TOKEN ECONOMY FOR MIDDLE-AGED CHILDREN: A PARENT GUIDE

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What is Token Economy?

A token economy is an intervention used to reduce problem behaviors in children. It is a "system of behavior management in which tangible or token reinforcers…are given as rewards and later exchanged for back-up reinforcers that have value in themselves" (Kerr & Nelson, 2010, p. 414).

Token reinforcers could include:	Rewards could include:
· Points · Plastic chips · Metal washers · Poker chips · Play money · Stickers	· TV/computer/game usage · Stickers · Free time · Chore "pass" · Later bedtime · New items (e.g. clothes, games, books, etc.)

A token economy system can be used in numerous settings, as long as attention can be focused on the child's behaviors. Parents and teachers can adapt a point or reward system in schools, at home, or in the community.

Numerous problem behaviors could be addressed within a token economy system. Keep in mind, there is a wide range of behaviors that could be considered problematic in settings and that could be addressed with a token economy, including but not limited to:
 · Bickering/talking back/teasing
 · Not following rules/direction
 · Bedtime behaviors
 · Opposition

Glossary

- **Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence (ABC) assessment**- A direct observation technique used to identify potentially functional relationships among behaviors and environmental variables
- **Antecedent**- A stimulus that precedes a behavior
- **Assessment**- The purpose of gathering data to assist in making decisions
- **Behavior**- positive or undesired actions of a child
- **Economy-** A system driven by patterns of earning and spending
- **Efficiency-** The rate at which something is done with ease or effort
- **Evidence-based practices**- Practices addressing academic and social behaviors that are supported by research evidence that has been validated by professional groups
- **Frequency (rate)**- Amount of times a behavior occurs during an observational period
- **Intervention**- Systematic involvement with a student to improve his or her performance socially, emotionally, or academically
- **Levels system**- A method of differentiating hierarchically any aspect of an individual's performance (e.g., in a token economy or for assessment purposes)
- **Modeling**- Demonstrating a desired behavior in order to prompt an imitative response
- **Reinforcement**- Terms of a reinforcing consequence or removal of an aversive stimulus dependent upon the occurrence of a behavior, resulting in an increased or maintained rate of the behavior in the future

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Case Study
Before the intervention
"Tommy", age 14, is oppositional to his parents. He says "no", yells, and does not listen when his parents ask him to do anything. For example, when being asked to turn down the TV, Tommy says no. When asked to clean his room or take out the trash for his chores, Tommy says no. Even when asked to sit at the table to eat meals, Tommy says "no".

Tommy's parents feel Tommy has control of the house, as he will not listen to their requests. The parents usually end up yelling at Tommy as a result of his refusal of requests and combativeness. Tommy's parents feel frustrated and feel like they have a poor relationship with their son. They feel like Tommy's behaviors will continue to get worse and think it is time to address these problem behaviors.

The Intervention
Our goal is to implement a reward system that will help decrease/change Tommy's problem behavior. Tommy's problem behaviors need to first be identified.

Step One. Identify problem behavior. Parents should observe the child's behavior and decide what the problem behavior is. In Tommy's case, the problem behavior was his refusal and oppositional yelling when being asked to complete/do a request by his parents. Once the behavior is determined, parents should observe what actions are occurring prior or before the problem behaviors. This is known as the antecedent to the behavior. In Tommy's case, he was always doing what he wanted to do, like playing video games, watching TV, playing outdoors or riding his bike. The parents determined the antecedent to Tommy's poor behavior was the parents interrupting Tommy's own set plans.

Parents should then observe how the child and parents react to the problem behavior(s). This is known as the consequence of the behavior. Tommy and his parents would end up yelling at each other, resulting in the original request being completed by the parents and Tommy continuing what he wanted to do.

Through identifying the antecedent, behavior, and consequence (or A-B-C), parents can better understand the problem behavior to develop a point/reward system to encourage positive behaviors. Throughout the A-B-C process, Tommy's parents realized they were demanding Tommy to complete his chores, turn off the TV, et cetera before asking him nicely. They also realized they never sat down and talked calmly with Tommy about his behaviors, asking Tommy how he felt, or addressing his chores and rules. Tommy's parents then did just that and talked to Tommy.

Step Two and Three. Discuss with the child their feelings regarding their behaviors and set structure and rules. In the discussion, the parents talked about the rules and chores of the house. Tommy reported he did not think he had to listen. At this point, Tommy and his parents began yelling. This is a time when a time-out should take place. Regain composure– stay calm and most importantly do not push the subject. Attempt to talk again in a few days. Tommy and his parents started talking a few days later. Validate or address how the child feels. Parents should also address their feelings as well. Parents should firmly set the rules. Tommy had chores to

complete. When they were not completed, his parents stated they would take away TV, playing, and video game time.

