

Token Economies- Part I

This week we are talking about token economies. I kind of debated doing it this early in our stage one of learning, because it is a little bit more advanced. But, it's so very powerful, that I want you to start using it. I want you to see these positive behavior changes happening with your kiddos and in your family. It's something that we use all the time around here, when we need it, in my own family.

Token economy, let's kind of break down those words. You're like, "What on earth are you talking about?" Token, is the little thing that you get, right? Think of token as kind of like money. It's something that you get, and you can hold, or you can look at, you can see. An economy, we exchange tokens for things. Easy peasy, right? Supply and demand. No, we're not going to get into economics.

But, an economy, we get money for working, and we then give our money at the store in exchange for a thing. That's it, that's the whole token economy. You give your kiddo something for working, for engaging in some desired behaviors, for doing something, for doing something that you want them to do. Then later on they exchange those tokens for a prize, for a reward, for a privilege, for an activity, whatever it may be. We'll get into the nitty gritty of that with the webinar so you can see lots of examples with the definition.

But, we have used the token economy with our older daughter, before she was even two years old. She was 22 months. Not even two. We started a little sticker chart with her. It was a strip of paper that I drew lines on, so that there were five boxes. In each box she could get a sticker. She really liked stickers at the time, so it was a good fit for her. You don't have to use stickers, whatever your kid likes. She liked stickers, and every time ... When we first started it, we were really working on using your words. That is something when you have little ones, toddlers and preschoolers, oh my gosh. You say that all the time, "Use your words." We had talked about talking nicely, use your words, we had watched Daniel Tiger about this, has a little song. Other shows, you can find all kinds of cartoons about use your words. We had taught it, we had practiced it, but we weren't reinforcing it very strongly. It wasn't happening very often, so I was not reinforcing it very well.

I showed her when she got all five stickers on her chart, she could give me the strip, and I would give her, I think two M&M's was the reward at that time. It wasn't much. It wasn't a big deal. But, to teach her that every time you use your words, you get something. If I was carrying around M&M's all day and every time she used her words, giving her M&M's. Well, that would work. Obviously it would be reinforcing, if your kid likes M&M's. But, that's not a very healthy way for us to live, by actual health, and diet, and nutrition. But, just not ... I don't want to be rewarding with candy every single time my kid does something.

The token economy is there to help us make it a little more natural, a little more like the real world, a little more building in that intrinsic motivation eventually, as we fade it out. It helps to make things more natural, and less of this contrived, "I'm following you around, giving you candy all the time." That's not what we're going for here. So, with the token economy, every time she did talk nicely she would get a sticker. When we first started it, I was having to do it all the time. I mean, "Thank you for talking nicely. Good job, you get a sticker. Good job talking nicely. You used your words, you get a sticker." And so, we were going through strip, after strip, after strip, several strips a day of these little, I cut up a piece of

paper and drew some lines on it so it looked like boxes. Nothing fancy. Didn't have to be much. But I mean, she wasn't even getting a half a bag of M&M's a day. She wasn't getting a ton of candy.

But, she was getting rewarded for that, and learning that once she earned something, she could trade it in for what she wanted. Once she earned her stickers, she could trade it in for what she wanted. Now that same one is almost four, when I'm filming this. We go through phases of having a sticker chart, or not. Having a rewards system, or not. 'Cause, you don't have to have it out all the time. We'll talk more about that next week, about flexibility, and making this work for you.

But, as we have a problem, behavior or something that's going on. Things kind of come in waves. We get something under control, we're good for a while. Then a new problem pops up, and we get frustrated. "Okay, what's the replacement behavior?" We tell her, and then we choose a system to reinforce it. I'll go through just printing out a table in word document. Just insert a table, however many squares you want. I have an app on my phone, there are a ton of apps. You can just look in the app store for like, "Stick chart, reward chart," you can do Google Images for these things and print them out for free. There's a ton of different formats this can take. My sister always had a jar with marbles in it, she did a marble jar. You can do a puff ball jar, if you like those little crafty puff balls. You can do points, have a point system. Just tally marks on your chalkboard, dry erase board that's in the kitchen with the menu for the week. Whatever, it doesn't have to be fancy.

