

Token Economy for Preschoolers: A Study Guide

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What is a token economy?

A token economy is a behavior management system for children showing undesired behaviors in a classroom or home setting. A token economy uses token reinforcers to get the desired behaviors. A desired behavior can be anything from wanting the child to raise their hand in class before speaking or getting a child to make their bed at home. Once the child has gained enough token reinforcers, a back-up reinforcer is given to the child to reinforce the desired behaviors again.

Steps to Back up Reinforcer

- **One desired behavior earns one token reinforcer**
- **Earn determined number of token reinforcers**
- **Exchange token reinforcers for back-up reinforcer!**

OR

- **Making bed earns one sticker**
- **4 Stickers earned**
- **Movie with Mom!**

When is a token economy useful?

Token economy is useful for a child who is able to understand earning rewards for desired behaviors. Children ages two and older are able to learn the rules of a token economy and can even help make their own token economy. If you are dealing with a child who has unwanted behaviors and does not following simple rules, then a token economy is good to use.

What to remember:

- Let child pick back-up reinforcers
- Make desired and undesired behaviors clear
- ALWAYS give praise with tokens
- Give tokens and praise for ANY behavior improvement

Case Study

Case Study before Intervention

A mother of three who is asking her children to make their beds at home.

Mrs. Smith is the mother of three children, ages six, eight, and ten. Mrs. Smith has had trouble getting all of her children to do their chores at home. She asks her children to make their beds, but they will not listen. Mrs. Smith had tried to give her children candy to do their chores, but this does not work. Mrs. Smith is looking for a good way to get her children to make their beds.

Case Study after Intervention

Mrs. Smith has asked for the help of a behavior intervention specialist. After meeting with the Smith family, the specialist thinks a token economy is best for them. The specialist tells the family a token economy is a behavior management system where tokens are used as reinforcers and exchanged for a back-up reinforcer. The specialist tells Mrs. Smith to pick a reinforcer to be given to the children when they show the desired behavior. Mrs. Smith picks stickers for the children's tokens. The specialist then explains to Mrs. Smith when a certain number of stickers are earned by each child they get a back-up reinforcer. Because of the ages of Mrs. Smith's children, a low number of stickers, in this case four, are chosen to be earned by each child. The specialist tells to Mrs. Smith that each child will pick their back-up reinforcer to make sure they will want to work for it. All children pick their back-up reinforcement to be watching a movie with Mom. The specialist then tells Mrs. Smith when she talks

about the token economy to her children to use terms they will understand. Mrs. Smith should also pick a place in her home to write rules of the token economy. Mrs. Smith should repeat the desired behaviors, what the tokens are, and how many tokens they must earn to get their back-up reinforcement.

Because Mrs. Smith clearly explained how a token economy will work for her children in her home and the consistent praise and token reinforcements, Mrs. Smith's children are showing signs of improving their desired behaviors. However, Mrs. Smith does not feel the token economy is working 100%. The specialist explains to Mrs. Smith she can add a response cost to the token economy. Now, if a child shows undesired behaviors, they lose a sticker. Finally the children's behaviors are becoming more consistent.

RESPONSE COST = LOSS OF TOKEN REINFORCEMENT

OR

Not making bed = loss of one sticker

Discussion Questions

- How would you make a token economy for a four-year-old child who is having a hard time staying in their seat during class?

- What would a good back-up reinforcer be for a child who does more talking with friends during class time than learning? Why?

- Why is it a good idea to ask students' likes and dislikes?

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why is it important to give praise with a token reinforcer?

A: It is important because unless the token reinforcer is given with something that has meaning to the child, then the token reinforcer simply has no meaning to the child and the token economy will have no effect on their undesired behaviors

Q: Is it okay to use food as a token reinforcer?

A: No, food should never be used to reinforce a child for a few reasons. For a child to be hungry enough to accept a food reward means they must be denied that particular item. Also, food allergies can come into play and it may be difficult to find a food that all children in the token economy will want to eat.

