

Token Economy for Elementary: A Parent's Guide

Token Economy For Elementary

A Parent's Guide

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Overview

A token economy is a form of positive behavioral intervention support. Like all forms of PBIS, a token economy can be used with a whole school, classroom, or family. Students are taught what behaviors are positive and what behaviors are negative. The token economy is a very hands-on system. Students can help choose rewards that are fun, and that they want to earn. The token economy focuses on the child's positive behaviors and rewards for those behaviors.

A token economy is a behavioral strategy that allows children to earn tokens for positive behaviors.

- Tokens are paired with verbal praise and granted as soon as positive behavior occurs.

An example of verbal praise while giving a token is, "Lisa, you did a good job completing your homework. Here is your token."

- Tokens can also be taken away. These are called fines. Fines are given when a student does a negative behavior. Students can later trade in tokens for rewards.
- Eventually, fewer tokens are given for positive behaviors, so that the student learns to do the behavior without having to get a token.

Glossary

- **Economy-** A system driven by the earning and spending of goods.
- **Fines-** When tokens are taken away for a negative or unacceptable behavior.
- **Intervention-** A strategy that is used to change or improve a behavior.
- **Negative or Unacceptable behaviors-** Behaviors that you would like to see less of.
- **Positive or Acceptable behaviors-** Target behaviors; the behaviors that you want to stay the same or see more of.
- **Reinforcers-** Something used to strengthen a positive behavior. For example, verbal praise or a reward/prize.
- **Token-**Is an object that is given for a positive or acceptable behavior. A token can be traded in for a reward. Tokens can be tickets, plastic chips, slips of paper, stickers, etc.
- **Verbal Praise-** Verbally stating that your child has completed a positive behavior. This praise should be given at the same time as a token.

Case Study Part 1

Mr. and Mrs. Garcia have three children. Lately, Mr. and Mrs. Garcia have noticed that the chores they have given to their children to do are not being finished. One week, Mrs. Garcia asks her children several times why the chores were not completed. Each time, a fight breaks out between the children. The children are yelling things like, "It's not my fault," or "She was supposed to do that. It's not my job to clean off the table." Mr. and Mrs. Garcia are starting to notice that chores are becoming a problem in the house. Other than the fighting over chores, the Garcia children usually get along well. Mr. and Mrs. Garcia are upset and tired of all of the arguing over who is supposed to do what chore.

Case Study Part 2

Mr. and Mrs. Garcia knew that the main problem in their house was that the children did not know who was supposed to do which chore. One night after dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Garcia sat down with their children and listed out all of the positive behaviors that they wanted to see more of in their house. Because Mr. and Mrs. Garcia were mainly upset about chores, most of the positive behaviors were about doing chores, such as “Make your bed,” “Clean off the table after dinner,” and “Feed the dog.” Then, Mr. and Mrs. Garcia made a list of all the negative or unacceptable behaviors that they wanted to see less of. An example of a negative behavior was, “Fighting with a sibling over a chore.” Next, the parents chose the top three positive behaviors and the top three negative behaviors for each child.

Case Study Part 2, Cont'd

Mr. and Mrs. Garcia, with the help of their children, made a list for each child. Using a sheet of paper, the top of the page said “positive behaviors”, and listed the three behaviors. The bottom of the page said “negative behaviors”, and listed the three behaviors. The sheet also clearly stated what each behavior meant. For example, the oldest daughter’s sheet listed, “Clean off table after dinner.” Underneath the behavior the sheet stated, “Remove all dishes, glassware, and utensils off of the table. Stack dishes next to sink in kitchen. Wipe table clean using dishcloth.” The parents wanted to make sure that the children clearly understood the behaviors.

The parents then posted the list on the back of each bedroom door. Next, the family chose rewards that they would all enjoy. Some of the rewards were giftcards to the bookstore, 15 extra minutes on the computer, and a coupon to host a sleepover. Mr. and Mrs. Garcia decided how many tokens each reward would be worth. Mr. and Mrs. Garcia also told the children how they could be fined for doing a negative or unacceptable behavior. Mr. and Mrs. Garcia chose tickets to be used as the tokens. Each child would get a different color so that nobody would be confused about who was given the token. Finally, the parents practiced using the token economy system with their children. Mr. and Mrs. Garcia always made sure to give praise and a token after each positive behavior. If a child was seen arguing or doing another negative or unacceptable behavior, the child was fined a token.

After using the token economy system in their home for a few weeks, Mr. and Mrs. Garcia saw a big change. Most of the chores were done and they didn’t have to keep asking! Also, the fighting that had made Mrs. Garcia tired and upset had almost stopped completely.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important to provide interventions that an entire family can work on as a group, instead of singling out a single family member?
2. When a parent has a child with a problem behavior, why is it sometimes more helpful to focus on strengthening the child's positive behaviors than to focus on decreasing the child's negative behaviors?
3. Why is it important for parents to be involved in their child's behavioral interventions?
4. Why is it important to use interventions at home and school? Why do we not just focus on the behavior in one environment?