Step Four and Five. Identify point/reward system and discuss the system with the child. After discussing rules and setting structure, discuss the point/reward system. Tommy's parents know he loves video games. Previously Tommy's parents decided that for every time Tommy followed a direction/rule, like turning off the TV or video game when asked, going to bed on time, coming to the table to eat, that he would receive a point. Parents should start lower with the amount of points it will take to receive an award, as they should continually set a gradual positive behavior progress. For every fifteen points Tommy earned from having good behavior, he could choose to be rewarded with two minutes extra video game time or to put $1 towards a new video game. Tommy understood when he did not listen points would be taken away, as well as his regular privileges. After having one month of good behaviors, with enough "money" in the bank, Tommy could be eligible to get a new video game.

Step Six, Seven, and Eight. Monitor and model behavior, keep structure, and reinforce desired behaviors. Tommy's progress would be kept on the family refrigerator for him to view his own progress. Parents should model the behaviors they want to see in their child, for the child to see what the parents expect of them. Even if the child's behaviors are not appearing to improve, parents need to keep the structure of the point system and follow their set rules.

Case Study - After the Intervention

Tommy's oppositional behaviors have decreased. The process was not a quick and simple fix. Tommy and his parents were not able to sit down and discuss the intervention process in one day. Throughout the process, Tommy did not agree with his parents, for example, when setting rules. At other times, the parents did not agree with Tommy's reasoning.

Tommy understood for every time he had good behavior he received a point. At first, Tommy was compliant with his parent's requests as he wanted more TV and game time and wanted a new video game. Tommy reached fifteen points and traded it for two minutes extra video game time. But soon, Tommy got tired of listening as he was not receiving what he wanted immediately. Tommy's behaviors began decreasing. Tommy's parents did not like seeing Tommy's problem behaviors returning. They continued to model the behavior they wanted to see and follow the rules they previously set. They also continued to take points away when Tommy did not listen, and added points when he did listen; they kept structure.

Tommy was able to view his progress on the refrigerator. He saw that even though he would have bad days, he was still working towards his goals of more TV time and a new video game. Tommy realized points he received each day added up quickly. Tommy's parents continually gave him praise and attention for his good behaviors, which Tommy liked. They had more open communication, with arguments at times, but soon their relationship began improving. Each week that passed, Tommy began to notice it was easier for him to follow rules and listen to his parents.

As Tommy's behaviors improved, the reward system needed to be modified to keep Tommy moving towards the goal of positive behaviors. By the end of the third month, Tommy and his parents were discussing new possible rewards for every 25 points he earned.

Case Study Revisited - Tommy's Parents

Tommy's parents were frustrated by Tommy's oppositional behaviors. After hearing of the token economy system, they took time to read and learn about the system. As discussed in the intervention process, Tommy's parents took the time to identify the A-B-C to Tommy's problem behaviors.

After setting rules and structure, by determining how many points would equal the chosen reward, the parents discussed the system with Tommy. For every fifteen points Tommy earned from having good behavior, he could choose to be rewarded with two minutes extra video game time or to put $1 towards a new video game.

The parents knew they would be met with more opposition when setting rules and structure in the home, but they knew they could not give up. When Tommy began to act up, the parents did not push the topic. They waited until a later time to talk.

Now it was time for the parents to implement the system. The parents made a chart for the refrigerator to mark Tommy's earned points at the end of each day. The chart was on a simple piece of poster board. Tommy's parents had it marked like a calendar. At the end of each day, the parents and Tommy marked the points earned each day while in the home setting. Once Tommy had fifteen points, he either chose extra game time or the chance to put $1 towards a new video game.

Keeping track of Tommy's behaviors was challenging, but lead to Tommy's improved behaviors. The parents kept a separate chart on them at all times in the home. The parents would put one point for each time Tommy complied with a request. If Tommy became oppositional when asked to do something or break a house rule, a point would be taken away (crossed off the sheet).

Intervention Process

Steps to deliver a token economy system:

1. Indentify problem behavior

2. Discuss with child their feelings regarding behaviors

3. Set structure/rules

4. Identify point/reward system

5. Discuss system with child

6. Monitor and model ideal behavior(s)

7. Keep structure

8. Reinforce desired behaviors

Discussion Questions

· What is a token economy?