Annotated Bibliography

Filcheck, H. A., & McNeil, C. B. (2004). The use of token economies in preschool classrooms: Practical and philosophical concerns. *Journal of Early and Intensive Behavior Intervention*, 1(1), 94-104.

The authors of this article, Filcheck and McNeil are professors of psychology. Filcheck teaches at Louisiana State University where she is an assistant professor and McNeil teaches at West Virginia University where she also does research on children with emotional and behavioral disorders. In this article, the authors weigh the pros and cons of implementing a token economy in a preschool setting. First, they define a token economy, which is explained as a management system for classroom behavior. It has been shown with teacher prompts and praise, the token economy increases attention placed on school tasks. Some positive outcomes of a token economy are gaining control over behaviors in the classroom. Another positive aspect is a token economy entails almost no effort on the teachers' part. One con of a token economy in a preschool setting is the readiness of the students to participate in the activity. Some students may not understand the concept of a token economy; so therefore, it must be made with the students' abilities in mind. Another con of a token economy is the lack of consistency with positive behaviors, such as remembering to praise children for positive behaviors. The authors remind the reader throughout the article that there is simply not enough research on token economies to state whether or not they work. This article is pertinent to my research involving token economies

because it is unbiased and unlike the previous articles, it directly deals with a token economy in a preschool setting.

Filcheck, H. A., McNeil, C. B., Greco, L. A., & Bernard, R. S. (2004). Using a whole-class token economy and coaching of teacher skills in a preschool classroom to manage disruptive behavior. *Psychology in the Schools, 41*(3), 351-361.

Retrieved from

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=12215735&site=ehost-live>

In 2004 when this article was published, authors Filcheck, McNeil, Greco, and Bernard were all associated with the University of West Virginia. Unlike in Filcheck et al. previous article, this one focuses on a whole-class token economy. In a whole-class token economy, response cost and positive reinforcement are utilized which has been shown to decrease inappropriate behaviors in a preschool classroom with more than just one child. This article also specifically discusses “The Tough Class Discipline Kit” also known as “KIT” (Filcheck, McNeil, Greco, & Bernard, p. 351, 2004) which was found to decrease problem behaviors. “The Level System” (McNeil & Filcheck) was also another whole-class token economy studied in this article that was designed for preschool children (as cited in Filcheck et al., 2004). Filcheck et al. also mention how teacher praise, much like parent praise and attention, can have positive effects on children’s behavior in the classroom. The study in this article focused on teacher praise in the classroom. The teacher of this preschool class was asked to write down certain problem behaviors in the classroom as well as how often the teacher uses the management techniques they were taught for a whole-class token economy. The

teacher was encouraged to use praise along with positive reinforcements such as stickers. The teacher was trained by modeling, coaching, and receiving feedback on her performance in class. Parents were also taught some of the same skills to use with their children at home. Results of this study proved the training of parents and teachers using praise in a token economy yielded a decrease in problem behavior with the preschoolers. The author's would like the reader to know a whole-class token economy is more cost effective, less time consuming, and beneficial to the children in it because no child is singled out in the process. This article is useful to my research in that it talks about different kinds of systems used for training in a whole-class token economy.

Heiman, T. (2002). Parents of children with disabilities: Resilience, coping, and future expectations. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities, 14*(2), 159-171. doi:10.1023/A:1015219514621

Author Tali Heiman has a Ph.D. and is associated with the department of psychology at The Open University of Israel. Heiman has had several articles published on children with emotional and behavioral disorders. This article focuses on the parents of children with disabilities and how they are able to cope with having a special needs child. Heiman states major life changes occur in families with a special needs child and this can be a source of frustration and stress for the parents. There is a strong concern of parents regarding their special needs child in which they turn to resilience in order to cope. The relationships with other family members are a source of comfort for the parents of a special needs child. Parents with a special needs child also attribute their coping abilities to believing in their children's future and

accepting the reality of their child's diagnosis. The parents of special needs children remember that they are a part of a family, which provides them with strength during these difficult times. Heiman ends the article by stating families are able to deal with the reality of raising a special needs child with great resilience. Unlike the first two articles, this article has little to do with my project in that it is simply stating how parents of children with special needs cope with their everyday lives.