But, it works. You can change how many stickers, you can just ... Stickers. Tokens, I say stickers 'cause that's what we use. It works with the little kiddos, it works with big kiddos, it works with me. I work to get a paycheck, and then I use that money to go to Target, or wherever, and buy things, you know? You're doing this in real life. You're experiencing this, so now how do we make that for our kiddos so it feels like real life?

A token economy, you give them something. You give them a token, the physical marble to put in the jar. Physical sticker to put on. On my app, she gets ... On my phone, she gets to push a button and there's like a little animation that pops up. Then they get to trade it in for something they want. That can be something you define ahead of time, "When you get your five stickers, you get two M&M's." It could be, wait till it's full and then say, "Well, here's some choices for your rewards." It could be you, you create a fancy reward system like at Chuck E. Cheese. You have three tickets, you get an eraser. But, if you have 300 tickets, you get a stuffed animal, and they can save them up. You can make it however you want. We'll get into the nitty gritty of that.

Big picture, using reinforcement within a system, and making it a little more naturalistic for your kiddos. We love it in my house. My own child will be like, "I think I'd like to start another sticker chart," after she earns one. We love it, it works. It works, it works, and it makes life easier because it's just, "Okay, if you're not going to eat your dinner you're not going to get your sticker on your sticker chart. Then you can't have screen time before bed."

It's just, a system in place. "If you go to bed nicely, you get a sticker. If you do this, you get your marble in the marble jar. If you do this ..." It's the pre-met principle, which you should recognize from a couple weeks ago. "First do this, then get your sticker." And so, it's still using reinforcement, but it's spreading it out a little bit more to be a little more naturalistic. And then, they get the reward later.

So, let's learn all about token economies. I hope you like them as much as I do. I hope you try it. Don't get caught up in it has to be fancy, and pretty, and color coded, and a poster board on the wall. Just try it, and see what happens this week, and share it with us. Thank you.

A token economy is one of my absolutely favorite, favorite strategies, and tips and tricks. Both as a parent, and with little kiddos right now as a mom, it's super helpful. As an ABA practitioner, I use this with all of my clients. As a Special Ed teacher in the past, we had all kinds of token economies. For every kid, it can be different. It is just so effective, and so I hope you guys like it as much as I do.

Let's review what is positive reinforcement. You should know this by now. I feel kind of silly reviewing it, but it's so important. Just look at it again. Behavior happens, something is added to the environment, we give the kiddo something. Some praise counts, give them something. In a token economy, we're going to give them an actual token. A thing, and then that behavior has to be strengthened by whatever you're providing. We really still have to pay attention to what happens later. If I give the kiddo a sticker on a sticker chart, and then they have major problem behavior. Well, that sticker might not have been reinforcing. So, making sure that we are reinforcing the behavior.

Why do we call it an economy? I already kind of talked about this. People who are anti ABA, which I don't quite understand obviously. They'll say, "Why are the kiddos always working for contrived reinforcement? They should have intrinsic motivation, and they should want to do these things." My response is this right here. In the real world, we as adults do our jobs to get a paycheck. We do our jobs for some sort of reinforcement. If we're stay at home moms, we do our job of teaching our kiddos, and taking care of them. The reinforcement is watching them grow, and learn, and having fun with them.

In the real world, you do a job and you receive a token. A paycheck, and then you can save those up and trade them in for things, called shopping. A token economy, we're teaching our kiddos about the real world.

The definition is, a behavior change system consisting of three major components. This is important. You need a specified list of target behaviors. These are the things your child needs to do. Tokens or points that the participants receive for emitting the target behaviors. So, what do they get immediately? Then, what's the backup reinforcer? What can they trade their tokens in for, what can they trade their points in for? What can they earn, what can they buy? The list of target behaviors, give a token for doing those things. Then have some good reinforcers that your kiddos can get by exchanging their tokens. If you give them 12 tokens and then they get something they don't really want. They get half of a cookie, and they've worked three days to earn 12 tokens. Well, that might not be so effective. Maybe they would have rather had screen time, or stay up late past bedtime, or go out to dinner and they get to pick the restaurant, or some sort of privilege.