· In what settings can a token economy system be used?

· In the case study, what was the A-B-C to Tommy's identified problem behaviors?

· What other types of points system could Tommy's parents use?

· What types of behaviors should Tommy's parents model?

· What are the "dos" and "don'ts" in a token economy system?

· Create a problem behavior scenario and implement a token economy system using the intervention steps.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Should I give my child food as a reward?
  A. Food is not a recommended reward strategy.

Q. How long will it take before the behavior improves?
  A. Behaviors do not change overnight. A token economy system is a process. When following a set structure, behavior changes will be seen within a few months.

Q. What if the behavior gets worse?
  A. Parents should be aware behavior does not change overnight and should continually address the problem behavior. The behavior may get worse before it gets better. Do not give up! Evidence-based research has found that the token economy system reduces problem behaviors. Only after two months should the intervention be changed if there are no positive changes in behavior.

Q. Do I have to record the behavior every time it occurs?
  A. Yes. Structure and reinforcement are very important aspects in the token economy system. A token economy system is a process. Behaviors need to be observed at all times to address and intervene with the problem behavior. If only sometimes addressing the problem behavior, the child may think it is okay to act in a certain way or may be confused as to how to act, as that behavior is only sometimes corrected and therefore, sometimes rewarded.

Annotated Bibliography

Christophersen, E. R., Arnold, C. M., Hill, D. W., & Quilitch, H. R. (1972). The home point system: token reinforcement procedures for application by parents of children with behavior problems. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 5*(4), 485-497.

    Edward Christophersen is a Clinical Psychologist and professor of Pediatrics at the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Medicine. His research interests include attention deficit disorders, common childhood behavioral disorders, and parenting issues. His co-authors hold established positions in the field as well. The article examines a behavioral approach to addressing parent-child problems within two households by using a token reinforcement program. Behaviors were identified through parent interviews. Points were given to each child for appropriate behaviors and removed for inappropriate behaviors. Points then were used in redemption for privileged activities. Child behaviors included bickering, jumping on furniture, teasing, chore completion, whining, and bedtime behaviors. The study found a decrease in the problematic target behaviors and that parents can manage a point system within their home using naturally occurring reinforcers. This article is useful as it lays groundwork for the token economy in the home and indicates parents may only need a small amount of professional assistance to implement reinforcement procedures.

Field, C. E., Nash, H. M., Handwerk, M. L., & Friman, P. C. (2004). A modification of the token economy for nonresponsive youth in family-style residential care. *Behavioral Modification, 28*(3), 323-330.

    Clinton Field is the assistant director of clinical services, research, and internship training at Father Flanagan's Boys' Home, Boys Town, Nebraska. His research interests include behavior analysis and treatment of children's problems and the development and prevention of childhood conduct problems. Heather Nash is an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Alaska Southeast. She is interested in the analysis and treatment of children's and adolescent's behavioral and emotional difficulties. The co-authors hold established positions in the field as well. The article addresses youth who were unresponsive to residential care programs with a token economy. The article focused on a modified token reward system. The treatment program included a token economy system utilizing points as tokens that can be exchanged for privileges, training youth using a standardized social skills program, including youth in program development and feedback processes, and a youth evaluation system. The article supports using modifications of the backup reward schedule in a token economy program to improve the disruptive behavior of youth who had been nonresponsive to treatment in previous residential care. This article is useful as it shows interventions may need to be modified to fit an individual's behavior and that interventions can be applied to a broad range of behaviors.

Heiman, T. (2002). Parents of children with disabilities: Resilience, coping, and future expectations. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities, 14*(2), 159-171.

    Tali Heiman is a senior lecturer in the Department of Education and Psychology at The Open University of Israel. Her interests include the social support of family and friends, social skills, learning skills and technology, and the contribution of all these aspects to effective coping and integration into society of adults with learning disabilities. This

article focuses on the parent' responses, adjustments, and future concerns and expectations regarding their child(ren) with an intellectual, physical, or learning disability. Heiman found most parents react in a negative way to the child's diagnosis of a disability, the disability brought about changes in the family's social life, and parents had an optimistic view of the child's future. This article is useful for my topic as it suggests enhancing coping strategies and "highlights the importance of social resources and the need for effective programs of intervention" (Heiman, 2002, p. 170). Therefore, it is useful to develop a token economy that is a *positive* experience for parents and children.

Jull, S., & Mirenda, P. (2011). Parents as play date facilitators for preschoolers with autism. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 13*(1), 17-30.