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

doi:10.1177/1098300709358111

The authors of this journal article are both associated with the University of British Columbia. Jull is a doctoral student who works as an interventionist for children with autism. Mirenda is a professor of special education at the university with an interest in research focusing on autism, positive behavior support, and alternative communication. This journal article is based on a study involving two young boys with autism, one of their parents, and a playmate. Throughout the study, the parents' facilitating skills were assessed during planned play dates, as well as the children's communication and social skills. The children's behaviors were reinforced by the peer and the parent, while the parent's facilitating skills were reinforced by the study organizers. The parents were given strategies to use in order to support the peer interactions and by the end of the study, they were using almost all of the strategies they had learned. However, a follow-up interview concluded both parents were not using all of the strategies they had been taught. In conclusion, the authors state that while all of the strategies used in this study were proved successful, not all parents

use each strategy to the extent they should for more accurate results. Additional research is needed on this topic across more age and ability ranges. The authors of this journal article prove to be credible in the fact that they have had noted experience in working with children who have special needs, specifically autism. This journal article was useful to my research because it shows how parent prompting can have a positive effect on the child it is being used on.

Murphy, M. A., Reitman, D., Hupp, S. D. A., & O'Callaghan, P. M. (2004). Behavior change and perceptions of change: Evaluating the effectiveness of a token economy. *Child & Family Behavior Therapy, 26*(2), 17-36.
doi:10.1300/J019v26n02_02

David Reitman is an associated professor for the Center of Psychological Studies at Nova Southeastern University. Molly Murphy and Patrick O'Callaghan are associated with the Department of Psychology at Louisiana State University. Stephen Hupp is also in the Department of Psychology at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville. Authors Reitman, Murphy, O'Callaghan, and Hupp state while research has shown positive effects on the behavior of preschoolers in a token economy, teachers have reservations about using a token economy in their classroom due to time and resources. The authors suggest stopping these concerns; a group-contingency and multi-method approach can be used. For the study, teachers were asked to identify three appropriate and three unwanted behaviors in their classroom. The teachers of the class were given directions and handouts on how to run the token program. Children were given incentives, in this case, stickers, at the end of each of two sessions throughout the day. In addition to stickers, the teacher gave praise every

ten minutes to selected students throughout the day. The results of this study show a token economy reduces problem behaviors in a classroom setting, even when the classroom teacher does not see an improvement.

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

Author, Park, is an assistant professor of special education at Wheelock College in Boston. Co-authors, Morgan and Flemming also have background in special education at Ohio State University in Ohio. This article shows need of behavior interventionists collaborating with the parents of children with behavioral disorders. Park, Morgan, and Flemming give a detailed account of how to include parents in the intervention process as well as how they can help in continue the process at home. Park et al., begin the article with stating how important it is to the intervention process to listen to the parents and the children involved in the potential intervention. By gathering information from the family, a better idea of the problem behaviors can be had by the interventionists. The parents can then be involved in the intervention process by giving them tools to use during their part of the intervention. By helping the parents see what environmental factors may be causing their child's problem behavior, the parents can work towards changing these environmental factors. Park et al. state once the parents and interventionists know the problem behaviors and possible causes of these behaviors, the collaboration on the intervention plan can begin. The interventionists can then teach the parents how to define and record the problem behavior and eventually how to appropriately respond to the behaviors. Park et al.

firmly believe with the collaboration of parents and interventionists, the child's behaviors are better understood and possibly better controlled. This article, like the previous one, is useful to my research because it proves once again what impact adults, specifically parents, have on controlling their children's behaviors.

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