
The Reinforcement Matrix (RMX): A behaviour management and change strategy for children, young people and adults caring for them

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Introduction

Few would argue that living with, raising or working with children and young people is both a hugely rewarding, and at times challenging, experience requiring all the resources of energy, clarity and self control that we – the adults – can muster. As a parent to teenage sons I am constantly amazed at my capacity to, at times, not follow through on the good advice that I readily dish out to others.

As you read this, you may be a parent wanting to be more consistent in your parenting – or wishing your partner could be more collaborative and consistent with you in their parenting. Or, you may be a caregiver, counsellor, educator, social worker or youth and community worker looking for an effective framework to work to, or wanting to be able to offer something more to parents who are struggling. If the hat fits for either of these propositions, then read on. Chances are, you will find what follows very helpful.

The Reinforcement Matrix or ‘RMX’ is a behaviour management and change strategy designed to effect positive change for children and teenagers and for the parents/caregivers and professionals living and working with them. It is built around the notions of ‘keep it simple, strengths-based, memorable and practical’. Let me say categorically at the outset that this is not an instrument designed to give adults more ‘power and control’ over children and young people, to be applied like some sort of robotic formula. Rather it is a proactive approach to working with them, designed to promote more positive relationships, enhanced understanding, greater self control, and increased responsibility for all parties involved.

The idea was first developed as an initiative at the Lower North Youth Justice Residential Centre in Palmerston North, a Statutory Residence run by the New Zealand Department of Child, Youth and Family Services.¹ The Reinforcement Matrix was adopted as a behaviour

¹ I would like to acknowledge my colleague and former manager of this residence, Graeme Munford, for providing the training opportunity that led to the Matrix’s development.

management strategy in the residence and a particular form of this model with an implementation strategy was incorporated into their procedures manual.

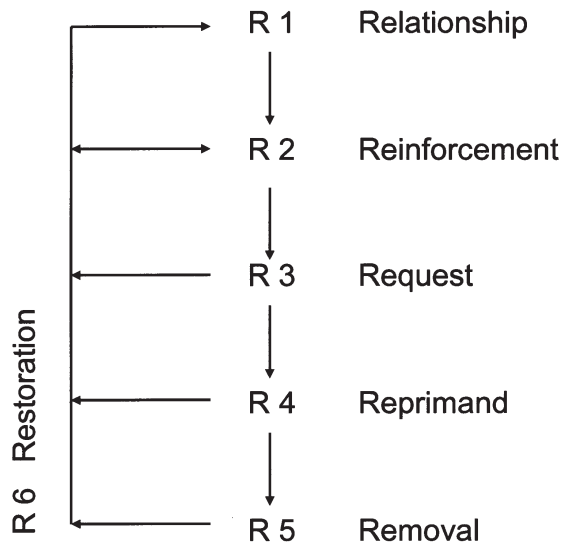
Having developed the model for this context, I then began a process of thinking how it could have applications into other contexts. I began to incorporate the Matrix into my supervision work with professionals working with children and young people, into my training work with youth orientated professionals (particularly in Singapore where I have had the opportunity to run social work training for the last 13 years), and also introduce it into work I was doing with parents in my private counselling practice.

Section A – the model

At this point it will be helpful to refer to the diagram of the model (Figure one).

Figure one. The Reinforcement Matrix.

The Reinforcement Matrix (A Behavioural Management and Change Strategy)



Notes:

- Do most of R1 and R2, least of R4 & R5 (imagine an inverted triangle imposed over top of the model).
- Always return to R 2 and then back to R 1 – following higher-level intervention.
- Removal may be physical removal to 'time-out', but may also mean removal of privileges.
- Each stage has a range of interventions and strategies within it
- Consistency by caregivers and other professionals is the key to making it work.

The diagram gives an overview of the whole model and each of the stages within it, and the notes at the bottom provide some further details on how to interpret and use it. Note that it contains six stages – all ‘R’ words – and shows a progressive and cyclic process between the stages following the arrows. At any stage there can be a shift to the left and then a flow back up to stage (2) – Reinforcement, and then back to the all-important stage of Stage (1) – Relationship. It is the cyclic and flow aspects that led to the ‘Matrix’ title.

Most interaction with young people and children is best done in stages (1) to (3) – this is the stuff of daily interaction, cooperation and maintenance of relationship. When things have to progress to stage (4), Reprimand and stage (5) Removal, there needs to be some ‘rules’ governing how this is done so that the best and most positive outcome occurs.

