickertraining.com, www.Amazon.com, and at the Winter Lodge in Palo Alto, CA where the program takes place.



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** *Clicker Puppy* is available from www.dogonesafe.com.