

## What Is It?

The **token system** is a strategy where the student receives a token after completing a specified academic task, or using an appropriate behavior. Anything that is visible and countable can be used as a token. The token itself has no value, but is traded in for a backup reinforcer after a specific number of tokens are earned. Backup reinforcers are meaningful items, activities, or privileges such as food items, extra recess, toys, etc. The success of a token economy relies on the appeal of the backup reinforcer.

## When to Use It

- Token systems can address challenging behaviors that are maintained by escape from demands. A token is provided upon completing a specified task. The task could be an entire worksheet or a few questions, depending on the student. Using a token system provides reinforcement for something the student may find difficult.
- Token systems may also address challenging behaviors that are maintained by attention. The student gets attention when the token is provided and when the tokens are exchanged for the backup activity. Token systems can also be used as a part of a reinforcement system. Specific student behaviors, such as a replacement behavior, can be supported and reinforced by providing a token when those behaviors are observed.
- A token system can also help teach students how to work toward short and long term goals (i.e., end of the week computer time).
- A token system can teach students to monitor their own progress in class. They see that they are earning tokens for expected participation and behavior.

## Steps to Implementation / How to Do It

	1. Determine which behavior you are addressing with the token system.
	2. Select what the token will look like (check marks, stickers, smiley faces).
	3. Define the backup reinforcer. To determine what the student will be working toward or earning access to, assess the student's interests and motivation.
	4. Determine the criteria for success: determine how many tokens are needed to earn the backup reinforcer (i.e., 10 pennies, 5 stickers, a 10-hole punch card, 7 pieces of a puzzle, etc.).
	5. Provide an instruction or an opportunity to respond. When the student responds correctly, the teacher awards a token, or places a token on the student's token board.
	6. Continue this process until the student has earned all the tokens. After the student has earned all of the tokens, the teacher provides the backup reinforcer.
	7. After the student becomes familiar with the system, introduce new goals.
	8. Over time, increase the criteria for earning tokens (i.e., the number of correct responses).

## Example

Omar completes most assignments readily, however, he has a tendency to make fun of other students in class. This occurs most frequently when the teacher is paying attention to the other students. The FBA determined that the function of the teasing is to gain attention from Omar's teacher. To decrease the teasing, the team decides to implement a token system as part of Omar's behavior intervention plan.

Mr. Singh decided that he will use a raffle ticket as the token because Omar showed interest in the tickets during a class-wide game earlier in the year. He determined that Omar's possible reinforcers include reading and playing games on the class tablet.

Mr. Singh explains the token system to Omar. Every time Omar wishes to make a comment, he is expected to raise his hand and wait to be called on. Properly raising his hand and waiting to be called on will earn him 1 raffle ticket; 7 raffle tickets will be rewarded with 15 minutes of game time with his teacher at the end of the school day.

Mr. Singh records the occurrences of Omar's hand raising behavior. He also remembers to provide high verbal praise and attention for correct responses. He checks in with Omar at the beginning of each school day and discusses goals. Mr. Singh also meets with Omar at the end of class to go over his progress that day. He plans to increase the criteria for earned game time after Omar earns 5 tickets in 3 consecutive days.

## How to Increase Effectiveness

- Assess students' interests to determine what will motivate them to succeed in class.
- Meet regularly with a student to make sure the student understands the expectations of the academic task or new behavior. (DO NOT teach the student to use the token system at the same time.)
- Work with students to establish the criteria for meeting goals (i.e., 10 pennies = computer time).
- Include behavior specific praise and debriefing with students at the end of instruction.
- Monitor token systems and create new goals after previous goals are met. (Students may become satiated with reinforcement when tokens become too easy to obtain.)
- Use with other behavior support strategies and systems, such as differential reinforcement systems.
- Remember that some students will need to access tokens and backup reinforcers more frequently than other students. That is, one student may need to earn enough tokens to receive his backup reinforcer every 30 minutes. Another student may be able to access the backup reinforcer once per week.

## Resources

Higgins, J. W., Williams, R. L., McLaughlin, T. F. (2001). The effects of a token economy employing instructional consequences for a third-grade student with learning disabilities: A data based case study. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 24(1), 99-106.

Klimas, A., & McLaughlin, T. F. (2007). The effects of a token economy system to improve social and academic behavior with a rural primary aged child with disabilities. *International Journal of Special Education*, 22(3), 72-77.

Myles, B. S., Moran, M. R., Ormsbee, C. K., & Downing, J. A. (1992). Guidelines for establishing and maintaining token economies. *Interventions in School and Clinic*, 27(3), 164-169.