

## TIP SHEET

# Token Economy System

Young children often need something to motivate them. One teaching tool that has proven its effectiveness is the Token Economy System. It is effective reinforcement that can help demonstrate that learning has its rewards!

So what is a token system? A common example is part of our everyday lives. We work for money which has no value until we later exchange it for items or activities that are valuable to us. A **Token Economy System** allows a child to earn tokens for demonstrating specific, positive behaviours. Once a child has collected a set number of tokens, he turns them in to receive an item or activity that he really enjoys. The tokens themselves have no real value, but over time, they become associated with the end reward and help to keep the child motivated to be successful.

## How does a Token Economy System help?

A Token Economy System can:

- **Help a child to learn to wait for rewards** by providing a visual reminder of how much more he needs to accomplish before getting a favourite item or activity.
- **Help a child become more aware of time** by showing how long he has been at a task and how much longer he needs to “work”.
- **Help a child “value” a particular reward** by not allowing him to get too much access to it. It takes longer to get to the reward so he doesn’t get it as often and does not become bored with it.
- **Reduce disruptions to teaching.** Delivering tokens is quick and easy and allows the child to continue with the task.

- **“Normalize” reinforcement** by being more discrete than most tangible reinforcers such as food, toys or activities.
- **Increase options for reinforcers** by allowing “special events” to be included as rewards (e.g., going out to the playground 5 minutes early, etc.)

## Using Token Economies

1. **Start by selecting the behaviours to be rewarded:** Describe the specific behaviours you want to see. Phrase them in a positive manner (e.g., “hands in lap” rather than “no touching others”).
2. **Decide how you will measure the behaviours:** Some behaviours will be measured by the number of minutes the child displays the desired behaviour (e.g., sitting quietly for 1 minute) or the number of times the child displays appropriate behaviour (e.g., raising hand before asking a question).
3. **Decide where and when to monitor the behaviours:** For instance, you might decide to use this token system only in the classroom, during circle time or at the lunch table, based on convenience or identification of the most challenging times for the child.
4. **Select your tokens:** You can use lots of different things as tokens including poker chips, coloured dots, printed cards, pennies or even checkmarks. Some teachers prefer to use images of the targeted behaviour as their tokens, (e.g., a picture of nice sitting). Regardless of what you choose, tokens should be portable, and durable. They must be easy to give out and convenient to store. You may wish to put Velcro on the tokens so they can be fastened to a token board.

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- 5. Select your reinforcers or rewards:** Consider the child's individuality. Where possible, involve him in the selection of rewards. For instance, you might have the child list things that he would like to work for, or you might set out possible reinforcers and observe which ones he selects most often. Be sure that the reinforcers are appropriate to your classroom setting and remember to add new ones periodically.
- 6. Decide on the value of the reward:** How many tokens will be required in order to earn the reward? Remember that this can change over time. Initially, it should be fairly easy to earn the reward. Later, the child may need to earn more tokens to receive the same reward.
- 7. Start your program:** Have the tokens and token board ready to show to the child as you explain the program to him. Use language that is easily understood. Briefly remind the child of the system each time you use it.
- 8. Deliver the tokens consistently:** Give the tokens to the child as soon as they are earned. Initially, praise the child when giving the token. "Good sitting!" or "Nice hands in lap!" will remind the child why he is getting the token.
- 9. Review and adjust your token economy system:** Your goal is to eventually fade the child

off the token system, so remember to extend the time and amount of work required to earn tokens. Be careful not to do this too quickly or the positive behaviours may stop being exhibited.