Step one, define your target behaviors. We have talked about this before, you know how to define your target behaviors. But in this one, you're going to choose one to three behaviors. You might sit down and think about this and think, "Okay, I want my kid to do this, this, this, this, this, this, and this." Let's choose one to three. Prioritize what do you need to work on right now? What's going on right now? What have you been hearing yourself nagging, or complaining, or what's causing you to feel frustrated? What is happening right now? And, you can change these.

We'll actually talk about token economies again next week, about how to be more flexible with them, and be more creative, and these sorts of things. But, one to three behaviors. With little kiddos it might be a big, obey. That's your target behavior. Then you explain to them what that means, "When mom asks you to do something, you do it. You don't complain, you don't argue, you just have to obey." With older kiddos it might be a chore list. "Get your homework done in this amount of time. Do your chores in this amount of time." It might be more complex. One to three behaviors. Do not give them a laundry list of things to do.

Make sure behaviors are short and sweet. Not, "You need to clean up your room. That means all the stuff off the floor, and wipe down the walls. Do this and that, and this and that, and this and that." Clean up your room, that's it. If all of those other things are required, then you need to teach that, and you need to practice that with them. But, in this, let's just get to the point. Clear and concise, tell your kiddo what they need to do.

And, what can they do instead? Remember, when we look at these problems we gotta flip our perspective. Not from what they're doing wrong, and what the problem is. What's the desired behavior that they can do instead?

Here's step two, your system. What is this going to look like? I have been known to take a piece of scrap paper and draw five circles on it, and I will draw a check mark every time you get whatever. "Every time you follow directions, talk nicely, use your words, obey," whatever. "When you get all five check marks on this piece of junk mail off of my kitchen counter, then you can get ..." Whatever activity that my child wants at that time. It doesn't have to be fancy. It does not have to be fancy.

If you are fancy and you like Pinterest, go for it. It doesn't have to be. There are apps, all kinds of different things. Pick something that you have at home, don't go spend money on this. Pick something that your child is into. If they really like coloring, then maybe they color every circle on a piece of paper, and they all end up making a caterpillar, or something like that. They get to color it in. If they like stickers, use a sticker chart. If they're not into artsy craftsy things, give them points. If they're older, maybe points, or pennies, or money type things towards allowance. It doesn't matter, just pick one. You're not stuck with it. This is not set in stone.

Then the goal, how many tokens do they need to get before they get to trade it in for their reward? Is it five stickers, is it 35 stickers? What's the goal for this time, this time around?

Then step three, is to pick the reinforcers. What are the choices, what can they get, what's the good stuff that they trade it in for? It's better that you don't dictate this, but that you have a fun, open discussion. "What would you like to earn? Well, what sounds fun?" With older kiddos, you could easily make a Chuck E. Cheese style menu. Or, "You really want to get your ears pierced. Then you need 100 points. You want to want five extra minutes of your show? You need 10 points." They get to pick, and trade them in as they choose. Like a real economy, give choices. We've talked before about finding effective reinforcers, so go back to that. What are the things that your kiddo likes? Make it good, make them want to do this.

Okay, and then put it to work. Give the token as immediately as possible. We know this in the definition of positive reinforcement, as immediately as possible. If you're out grocery shopping and you have a marble jar back at home. Well, then just tell them. "I am so glad you used an inside voice at the grocery

store instead of shouting. So, you have earned a marble. When we get home, that's one marble." Then, "You were wonderful at the checkout line. Now I owe you another marble, that's two." You can tell them. That's kind of the beauty of the app on my phone, is that, that's almost always with us, so I can give it right away.

Always pair prize with the token. I kind of already did that in my grocery store example. But, tell them why. Or, ask them why. "I really want to give you a puff ball right now for your puff ball jar. Why do you think that is?" Or after dinner, "Do you think you earned a sticker at dinner time? Why?" Making them recognize what they've done, and identifying it. Make a big deal out of it every point, every marble, every sticker is to be celebrated. "This is awesome. Great job eating all of your food. Go put your sticker on your chart, that was fantastic."

