

TOKEN ECONOMY SYSTEMS IN THE CLASSROOM: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Only use a token economy system when necessary, and not when desirable behavior can be maintained with the use of less systematic and controlling techniques (e.g., praise, modeling, occasional use of mild punishment such as taking away privilege).

Some behavior problems may be a product of the setting. Sometimes making alterations to the classroom (room organization, routine) can eliminate problems, and specific changes that focus on the child or children are not necessary.

A token economy may not always be needed for behavior modification. Other reinforcers such as praise, feedback, and access to activities and privileges should be attempted and proved ineffective before moving to a token economy program.

Teachers designing and administering token economy programs should be trained in behavior modification procedures, record keeping, and analysis. They also need to read and review any appropriate literature.

Take care to avoid any ethical problems, remembering never to plan a program that may involve depriving a student of something that already morally or legally belongs to him or her.

The more homogenous the group with which you are working (i.e., students at roughly the same behavioral level), **the easier it is to set rules** according to which behavioral responses will be reinforced.

Even with very homogenous groups, **it may still be necessary to have specific rules for certain individuals** which apply to their specific behavioral needs.

Determining the target behaviors will depend largely on the group of children with which you are working. Short and long-range objective as well as specific behavior problems you plan to modify should be considered.

Before choosing the target behaviors, take baseline observations to ensure the behaviors you wish to modify need to be changed. Systematic observations will also give you a clear idea of the environmental responses elicited by the behaviors (i.e., the natural consequences).

When choosing target behaviors, **efforts should be made to select behaviors that might generate their own reinforcing consequences.** This will lead to better maintenance of the behaviors once tokens are withdrawn.

All staff that have regular contact with the child or children should be involved. Additionally, it is important that every staff member who administers tokens do so in a consistent and systematic manner.

When determining who will administer reinforcement and for what behaviors if individuals other than the teacher are involved, **only one individual should be responsible for reinforcing a particular response at a particular time.**

When considering the type of tokens you wish to use, remember that they should be portable, durable, and not easily counterfeited. Tokens may be anything from physical objects such as poker chips, gold stars on a bulletin board, or simply points added in a record book.

The amount of tokens given for a particular behavior must be considered, depending on the stage of the economy, how accustomed the students are to receiving tokens, and their therapeutic value.

A bonus points component may be included in the program, awarding extra points to students doing extremely well, or to reward targeted prosocial behaviors such as helping others or sharing.

When choosing backup reinforcers for administered tokens, realize the system allows an increase in the variety of reinforcers you can use since they do not need to be limited to those which can be administered immediately following the desired response.

As often as possible, **use backup reinforcers that students will encounter in their natural environment.**

A variety of backup reinforcers should be used to allow for all student preferences. What the points earn is one of the most crucial factors for program success. Junior or senior high school students usually prefer privileges; whereas elementary school aged children usually respond more favorably to trinkets.

To select backup reinforcers, observe what the students like to do and ask them what would be rewarding to them. Also, questionnaires and table are available which list potential reinforcers for children of all ages.

How many tokens each backup reinforcer will cost should depend on supply and demands as well as the therapeutic value of the backup reinforcer.

It is important to have different priced reinforcers so that different point values will allow the back up reinforcers to reward movement toward desired behavior.

Decide how you will distribute the backup reinforcers. In a smaller economy such as a classroom, the store may simply be a box on the teacher's desk or another table in the room.

Evaluation procedures should be built into the program from the beginning. Staff should keep a record of the frequency of the target behaviors as well as the undesirable behaviors to judge the success of the program. Changes should be made accordingly.

A plan to handle potential problems should be established. Problems that may be encountered include initial confusion, students attempting to get unearned tokens and students manipulating the tokens distractedly.

It might be helpful to write the procedures down, such as in a manual. The manual should explain what behaviors are to be reinforced, how they are to be reinforced, the times reinforcement is available, and the responsibilities and duties of the teacher. Any staff involved should have a copy.

When introducing the program, be sure to provide detailed instructions to the children (oral, written, or both) so that they understand what the rules and contingencies are. This will avoid confusion and also may help to facilitate performance.

Enlist any others you know may be available to help during the first days of the program. Try teachers' or nurses' aides, parents, etc.

A method for recording data needs to be established, including who is to record and when.

Plenty of tokens for each child need to be available at the start of the program. Suggestions indicate 100 tokens per student to be adequate.

Tokens should be dispensed immediately following eliciting of the desired response.

Providing each student with a means in which to store the tokens such as a box, a purse, or a bag will prevent students from manipulating them distractedly.

Backup reinforcers should be given frequently in the beginning of the program and gradually be decreased. In the early stages of the program, backup reinforcers should be presented soon after token presentation and decreased gradually.

Once a behavioral change has been achieved, care must be taken to maximize the chances that this change will be maintained even after the program has ended. Specific ideas include transferring the program to another more natural setting (such as home) or fading the reinforcement contingencies over time.

Positive reinforcement should be stressed over punishment. Use punishment only when positive methods have failed repeatedly.

Be careful in including punishment contingencies for inappropriate behavior. Punishment should be used sparingly and only for clearly defined behaviors.

If using fines in the economy, it may be necessary to train students to accept them in a nonaggressive and nonemotional manner.

Additional resources:

- Harlan, J. (2002). *Behavior management strategies for teachers*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Myles, B. (1992). Guidelines for establishing and maintaining token economies. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 27*(3), 164-169.
- Shore, K. (2003). *Elementary teacher's discipline problem solver: A practical A-Z guide for classroom management of behavior problems*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

www.polyxo.com/visualsupport/tokeneconomies.html: Token Economies.

www.vams.edu/add/token.htm: Token Economy Handout.

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