### What does a token economy system look like?

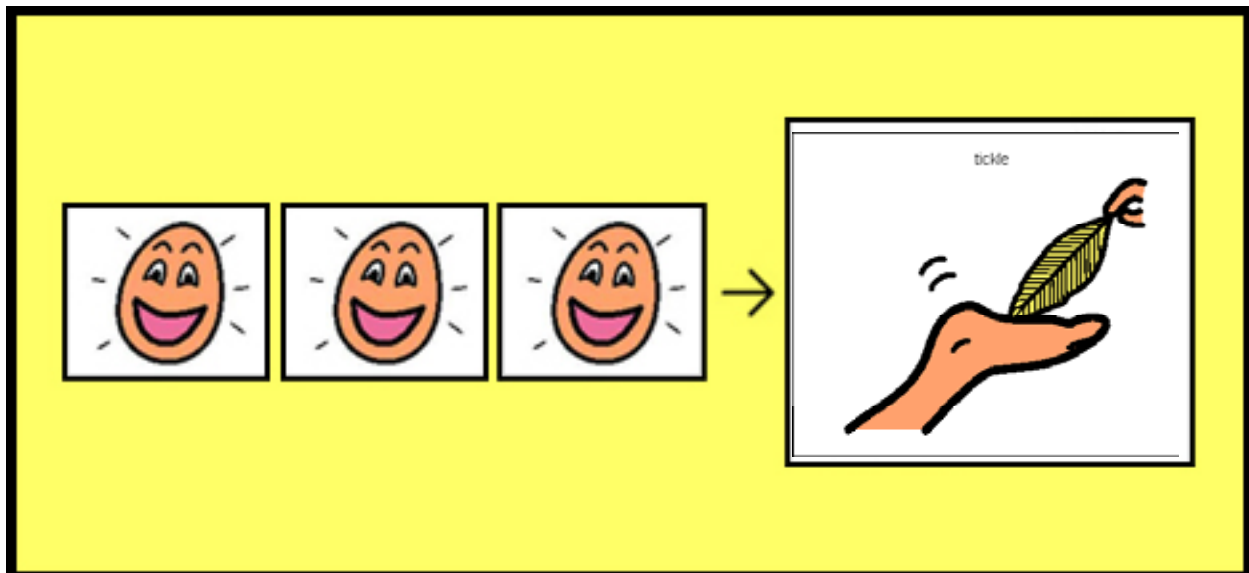
Token economy systems can take a variety of forms, from very simple to much more complex. If this is your first time developing a system, or you are working with a young child, you will want to keep things simple. You'll find some basic templates in the Visuals Engine of Supported Inclusion.

These will help you to build your own token board for displaying earned tokens.

### Here's an example of designing and using a token economy system.

*William is easily distracted. He often starts playing with things but ends up staring off into space or wandering away. His teacher wants him to learn to keep himself involved in purposeful play activities, and to finish what he is doing before moving on to another activity.*

We'll establish a goal for William to complete a short series of six activities during free play time. We will reward him with a token every time he



## Token Economy System, continued

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completes an activity. Initially, we'll select activities with clearly defined endings, such as puzzles, building a block tower using 10 blocks, etc.

We'll start with a token board that only requires a single response before the reward is delivered. As William becomes familiar with the token system, we'll move to two responses, and so on, until he gets to six responses before earning the reward. Each day before free play time, we'll remind William that he'll be earning tokens for each completed activity. We'll show him how many he needs to earn. We'll also review his choice of reinforcers and help him to select his reward. The picture of the reward will be placed in the end space of the board and will be visible to William throughout free play time. This will continually remind him of what he's working towards. In this case, William is working to earn a tickle.

Token economy systems are great to use in classrooms because they can be geared to a specific child, or to groups of children. The children may be working on improving the same behaviours or have completely different behaviours that will be reinforced. Token systems are most effective at maintaining positive behaviours when they are specifically designed for a child or group of children, address specific targeted behaviours, and are clearly communicated. The expectations and rules must be communicated and understood.

Think about using a token economy system in your classroom! With a little thought and some practice, you'll come to love this valuable teaching resource.

### For more information:

- Create your own token system by visiting the [VISUALS ENGINE](#).
- Learn more about "Using Visuals" in your classroom or visit the workshop on [Visual Communication](#).
- Take a look at how we used a token system with Michael and the new skill of [Asking a Friend to Play](#).