

What Is It?

A token economy is a strategy where the child receives a countable object or symbol (a token) for engaging in an activity appropriately. The token has value when exchanged for something meaningful to the child (i.e., the “backup reinforcer”). This could include items, activities, or privileges such as taking on a designated role in the classroom (e.g., line leader, circle time assistant). The success of a token economy relies on the appeal of the backup reinforcer.

When to Use It

- To reduce challenging behavior that serves to avoid requests from teachers or other adults.
- To reduce challenging behavior that results in attention.
- To teach children how to work toward short- and long-term goals (e.g., end of the day access to a special iPad game).
- To teach children to monitor their own progress (by monitoring the number of tokens earned).

Steps to Implementation / How to Do It

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| <input type="checkbox"/> | 1. Determine which behavior(s) to target with the token economy. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. Select what the token will look like (check marks, stickers, smiley faces), keeping the child's preferences in mind (e.g., a child that loves cars could earn car stickers). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. Define the backup reinforcer. Assess the child's interests to determine what the child will be working toward or earning access to. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. Determine the criteria for success: Determine how many tokens are needed to earn the backup reinforcer (e.g., 5 stickers, a 10-hole punch card, 7 pieces of a puzzle). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. Provide opportunities for the child to earn tokens. Give the child a token or place a token on the child's “token board” when the child successfully participates in the targeted activity and/or exhibits the targeted socially appropriate behavior. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. Continue this process until the child has earned all tokens. Provide the backup reinforcer after the child has earned all tokens. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 7. Increase the criteria for earning tokens as the child experiences success with engaging in the activity or exhibiting the targeted socially appropriate behavior (e.g., increase the number of minutes the child participates in the routine prior to earning a token). |

Example

Omar readily participates in most routines across his daycare program. However, he has a tendency to push other children. This occurs most frequently when the educator is paying attention to other children during snack time or during diaper changing/toileting times. A functional assessment of Omar's behavior determines that the pushing results in attention from Omar's educators. To decrease the pushing, the team decides to implement a token economy as part of Omar's behavior intervention plan.

Because Omar showed interest in raffle tickets during a game earlier in the year, Mr. Singh decides to use raffle tickets as tokens. He determines that Omar's possible reinforcers include a large parachute (frequently used during circle time) and dancing to music.

Mr. Singh shows the raffle tickets and talks about the token system with Omar. Every time Omar wants an educator's attention, he can gently tap the educator on their arm or leg and say the educator's name. Tapping the educator and saying their name will earn Omar 1 raffle ticket; 5 raffle tickets will be rewarded with 5 minutes of a dance party with an adult from the daycare program, and any interested peers.

Mr. Singh records the occurrences of Omar's gaining adult attention behavior. He and the other educators remember to provide high verbal praise and attention when Omar appropriately seeks adult attention. Mr. Singh checks in with Omar at the beginning of each day and reminds him of the token economy. He plans to increase the criteria for earning dance parties after Omar earns 5 tickets across 3 consecutive days.

How to Increase Effectiveness

- Assess children's interests to determine what will motivate them. Work with children to establish the criteria for meeting goals (e.g., 5 stickers = time with a special toy).
- Provide behavior-specific praise when delivering tokens (e.g., "Great job sitting at snack time with your friends!").
- Monitor token economies and create new goals after previous goals are met (children may become satiated with reinforcement when tokens become too easy to obtain).
- Combine with other behavior support strategies and systems, such as differential reinforcement.
- Remember that some children will need to access tokens and backup reinforcers more frequently than others in order to experience success.
- If using a visual token board, make sure the board includes a spot to place tokens and a picture of the backup reinforcer. This helps remind children what they are earning.

Resources

Ackerman, K. B., Samudre, M., & Allday, R. A. (2020). [Practical components for getting the most from a token economy](#). *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 52(4), 242-249.

Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence. (n.d.). [Resource gallery of interventions: Token economies](#).