

Creating a Token Economy

A token economy is a frequently used and effective technique to help change behaviors in resistant children and adolescents. Some form of token (such as a slip of paper or a sticker) is awarded after a positive behavior. The token can later be exchanged for a reward. Research has shown that token economies are an effective way to change behavior, but the way in which they are implemented is the key to their success. Here are a few tips to help you get started.

1. Tokens can be awarded, but never taken away.

In the same way that an employee won't lose their pay from Monday if they do a bad job on Wednesday, tokens should not be taken away as punishment. The child has earned this token, and being overly punitive can lead to them giving up or feeling that their efforts are useless.

2. Desired behaviors (and rewards) must be clearly defined.

Asking a child to "clean your room" for a token is not enough. Your idea of a clean room is probably very different than theirs. Explain that clothes need to be placed in drawers, there should be no toys on the floor, and any dishes must be returned to the kitchen. Avoid abstract tasks such as "don't get in trouble today".

3. Choose just a few behaviors at a time. Don't get too complex.

Focus on two or three behaviors to reward at any one time. Even the most proactive parent will have difficulty tracking and rewarding four or five goals on a daily basis. Complex systems work great for a day or two, but are usually quickly abandoned.

4. Do what you say.

When offering a token or a reward you must follow through. Make sure the rewards you offer are realistic for your budget. Offering a reward and not following through will invalidate the entire system. In that same vein, don't give a token if the desired behavior is not achieved.

5. Collaborate.

A token economy will do little good if your child does not understand how to achieve rewards or if the rewards aren't something they care about. Get some ideas for easy rewards such as spending the night with a friend or having extra time on the computer, but also create bigger rewards they can work and save toward.

6. Give it time.

Behavior isn't going to change overnight. These things take time and practice. Stick with it and be consistent.