In the RMX stages (3) to (5) it is very important that parents and professionals manage their emotions effectively by staying calm, not getting emotionally involved where appropriate and keeping a ‘governor’ on their own level of emotional arousal. Failure to do so will mean that we buy into ‘the game’ that is being played out.

Following one of these ‘higher level’ interventions there needs to be an all important stage (6) – Restoration process – where things are normalised and the child or young person who has been reprimanded or removed, gets ‘brought back in’ to the flow and the normality of whatever is going on.

Ideally this ‘Restoration’ should involve some positive return to the Reinforcement Stage (2), then a normalising of or further development of positive Relationship (R1). Note that this is reflected in the flow along the arrow lines.

Findings

The feedback to date has been very encouraging. Where I have introduced this model to supervision clients, several have come back and told me that it was a very useful model in their work with their own clients. A number of parents have told me that they are stopping to think where they are on the Matrix in a particular interaction with their children, and are learning to work more within the three ‘lower stages’ (i.e. R1-R3). In my training courses in Singapore, a common outcome is that participants recognise a cultural characteristic where they identify families mainly operating in the three ‘higher’ intervention stages (stages 3-5), without any Restoration stage. In this context, a lot of emphasis is placed on learning to actively operate in the first three stages. Again, anecdotal feedback suggests there can be dramatic changes occurring – sometimes immediately – when a simple tool like this is implemented.

In one quite dramatic example, an ethnic Malay father went home from the workshop and utilised the strategy with his son who had just been caught truanting and stealing. Rather than the usual intense angry exchange with his son, this social worker father decided to deliberately utilise the ‘RMX’ strategy. In managing his emotions, keeping track of where he was on the Matrix and working towards restoration, he was able to engage with his son and create dialogue, which ended up with both of them in tears and reconciling several years of conflict and resentment towards each other.

Theory that informs the Model

There are a number of different theories that inform the Matrix model. Firstly the notion of reinforcement comes from the classic school of behavioural therapy (Skinner, 1938; Howe, 1987; Beck, 1989). Cognitive-behavioural therapy (Kuehlwein, Rosen, 1993) is a derivative of the behavioural school, and a number of tools from this base are included throughout the Matrix. A good example can be found in the second stage in the use of debriefing tools. The features PIGS (Problem with Immediate Gratification) and SIDS (Seemingly Irrelevant Decisions) come from this intervention milieu, and were borrowed from programmes run by the Community Probation Service (see further on in descriptors for a more detailed explanation of these tools).²

A strengths-based approach (Saleeby, 1997), Turnell and Edwards (1999) is interwoven throughout the model and is reflected in the strong emphasis on building and maintaining relationship, understanding the 'positions' (beliefs, strongly held values and meanings) of children and young people, the use of goal setting, identifying and building on the strengths of young people and their families, and finding and noticing exceptions to problem behaviour.

RMX descriptors and questions

In the material which follows, you will find in Section B a set of detailed descriptors of how to implement the model in a practical sense. The only variation is that in (R1) Relationship, the descriptors necessarily highlight different behaviours and boundaries for parents as separate from professionals.

The final segment – Section C – comprises a set of questions to get RMX users thinking about their own experiences of being parented, mentored and disciplined. Participants in a workshop are guided through a range of practical experiences that assist them to 'bed in' the ideas and concepts behind the RMX model. I have found this to be very important as so often our own techniques come out of, or are a reaction to, our own experiences. These powerfully moulding experiences usually have to be recognised before they can be replaced by a different strategy.

So – onto the stage descriptors.

Section B – RMX Stage Descriptors

EITHER

(R1) Relationship – FOR PARENTS

Positive relationship with a child or young person is THE most important element in a behaviour management or change strategy.

Shown in (for some examples but not exclusively) – using their name warmly (where possible), facial expression, making frequent eye contact, attentive conversation, appropri-

² "Straight Thinking" Programme, Community Corrections Service, Ministry of Justice, NZ.

ate physical contact (i.e. hugs, play fights, holding hands, a kiss, a hand on the shoulder as you are walking along); daily interaction around meals, routines, chores, sports, travelling to get to school or other activities. Making memories by doing a range of activities together, ranging from simple-everyday to 'one-off' adventurous things. Spending quality one-on-one time together or going on 'a date', doing something that interests the child or young person (food and/or shopping usually work well!).

OR

(R1) Relationship – PROFESSIONAL CAREGIVERS, EDUCATORS

Is rapport with the young person, not friendship.

Friendship is reciprocal (meeting needs of both), rapport is not. Rapport is positive regard, empathy, warmth and respect – while maintaining professional boundaries.