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Do rewards have to cost money?

Many parents ask if rewards have to cost money? No! Absolutely not! While many token economies use rewards that do cost money, you do not have to rely on expensive rewards. Be creative. You know your child best. Ask your child what types of activities they would like as a reward. These could be things such as, 15 extra minutes of a favorite video game, extra time riding their bike outside, hosting a sleepover with a friend, choosing the dinner menu, rearranging their room, or baking a favorite treat.

2. What if I don't see changes right away?

Many parents will be concerned if their child's behavior does not change right away or completely stop if it is a negative behavior. Remember, this will take time. Don't give up!

3. If my child is using a token economy system at school, can we use the same system and focus on the same behaviors at home

The answer to this question is, yes. Your child's teacher can help you make some changes to the system so that it fits into your home setting. You can also mix and match the behaviors that your child is focusing on in school with behaviors that you would like to see change at home. This is also a great way for you to be involved in your child's education.

4. Can I use a token economy system at home if I have more than one child?

Yes! Just be sure to pick out behaviors that are important for each child. Also, make sure that you have rewards that are exciting and fun for all of your children.

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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, 485-497.

Edward R. Christophersen, is a board-certified clinical psychologist at Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri, and is a professor of pediatrics at the University of Missouri at Kansas City School of Medicine and the University of Kansas Medical Center. His coauthors are also professionals in the fields of child development and behavior modification. This was a study of two families attempting to implement token economies in the home setting. Both families were involved in defining target behaviors for their children and identifying rewards that the children would work to attain. The parents were trained in tracking points and instituting fines. Family one defined the children's target behaviors and posted them on the children's bedroom doors. Points and fines were tracked using a notecard. Points were traded in for activities or privileges that the family determined in advance. Family two also defined target behaviors clearly to avoid misunderstandings. Target behaviors, mainly chores, were first modeled and completed with the help of the mom or therapist. Chores were checked for completion at 9 P.M. each night and were tracked on a sheet of paper. Several forms of reinforcement were used during family two's trial, including the following: star stickers on a chore report card, money in return for chore completion, a bonus for completion of all chores, and points that could be exchanged for rewards. Both families were able to modify their children's behaviors using the token systems that were established. This study is important because the parents were able to successfully modify their children's behaviors using token systems. In addition, the study illustrates that token systems can be adapted to fit the needs of each individual family. Parents can identify target behaviors that are relevant to their children. They can also locate reinforcers that will increase the likelihood that the intervention will be successful for their children.

Davern, L. (1996). Listening to parents of children with disabilities. *Educational Leadership*, 53(7), 61-63.

Linda Davern is an assistant professor in the education department at The Sage Colleges. She is involved in teacher preparation. The main objective of this article was to determine how relationships between parents of children with disabilities and teachers could be improved. The author interviewed fifteen families whose children were fully included in general education programs. The author found that parents believe a more successful partnership would exist if the teachers focused on their child as an individual. Parents were worried that their child was being unfairly compared to other children in the classroom. The interviews also revealed that parents felt that teachers should not judge based on stereotypes or assume that parents were responsible for their children's disabilities. In addition, parents wanted to be incorporated in their child's education. The article stated that teachers should include parents in ways that meet the parent's abilities and are beneficial to the child.

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Teachers should try to include parents in activities in addition to just those mandated by law. Furthermore, teachers should pay attention to the parent's goals for the child and should not talk down to the parent. The article also argued that parents should be provided with a consistent communication representative with whom the family can relate to. Overall, the article demonstrated that it is crucial to make the family feel comfortable and included in the classroom. Even though this article is related to children with disabilities, it can be helpful for implementing a token economy. It identifies the important qualities that parents look for in a successful relationship with a professional.

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. She is also the head of the Learning Disabilities Research Center and the head of The Open University Diagnostic Center for Students with LD. The main objective of this article was to assess the resilience of families who have children with special needs. A study of 32 parents of children with special needs was conducted to identify factors that impacted family resilience. An interview process was used to examine events in the child's life that occurred in the past and present and those that may occur in the future. In addition, the interview related these events to such things as supports, family reactions, and parental feelings. The study revealed two important results. The first was that transitions were especially stressful in families of children with disabilities. The second was that the majority of these parents expressed feelings that were true of resilience. Those families who looked at the disability realistically, were optimistic about their child's future, had support from friends, family, and professionals were able to cope with the child's special needs and retain family strength. The article also noted that these characteristics of resilience are important for future implications regarding the child and family's health. This article is significant for demonstrating the importance of increasing a family's resilience in order to help them cope with the child's special needs. Also, this article demonstrates how crucial family support services and interventions can be in strengthening a family's resilience.

