

The Token Economy

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Token economies can be an effective way to manage contingencies in schools, home and the community. They are systems in which a child earns “tokens” that can be exchanged for a variety of preferred items. (Sound familiar? Our monetary system is a token economy!) They can help children with and without disabilities learn to follow rules, complete certain tasks and engage in appropriate social behavior. While token economies are similar to more general reward systems there are certain guidelines that one has to follow in order for them to be effective in increasing desired behavior.

Guidelines to Token Economy

1

Pick and define the target behavior

What behavior do you want to see decrease and what behavior is going to be used to replace the undesired behavior? For example, targeting task completion for a student that is not completing work during class. After the target behavior is chosen, it is time to operationally define the behavior. In order to define a target behavior properly, it must be clear, objective, and complete. It is important to have the target behavior operationally defined that way everyone involved knows exactly what they are looking for and what the schedule of reinforcement is.

2

Identify what to use as a token

First, make sure it is tangible. The tokens have to be delivered immediately so it is important that whatever is chosen as the token is practical. Some common items that are used for tokens are check marks, stickers and money. Though these are definitely not the only items that can be used. When picking out the perfect token, make sure not to pick something that can be counterfeited or that they can receive from somewhere else.

3

Identify the backup Reinforcers

What is a backup reinforcer? These are the items that the child will earn when they exchange their tokens. When selecting backup reinforcers, it is important to choose items or activities based off of the child’s preferences. You can develop a list of preferred items by conducting a preference assessment with the child. Make sure the items are only available when being purchased with the tokens.

4

Set up the Reinforcement Schedule

The initial schedule of reinforcement should be high; meaning the child can earn the backup reinforcers quickly. This allows them to be successful with the system early on. However, we don’t want to keep this schedule forever. Once the child has been successful you want to require more for the same number of tokens.

5

Token Exchange Rate

Start by determining the maximum number of tokens that can be earned. Once this has been determined, set some prices for the items being used as backup reinforcers. For example, smaller items are worth less tokens than the bigger items.

6

Time and Place for exchanging the Tokens

- 1) Create a token store- Choose a designated area to keep all of the items chosen from the preference assessment and allow the client to enter the store once they have earned the predetermined number of tokens they need to purchase a reinforcer.
- 2) Reinforcer Menu – Create with the backup reinforcer items that the client can choose from. You can use pictures of the items or if the client can read, make a list. This gives the client a visual of what they are working for.

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