    Stephanie Jull is a M.A. in Special Education with a concentration in Autism and Developmental Disabilities from the University of British Columbia. Her research interests include family support and staff training for individuals working with students with autism spectrum disorders. Pat Mirenda is a professor in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology and Special Education at the University of British Columbia. Her research interests include autism/developmental disabilities, augmentative and alternative communication, positive behavior support, inclusive education, and literacy development. The study examines the efficiency of parent-implemented contextually supported play dates of social interaction of children with autism and typically developing peers. Parents were trained to host reinforcing and cooperative activities to equally engage both children in play activities including crafts, games, and gross motor activities. Parents were taught to prompt children to interact together. The article reported parents felt after training they were successful in facilitating play dates and activities. The results of this study suggest parents can learn skills required to become facilitators through strategy teaching. This is an informative article on what parents can facilitate in the home with other peers, as parents represent an essential part of a child's support system.

Kehle, T. J., Bray, M. A., Theodore, L. A., Jenson, W. R., & Clark, E. (2000). A multi-component intervention designed to reduce disruptive classroom behavior. *Psychology in the Schools, 37*(5), 475-481.

    Thomas Kehle is a professor and Director of the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. His research interests include evidence-based interventions to promote children's academic and social functioning, and their sense of psychological well-being. His co-authors hold established positions in the education field as well. The authors examined numerous treatments for disruptive classroom behaviors. The article suggests inappropriate behaviors still occur in special-education classrooms and addresses treatment for disruptive classroom behavior through examining classroom contingencies (interdependent, dependent, and independent). The multi-component intervention for teachers included strategies including teacher movement, public posting of classroom rules, precision requests, and the consequences of response cost, token economy, and mystery motivators. Interventions were found to be effective and accepted into the classroom setting with ease. Group contingencies were found to be the most effective means of reducing disruptive classroom behavior. This article is very

useful as it details classroom interventions and suggests multiple interventions can be used in one setting.

Park, J. H., Alber-Morgan, S. R., & Fleming, C. (2011). Collaborating with parents to implement behavioral interventions for children with challenging behaviors. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 43*(3), 22-30.

Ju Hee Park is an Assistant Professor in the Special Education Department at Wheelock College in Boston, MA. Sheila Alber-Morgan is an Associate Professor and Courtney Fleming is a doctoral student in the Special Education Program at The Ohio State University. The article focuses on the importance of parents to be actively engaged in planning and implementing behavioral interventions of their child to maximize its effectiveness. The article offers suggestions to involve parents in the process of intervention to maximize the effectiveness of the behavioral intervention and to improve the child's challenging behavior(s). The article encourages practitioners to build a trusting relationship with parents, identify parents' strengths and challenges, and develop goals based on family input of the child's challenging behavior. Practitioners should educate family members from the behavioral perspective of key behavioral concepts (e.g. antecedent, behavior, consequence; the three-term contingency) and have the parents involved in planning the child's interventions. Practitioners should train parents and family members by "(a) teaching parents to identify and record their child's behavior, (b) teaching parents how to respond to problem behaviors, (c) modeling intervention procedures, (d) providing guided practice as well as frequent and specific feedback, and (e) encouraging parents to teach behavior strategies to other family members" (Park, Alber-Morgan, & Fleming, 2011, p. 26). By offering examples of each phase, this article is useful to better understand the importance of parent's involvement in developing a token economy to effectively address challenging behaviors.

Simonsen, B., Fairbanks, S., Briesch, A., Myers, D., & Sugai, G. (2008). Evidence-based Practices in Classroom Management: Considerations for Research to Practice. *Education and Treatment of Children*, *31*(3), 351-380.

Brandi Simonsen is an assistant professor of Special Education in the Neag School of Education and a research scientist with the Center for Behavioral Education and Research at the University of Connecticut. Her research focuses on positive behavior interventions and support (PBIS). Her co-authors hold established positions in the education field as well. The authors investigated evidence-based classroom management interventions, suggest guidelines for translating research into practice, and give an example of a self-assessment tool. Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers and Sugai (2008) suggest that there are "*critical features* of effective classroom management: (a) maximize structure; (b) post, teach, review, monitor, and reinforce expectations; (c) actively engage students in observable ways; (d) use a continuum of strategies for responding to appropriate behaviors; and (e) use a continuum of strategies to respond to inappropriate behaviors" (p. 353). This article is resourceful and useful, as it suggests modes of intervention for disruptive behaviors, giving numerous examples, guides, and assessment tools to implement the interventions at numerous times throughout the school year.