Give them quickly at first. When you first start this system, if you only give one sticker a day, why would they buy into it? Give lots. Give them a quick pace when you start out. Get your kiddo to buy in, and to like it.

Then, sometimes they don't earn it, and you can use that as a discussion, and a reflection. "Well, why not? Okay, what can you do next time? I really want you to earn your stickers. What's our plan? How are we going to get there?" And, always make sure your kiddo knows while they get the token. Don't do it for them. Don't be over there just throwing marbles into a jar, and they're not even paying attention to you. But, "I'm giving you this marble because you did this, and I really appreciate it. Here, why don't you put it in?" Involving them, making a big deal out of it for them.

So, some tips. Set the goal low at first. We want them to get the reinforcer really quickly the first time. We want them to like this system, and not think you're crazy putting marbles in a marble jar, or making them earn points when they've never had to do that before, and they think it sounds like work. We want to make this reinforcing and fun, and so to do that they need to get the reinforcer. They need to get the good stuff. So when you start, set that goal pretty low. And then, they earn it quickly. "Okay. Last time you only had to get five, we're going to bump it up to seven 'cause you're so awesome, and you're getting better at things. Here we go." Or, give a lower quality reinforcer. "You got five, so you get five minutes extra after bed time. Okay, now the goal is 10 but you can earn," Whatever's a bigger deal than that. Make every part of it a big deal. This is fun, and this is to celebrate, and this is really focusing on the positive, and building up the positive.

Celebrate the small wins. Little things that they do, we get to celebrate with tokens. This enables us to give lots of reinforcement, without satiating them on the reinforcer. We're not constantly giving out candy, or trinkets, or tons of screen time, and the kid's always on the iPad now, which is not what you were going for. But, we can reward them with something, and then we get to really celebrate the big wins with a big reward. That is the big reinforcer that they get to trade everything in for, and it is awesome, and it is to be celebrated. Then, they're going to want to earn it again, so let's start over. "Okay, let's set a new goal. Let's pick a new thing." And keep going.

Raise the goal slowly and incrementally. If you start at five, don't jump to 30 the next time. You will definitely lose their interest, and you will lose their buy in. We want our kiddos on board with this. If they are 14 years old, I wouldn't do a sticker chart, 'cause why would they be on board with something so babyish? Think about what will they like? What will they be interested in? What will they choose to engage in these desired behaviors to earn? Make it fun, and make it exciting.

You can be flexible. If they do something really fantastic, well give them more than one token. "Oh my gosh, I asked you to clean your room and you actually cleaned everything, and then vacuumed? You didn't just pick stuff up? You can have three points instead of just one." You can give a bunch, and it also leaves you wiggle room. So, if they have some minor problem behaviors, "Well I was going to give you seven puff balls for a good bed time. But, we're down to five because of this and that." Then you can talk about what happened, but you can still reinforce that they did okay, but not great. So, "All right, let's really try to get all of them tomorrow night."

If the token doesn't seem reinforcing your child, they don't like it and they're like, "Oh, I hate these marbles. I'm not going to put them in the jar." Well then, change the physical format of it. Change your system. Change your system up regularly to keep their interest. Use it when you need it. When you have a problem behavior, when you're finding yourself frustrated and you need to turn it positive, do it. When there's a big transition going on, if you're going from summer into the school year, from the school year into summer. Big changes in things that, these setting events could lead to some problems. Toss in a new system, reinforce those desired behaviors. Get your kiddos on board, and give them lots of praise and attention.

And then, when you're not having those issues anymore, you get to fade it out. You don't have to use it all the time. You do not always need a system in place. Use it when you need it. It works, it is effective, but you don't have to have it 24/7 if you don't want to. Use it to increase those desired behaviors, and celebrate those wins. Celebrate the little ones, and the big ones with your kiddos, and make it fun.