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Enhancing Reading Fluency with Reinforcement
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Despite our son's elementary school being new and spacious, the staff being competent, the vast majority of parents being at least from the middle-class, and there being no more than 18 children per teacher: Noah had trouble reading.

As a fourth grader, Noah read English with great skill by having mastered an enormous sight vocabulary and using thematic cues to guess words. Noah's problem, however, was reading Hebrew.

Our family only spoke English, so Noah's understanding of Hebrew was limited. His ability to read Hebrew depended, consequently, almost entirely on mastering relations between Hebrew symbols and sounds. For whatever reason, Noah had trouble mastering phonics.

On learning of Noah's problem, we scheduled a serious family meeting. We told him that he would be reading Hebrew with supervision, during the summer, for fifteen minutes daily. Summer came but Noah repeatedly postponed reading. During our infrequent meetings he read slowly and responded emotionally to constructive feedback.

I became tired of nagging and, instead, negotiated a contract. I first asked Noah to time me as I read a section of Torah. I read an average of 41 words correctly with less than one error per minute.

I told Noah that I would similarly measure his rates as he read Torah for 15 minutes daily and offer correction until he could read 40 words per minute. Noah felt that this goal was too high. So, we lowered the target rates to 35 words read correctly with less than one error per minute. Should this target be achieved I promised to buy Noah something very reinforcing: a personal computer.

The first sessions under the contract were painful. Noah read only about ten words correctly per minute with about two errors per minute. He angrily noted that it had taken me 46 years to read 41 words per minute so, therefore, the 35-word target was unreasonable. When he cried and refused to read timing continued; complaining only wasted time. For the first six sessions he, not surprisingly, only averaged about 13 words correctly read per minute with an error rate of about one word per minute.

Gradually his emotional behavior subsided and his rates improved. For the next six sessions he averaged about 17 words correctly read per minute with an error rate of less than one word per minute. He now began asking to read

twice daily and insisted on graphing his reading rates. Session numbers were plotted on the X axis and a line horizontally crossing the graph marked the target rate of 35 words.

Although his reading rates did not uniformly improve, within 12 sessions he was correctly reading 20 words per minute. Now he remarked on having earned the keyboard, and later the hard drive, video monitor, and eventually the computer's motherboard and CPU! I asked why he was suddenly so eager to improve his reading. He smiled and responded, "The sooner I reach the target, the sooner I get the machine!"

During our 20th session, Noah read 38 words per minute with less than one error per minute. He had achieved the goal he had previously thought unattainable in a mere five hours.

I, of course, do not have control data so that I cannot prove that the contract enhanced Noah's Hebrew reading rate. For example, I did not try to simultaneously teach Noah to read Russian without the contract being in effect. From his reluctance to study Hebrew, however, I believe I know how that data would look.

Some say that reinforcers undermine the intrinsic value of learning. Reinforcement, however, increased Noah's reading rate by a factor of four! Noah, now a fluent reader of Hebrew, completed eighth grade with an A- in Hebrew.