

# SPECIAL REPORT

The **E**ducation Company

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one intervention at a time*



## More Keys to Initiating and Maintaining a Successful Token Economy

There are a few more key elements required for a successful token economy. As mentioned previously, it is very important to begin by observing the children and noting each individual's behavior. Next, target behaviors (those eligible for reward and any with cost components attached) must be clearly defined. Everyone involved needs to be "on the same page" – teachers, parents, children, other staff - or the token economy will not be effective.

Ensure that everything is explained beforehand in simple terms appropriate for the age group in question. Also clearly define the number of tokens awarded or lost per incident, and when tokens will be awarded. Initial requirements and opportunities to earn tokens should be more numerous, and tokens easier to obtain, at the start, and become more difficult to earn, and less frequently distributed, as the system progresses; however, it is important to remember that raising the bar too high, too quickly, will discourage students and lead to failure of the token economy system. Goals and rewards require adjustment throughout the system – the goal is to gradually increase the requirements as the children become proficient in exhibiting target behaviors

without setting goals out of reach. In research, a situation where the requirements are so difficult that no one can perform well is called a floor effect. Essentially, the participants can't "get off the floor" because the requirements are too extreme. The ceiling effect is the opposite - requirements are set so low that everyone "reaches the top" too quickly. If either of these effects occurs, it is the fault of the researcher, who must then adjust the experiment appropriately to obtain successful trials. So it is for anyone utilizing behavior management techniques. Both floor and ceiling effects must be avoided for a token economy to be successful. Another important element is the backup reinforcer. Token economies work best when the participants have a say in the options for rewards. After all, if the children aren't interested in the "ultimate" prize, they certainly won't be motivated to participate. Backup reinforcers need not be expensive, just desirable. Lastly, it is crucial that rewards or cost components are given or taken immediately following the behavior. It is vital to the success of a token economy that the consequences (good or ill) of target behaviors become strongly associated with the gain or loss of tokens, which can only occur if the response of the teacher or parent is immediate and consistent. If not, the association will weaken (or never develop at all), and the token economy will be ineffective (or fail completely).

## Ending a Token Economy

In the classroom, there is no need to create an end plan – the system will end naturally as the school year comes to a close. At home, parents will want to intersperse tangible reinforcements with praise-oriented reinforcement, until the reinforcers are no longer needed.

A token economy is a very flexible reinforcement system. It can be tailored to all age groups, time frames, and reward levels.



*Educators learn how to create a safe, positive learning environment where students behave responsibly and take accountability for their conduct. They explore strategies to organize and manage the classroom with increased confidence and a calm sense of control. Through professional development, educators discover how to create a learning environment in which their students can excel, and in which they can go home feeling a sense of accomplishment.*

*This professional development is designed for K–12 teachers, special-subject teachers, administrators, counselors, resource teachers, and substitutes. Contact the Education Company for a Free Discipline Discussion.*

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