Shown in – using their name, facial expression, appropriate eye contact, conversation, appropriate physical contact (shoulder touch, handshake etc), daily interaction and case-work. Be aware that if you are needing a young person to respond to you just so that you feel good – you are over the line in terms of professional boundaries!!

Note: From here on – descriptors apply to all users of the Matrix Model

(R2) Reinforcement

We reinforce positive behaviour/co-operation.

There is a saying 'Change doesn't happen unless it's noticed'. If a child or young person is doing something good that you want them to continue doing (e.g. playing well with a sibling, helping get in the shopping, feeding a pet, without being asked), we need to notice and affirm this. If we do, the behaviour is much more likely to continue. So, we catch our children and young people doing 'good stuff'. We use their names often, we notice and comment – being discreet as we do this (i.e. not drawing unwanted attention from peers). Even though we think it's cool, the child or young person may not receive it as such if they feel this will incur ridicule or the risk of being 'shamed' by their peers.

We use appropriate rewards and incentives to reinforce the positive behaviour, such as going to a movie, staying up later, getting their favourite fast food for a meal.

We challenge and address inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour – appropriately.

Following a 'Reprimand' or 'Removal' (see following stages), we may use directed discussion around an incident (e.g. using questions, making clear brief points, using the DESC³ Model (Bower and Bower, 1976), listening to their point of view, and working towards a win/win outcome where possible.

Reinforcement may also take the form of a debrief around choices and decision making.

³ DESC – An effective and widely used model that assists the user to challenge behaviour appropriately and ask for change. DESC stands for: Describe the specific situation; Express feelings clearly; State what you would like to have happen(ed); Consequences – framed positively.

It may also involve making an apology and a process of forgiveness. An apology should include not only 'I'm sorry', but also 'I was wrong...'

PIGs and SIDs

These terms are borrowed from cognitive-behavioural intervention and mean – Problem with Immediate Gratification and Seemingly Irrelevant Decisions.

These concepts are very useful for debriefing incidents, particularly with older children and adolescents who have more highly developed reasoning and problem solving abilities.

Here are some examples:

- PIG I want that playstation now, so I steal the money.
I want that block of chocolate, so I take it from the fridge without asking.
- SID I decide to go with my friends to drink alcohol after school instead of going home, and I end up getting arrested for breaking and entering a building.
I don't do my homework and tell my parents I have none – and end up getting a detention for it.

It has been my experience that young people readily pick up these concepts and relate well to the terminology. Having a 'PIG' or doing a 'SID' somehow seems to capture the oftentimes impulsiveness and rawness of their experience in a concrete way.

Whatever form reinforcement takes, we need to remember that for children and young people (as for all of us), any attention is better than no attention at all. If we don't get wise to the way reinforcement works and use some deliberate strategies to harness it, it will happen anyway – but sometimes in ways that are less than desirable or useful in their outcome.

(R3) Request

We request that children and young people co-operate in behaviour/ activities. How we say it is just as important as what we say.

(Name) Please... help/ go/ start etc....Thanks.

Remember to use appropriate distance and closeness, angle, eye contact, gestures, relaxed posture and smile if appropriate.

(R4) Reprimand

We challenge inappropriate behaviour with firm statements and requirements for cooperation and sometimes, compliance. For example:

(Name) - I have asked you to (.....) . I want you to do that now. If you don't do this then there will be consequences.

It is very important to have the consequences clear ahead of time. Do not threaten or abuse. It is very important that the person in doing the reprimanding manages their emotional and verbal responses appropriately. It is like having a governor on a motor to manage the revs

and the speed of the vehicle. The verbal challenge to the behaviour and the consequences need to match the seriousness of the behaviour being challenged. You don't use a mallet to kill an ant!

Posture, position, distance, appropriate eye contact, angle and support are very important at this stage. There is an old saying I heard from a prison officer 'Run to a fire – walk to a fight'. Meaning, we have to determine the seriousness of the situation and act accordingly. The theory behind it is if it is life threatening, it deserves emergency action. If it is a fight, the parties will usually want to be pulled apart after 30 seconds. In the same way, we need to approach a situation with the positive outcome in mind. It is helpful to approach a situation calmly but firmly, and from the side rather than front on. Being 'angle on' while still close, allows for a way out, both physically and emotionally. In certain situations it also can facilitate a safe distance in case someone lashes out.

(R5) Removal

Removal can be done in many ways. It may involve removal of privileges, or removal from involvement in a particular activity, or removal from a social situation with peers or family members, or placement in 'time out' for a specific period of time, i.e. 3 to thirty minutes, taking the age, stage and response of the child or young person into account. The removal should be to a place that is both physically and emotionally safe.

