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“Positive Discipline Equals Positive Behavior”

A token system for behavioral change

By Kimberly Blaker

Finding positive approaches to gaining children’s cooperation and good behavior isn’t always easy. Frequently, the ‘tried and true’ methods turn out to be ‘tried and temporary’ at best, especially for children with behavior problems stemming from attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder or other behavior disorders.

One approach these kids won’t tire of quickly is a token system. With this method, children earn tokens for a variety of good behaviors and lose tokens for misbehavior. Then they purchase rewards or privileges with the tokens they’ve accumulated.

Benefits of the token system

The token system has a number of advantages over other forms of discipline and behavior management plans. First, it can be carried out any time and any place. Children often act up in stores or public places, leaving parents with few options for settling the problem.

With the token system, you and your child will carry a supply of tokens everywhere you go. Warn your child in advance that inappropriate behavior will result in immediate action, or loss of tokens, while good behavior will be rewarded.

Second, the token system teaches children how to save, budget, and plan expenditures because tokens are used in a similar manner to money.

Next, this system prevents inappropriate or useless measures that parents often toss out in the heat of the moment. Therefore, empty threats become a thing of the past, and because your child is aware of the consequences and your ability to administer them immediately, he’s less likely to act up.

Fourth, the token system is a positive approach, which eliminates the likelihood of criticism, yelling, arguing, and other less than healthy ways that parents get caught up in dealing with problem behavior.

Finally, the token system can be altered regularly to keep kids’ interest and therefore, increase its effectiveness. The token system, or one of its variations, can be used from about the age of three on into the preteen years, depending on your child’s maturity level.

Getting started

Make a list of the behaviors you’d like to work on with your child including positive behaviors you’d like your child to improve on, such as using good table manners or putting dirty clothes in the hamper, and then, if your child is five or older, make a separate list of problem behaviors, such as name calling or hitting.

For children under five, the token system should be used only for reinforcing positive behavior. The frustration caused by losing tokens for poor behavior will not be helpful to the preschooler.

Next, go through each list and prioritize, and choose only four or five behaviors to work on at a time. Once your child has improved on a certain behavior, remove it from the list and add a new one.

The next step is to determine how many tokens to reward your child or to confiscate. Your list might look similar to the one below. Keep in mind that the number of tokens assigned to a particular behavior should fit the severity or difficulty of the behavior, relative to the other behaviors on which you are working.

Hang up book bag and jacket	Earn 3 tokens
Eat supper without complaining	Earn 2 tokens
Saying please and thank you	Earn 1 token
Completing homework	Earn 6 tokens
Hitting	Lose 5 tokens
Tattling	Lose 2 token

You should also try to estimate the number of tokens your child is likely to earn and lose in a week. She should be able to earn enough tokens to pay for her problem behaviors. It's not a good idea for your child to go into debt. If this becomes a problem, adjust the distribution of tokens accordingly.

You'll also need to choose rewards for your child to purchase with the tokens. Determine what will be most enticing to your child. While a trip to the video store might be a real winner with some kids, others wouldn't be fazed by it.

As you plan the rewards, include privileges that your child asks for or does regularly and that would be devastating if the privilege were lost. Those rewards will be

the strongest motivators. In order to make such rewards effective, you'll need to place limits on such privileges unless they have been earned and purchased by your child.

Set guidelines with your child for rewards that require your time or attention. If your child wants to buy a trip to the apple orchard, require a two-day notice. While for a board game you might agree to play within four hours of a request.

Choose rewards with a variety of values so that your child has the option to either make frequent purchases or to save for something big. Small children require frequent opportunities to purchase rewards in order to maintain their interest.

Poker chips make good tokens. For older children assign different point values to each color.

Finally, when handing out tokens, always use verbal praise as part of the reward. Tell your child you're proud of his actions or appreciate his thoughtfulness. When your child is no longer earning tokens for the behavior, continued use of praise will reinforce it.

Variations

- If your child struggles to complete schoolwork and turn in assignments, use the token system for this alone. Ask your child's teacher to send home a daily report of what your child has completed and turned in and reward your child's efforts. Use grade rewards only if your child is capable of achieving high marks without too much difficulty.
- As your child approaches the teen years, tokens may be perceived as childish. However, if your preteen still struggles behaviorally and with completing tasks, offer a checkbook ledger for tallying points instead. When points are earned,

have your child fill in the ledger with the number of points earned for mowing the lawn or helping with the laundry. Then initial to show you’ve approved the points.

Sidebar:

Fun rewards for gaining your child’s cooperation:

- a trip to the ice cream parlor
- a video or game rental
- collector cards
- gel pen
- a trip to the park
- favorite fast food
- playing a board game with Mom or Dad
- a new book
- a pass to stay up late
- a friend overnight
- an hour of TV
- a packet of colorful modeling clay
- bowling or roller skating
- a treat from the ice cream truck
- favorite meal for supper

PULL QUOTE: Children often act up in stores or public places, leaving parents with few options other than to leave the store and deal with the problem immediately, wait until

later to discipline the child, or to try and correct the problem in the store while onlookers sneer for being either too harsh or too easy on your child.

PULL QUOTE: When your child is no longer earning tokens for the behavior, continued use of praise will reinforce it.

SIDEBAR IDEAS OR WAYS TO LOCALIZE: List fun local attractions to use as rewards.

Kimberly Blaker of Michigan is a mother of two. She writes for parenting and women's magazines around the country and in Canada.

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