**Token Economies**

One of the most commonly used behavior management interventions, especially in settings for students who have learning or behavioral challenges, is the token economy system.  A token economy involves awarding ("reinforcing" a student with) tokens, chips, stickers, check markshttp://www.behavioradvisor.com/check3.gif, points, stars, or other items/markings to students who demonstrate desired behaviors identified by the teacher.  Students may periodically exchange the tokens for rewards, which are items or activities desirable to them.  A token program is often compared to a national economic system in which we work for money, which has no value in and of itself ("secondary reinforcer"), and later exchange it for items and activities that are valuable to us.

    Token economies are often quite effective for students who are resistant to other types of motivational or behavior management techniques.  Other benefits of this system are ease of administration, the use of immediate or frequent reinforcement (tokens) while teaching delayed gratification (holding tokens until trade-in time), lack of boredom or satiation for the student due to the availability of a variety of back-up reinforcers, and lack of competition between students as they compete only against themselves.

    When a token economy is used for one or a few students only, it is often arranged through the development of a contract.   Procedures for implementing this variation are presented in the link on the home page ([www.BehaviorAdvisor.com](http://www.behavioradvisor.com/index.html)) titled "[Contracts](http://www.behavioradvisor.com/Contracts.html)".  Over time, the tokens are periodically devalued so that students must perform at a higher level to earn the same value in back-up reinforcers.  This stiffening of requirements promotes continual improvement in behavior or performance by the students.

Token economies have great flexibility and utility; they have been shown in research studies to be effective with students with various kinds and severities of disabling conditions.  Perhaps the reason for the effectiveness is that a token or check mark is visible evidence of success and progress.  It also reminds the student to display proper behavior, and assures that the teacher will notice appropriate behavior and interact with the student in a positive manner.

**How to Use Token Economies**

**1. Select the behaviors to be rewarded.  The behaviors to be reinforced should be in concert with classroom rules and guidelines.**

**2. State the desired behaviors in specific and observable terms.  If at all possible, phrase them in a positive manner.  Be sure to tell the student what to do (the desired action), rather than what not to do** (e.g., "Raise hand before talking" rather than "No speaking out")**.** Promote a replacement behavior for the inappropriate action. That replacement behavior should serve the same internal need and serve the same purpose as the present incorrect behavior.

**3. Decide how you will measure the behaviors** (e.g., percentage correct, number of minutes engaged in proper behavior, number of times student displays appropriate behavior)**.**

**4. Decide where to monitor the behaviors (**e.g., only in the classroom or also in the lunchroom and on the bus)**.**

**5. Select the initial reinforcer.  Use a reinforcer that is easy to administer and convenient to store.  Devise a token/item/marking that will inhibit theft or counterfeiting.**

**6. Select your back-up reinforcers.  Involve your students in the selection to insure that the reinforcers will be perceived as being valuable.** (For instance, have the students list things that they would work to obtain, or complete one of the many published reinforcement inventories, or set out possible reinforcers and observe which ones are selected most often.)**Be sure that the reinforcers are appropriate. Consider educational value, cost, possible misuse, or danger involved.**

**7.  Place a price** (in tokens) **on your back-up reinforcers.  Record the actual price of any purchased items. Higher priced items will demand more tokens for trade-in.  Place a value on back-up reinforcers** (the rewards) **that are activity-oriented such as free time, listening to music, or painting.  Develop a wall chart that lists the number of tokens needed to purchase each back-up reinforcer.**

**8.  Place a value on the tokens. Give the tokens a value that is worth more now than in the future.  As students begin to function more appropriately, tokens will have to be devalued to motivate the kids to improve continually.  Next, develop a wall chart that  lists the number of tokens to be given for each desired behavior, and decide whether inappropriate behavior will result only in a withholding of tokens or whether you will place a fine ("response cost") and take away tokens for that misconduct.  If the latter is the case, make a wall chart that indicates the amount to be fined for each misbehavior.** **Before deciding on fines for a youngster who fails to demonstrate the required behavior, consider whether it seems fair to do so, and whether you are able to handle protests by students. (** Consider too whether you would consider it fair if the following were the case: You were absent from your job, claiming a "sick day". It was found out that you actually went on a ski trip on that day of your absence. The school district then decides to not only withhold reinforcement (dock you a day's pay) for the day you were skiing, but also take away your pay from a day where you were present in your classroom. Now... Is if fair to not only withhold a token from a student, but also take away a token that was earned earlier?)   **Finalize the details by developing your own monitoring sheet to keep track of awards and fines, and deciding how often and when tokens can be exchanged for back-up reinforcers** (e.g., at the end of each day, at the end of each week)**. Develop**   
**storage containers/procedures for yourself and the students and devise a method for displaying the back-up reinforcers.**

**10. Start your program. Have the materials ready to show to students as you explain the program in language that they can understand.  Make your presentation very positive and upbeat.  Post the wall charts or desk cards and review them periodically.**   
**Implement the program, providing the tokens as soon as they are earned. Add to your back-up reinforcer menu as necessary to maintain student motivation to strive for success.**

**11.  Periodically modify your system to wean your students from the token economy.  This change usually involves requiring more positive behavior for a longer period of time in order to obtain a check mark or token.** **Be sure to tell the student that the change is because you know that s/he is capable of so much more, and should be proud of his or her progress** (Just as you are proud of him/her)**. If you meet with strong resistence, or the student refuses to work for less, consider changing the "level" of reinforcer** (see the page on www.BehaviorAdvisor titled "Weaning kids from rewards")**.**