Some examples of removal of privileges can include such things as: TV time; access to the internet (this has huge currency these days with the popularity of 'blogging', 'YouTube', online chat rooms and downloading music); access to the phone including mobile phones; gaming technology including X-Box, PS2, 3 or whatever. All such 'Removal' should be done for a defined and realistic period so that when it's over, it's over – and everybody knows it.

At times, the imposition of the removal of some privilege may be strategically delayed. For instance while the consequence is spelled out at the time with the young person, it may be that the carrying out takes place the next day when they are deprived of a visit to a friend's house, or being transported somewhere they want to go. The young person will quickly learn that you mean business if you are consistent and follow through. Adults working with young people sometimes have to learn to control their impulse to act immediately, and instead bide their time – knowing that they have a fair and reasoned plan to follow through with a consequence.

Be aware that in the case of physical removal, isolation from the group or event should be the consequence in itself, as opposed – in the main – to taking the person to a place to administer discipline or a punishment. Choosing the environment for 'time out' is very important. There was a time when being 'sent to your room' was a punishment and had a negative connotation for a child or young person. Chances are now it would be a negative reinforcement as so many children and adolescents have a sophisticated array of entertainment gadgetry in their bedrooms, such as TVs, Playstations, X-Box, Gameboys and connection to the internet. In such circumstances, what was isolation is now likely to be taken as a reward!

Access to texting (SMS) on a mobile phone or internet chatrooms and email can be particularly unhelpful during times of physical (R5) Removal. Teenagers will often text/talk

to friends who will agree that they are being unfairly treated, thereby working against the whole process. Part of the Removal is that the young person thinks about what has happened.

(R6) Restoration

Ideally, the removal should be for a specific and limited period of time, eventually resulting in the young person being reintegrated back into the normal setting. This can be done either once appropriate reinforcement stage (R2) activities have been undertaken, or else these can be left to a later stage when emotional state, attention and the setting are more appropriate.

Bear in mind that the arousal effect from adrenalin released with anger/frustration/anxiety and other strong emotions, can continue to affect a person for 60-90 minutes after the event or incident. These chemicals invariably affect cognitive processing and rational judgement – both in the child/young person and in the adult dealing with them!

Section C – RMX Stage Questions

(R1) Relationship

1. What, if any experiences, do you have of an older person developing a positive relationship with you when you were a child or teenager?
2. What are the three best ways that you have learnt to build relationships with young people? Where did you learn these?
3. What do you consider to be the most important aspects of building a relationship with a child or young person?

(R2) Reinforcement

1. In what ways are you now aware that you might be reinforcing negative behaviours in children and young people?
2. In what ways are you aware that you are actively reinforcing positive behaviour in children and young people?
3. What are the best three strategies that you have learnt for positive reinforcement and who/where did you learn them from?

(R3) Request

1. What is your usual style of making requests of children and young people?
2. In what contexts are you likely to be making requests of children/young people and what are some of the things you might say?
3. If you could change one thing about the way you make requests, what would that be?
4. What is the best example where you have seen or heard someone making effective requests of a child or young person? What did they say and how did they say it?

(R4) Reprimand

1. How do you normally give a reprimand, and when would you most likely do this?
2. What normally has happened for you to use a reprimand with a child or young person?
3. How effective would you rate your current way of giving reprimands? How would you like it to be different?

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4. What are the most effective techniques that you have learnt and where did you learn them?

(R5) Removal

1. What sort of removal strategies have you used (e.g. removal of privileges or rights, time-out, exclusion, isolation, etc)?
2. In what ways have you experienced 'Removal' in your own life? How effective was it in promoting changed behaviour?
3. What do you consider to be the purpose of various types of removal strategies, e.g. punishment, discipline, boundary setting etc?
4. How do you think the different types of 'Removal' change with the age and developmental stage of the child or young person to whom it is being applied?

(R6) Restoration

1. What is the purpose of Restoration, and what effect does it have on the child or young person for whom it is happening?
2. When is a time in your life that you have experienced Restoration for yourselves? What message did it send to you?

Conclusion

The 'Reinforcement Matrix' is a work in progress and is obviously not setting out to be the definitive answer for every situation and context. It is a tool designed to assist parents, caregivers and professionals to develop a reasoned, positive and proactive approach to their parenting, behaviour change and behaviour management of children and young people. The intended result is that the 'giver' is impacted as much by it as the 'receiver', resulting in positive outcomes both for the adult and the child/young person.

Let me know if you find it useful. Contact me via my website at www.changemaker.co.nz

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