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 doctoral student at the University of British Columbia whose work focuses on early intervention for children with autism. Pat Mirenda is a professor of special education at the same university and also does research on autism. The main focus of this article was to determine if parents of preschoolers with autism could become successful play date facilitators. The authors used previous research as a basis for their research design. Two preschool boys, their moms, and two playmates participated in the study. The playmates were children who were determined to not have any social, cognitive, or behavioral problems. The moms were trained to develop and implement play dates that would be interesting to both their child and the playmate. Play date facilitation was initially modeled and implemented with support, then implemented independently.

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After stable independent implementation, the moms were asked to go back to playing with the child as they did before the intervention. All of the play dates were videotaped and target behaviors were recorded. The authors discovered that the parents were successful at facilitating and implementing the play. During the reversal period, all improvements decreased. However, there was not a clear relationship between participation and improvement in child affect. Overall, this article is important, because parents can be trained to facilitate play dates successfully in a relatively short period of time. Incorporating them in their child's intervention can be empowering and may increase effectiveness of interventions.

Kerr, M.M. & Nelson, C.M. (2010). *Strategies for addressing behavior problems in the classroom, 6th Edition*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company.

Lazarus, B.D. (1990). A cooperative home-school token economy. *Preventing School Failure*, 34(4), 37-40.

Belinda Lazarus is an assistant professor of instructional services at Wichita State University. This article describes the process of implementing the cooperative home-school token economy for children with behavioral disorders. The cooperative home-school token economy allows student to earn tokens both at home and at school. This system also increases the opportunity for parents to be involved in their child's education. The author notes that the most important factor in implementing this system is advanced preparation. The cooperative home-school token economy is first established in the classroom. The teacher defines rules, determines methods for how points are earned, and allows students to practice procedures for receiving feedback and earning points. Next, the teacher invites parents to a training session. The teacher defines and highlights the important points of the token system. Then, the teacher asks parents to offer input on at-home behaviors that should be targeted during the intervention. Points are assigned to the behaviors, and parents are asked to choose three of the behaviors to focus on. Finally, reinforcers or rewards are chosen and assigned to the behaviors. Parents are taught how to record and track the behaviors and points. This system is ideal for modifying problem behaviors in children. It can be used to help children identify and become aware of similar behaviors over a variety of settings. In addition, the system allows for consistency and maintains progress of interventions that are occurring in school at home. Lastly, this system may increase collaboration between parents and educators allowing for higher success rates of interventions.

Lovitt, T.C., & Cushing, S. (1999). Parents of youth with disabilities: Their perceptions of school programs. *Remedial and Special Education*, 20(3), 134-142.

Thomas Lovitt is a professor emeritus at the University of Washington. His research focus is in special education. His coauthor, Suzanne Cushing, is a communications consultant. The main focus of this article was to identify how parents of children with disabilities perceive their child's school program. Forty-three parents were interviewed

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The interviews showed that parents expressed a need for better communication and cooperation between parents and school staff. The article stated that the development of a relationship between parents and schools increases parental participation in the child's education. In addition, communication allows the school to better understand the family's background and increases identification of its impact on school performance. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that these parents had a range of opinions regarding special education services. Some parents were pleased with services, while many were disappointed. . Many parents that were interviewed showed concern in the development of education goals for their children, and the evaluation of these goals. In particular, many parents were upset about their child's individual education plan (IEP) and felt that it was not individualized enough for their child's needs. Many parents worried that their children were not being motivated enough to achieve success in the future. Parents felt that the post school goals that they held for their children were not being supported by the school or social service agencies. Finally, these parents argued that teacher preparation courses on awareness and improving special education could be beneficial for families who have a child with a disability. This article identifies the need for successful parent and professional collaboration. Interventions will be more successful and more beneficial to the child if the parent and professional work together and learn from one another.

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 a professor in the special education department at Wheelock College. Her co-authors are a professor and doctoral student, also in the field of special education, from The Ohio State University. This article focused on the importance of parental collaboration in behavioral interventions. Using a case study, the authors demonstrated that collaborating with parents is a necessary and valuable approach for identifying and working with children's challenging behaviors. The article showed that parents have the ability to provide important information that can determine the outcome of a behavioral intervention. Through collaboration, practitioners can become familiar with families' strengths and weaknesses. This will allow them to identify the appropriate intervention that will fit in with a family's goals and routines. The authors identified parents as the ultimate resource concerning the child's history of behavior. In addition, it is noted how important parents are for identifying what reinforcers or punishments the child will effectively respond to. However, the article also noted that regardless of the level of parental involvement, if parents are misled or uninformed, they will be unable to make an effective change in their child's behavior. Educating parents on the proper responses to their child's problem behavior will allow them to avoid any unintentional reinforcement of the behavior. In addition, by educating parents on the reasoning for the intervention and the importance of the techniques used, parents can become a practitioner's greatest asset. Although this article focus solely on parental collaboration, it is important for implementing token economies because it demonstrates the benefits of involving parents in an intervention process and gives tips on how to do so properly.