

TOKEN PROGRAMS DONE RIGHT

For use as a part of therapy services

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS IT?

- 1) A list of behaviors to work on
 - 2) A list of the person's privileges
 - 3) The person gets tokens for doing well on the behaviors
 - 4) The person trades in tokens for the privileges
- It is not these steps that make the big difference, but rather how these steps are done

See Appendix II for a couple of examples of token programs.

CHILDREN WANT IT

- Once explained, the children usually want this system
- Once one child is on it, most siblings ask to be on the program as well

DO IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME

- Follow all the principles outlined here
- A half-hearted attempt may get in the way of using the tool properly later

WHO CAN IT BE USED WITH?

- Adults can use them with themselves
- Token programs can be very effective in institutions/group home settings when the individual on the program really wants the program. Many individuals with mild to moderate mental retardation, for example, feel empowered when on such a program and find it easier to make choices that work well for them in the long run – being happier and sometimes being able to live in less restrictive settings. !WARNING!: Some governmental bureaucracies and funding sources do not understand that behavioral programs often are wanted by the participant, and that many people use behavioral programs with themselves. Token programs can be misunderstood by such bureaucracies as being demeaning and contrary to human rights and may therefore not approve of it.
- Children 5 years and older, depending on developmental level (a “sticker-program” is used when a token program is too complicated for the child or the child is 2-5 years old)
- This presentation/handout will focus on children 5 years and older

POSSIBLE USES PART 1

- Train attention abilities (standard treatment; empirically validated)
- Improve behaviors and choices (standard treatment; empirically validated)
- Give a child an increased sense of control (helpful with depression)
- Make feedback concrete and believable
- Ensure regular positive attention
- Help the child understand that the parent is paying attention to them even when not actively engaged with them
- Confront fears (empirically supported; not a focus of this presentation)

POSSIBLE USES PART 2

- Reduce sibling rivalry
- Create a sense of fairness among children with very different needs and wants
- Reduce conflict with parents
- Improve communication between parent and child and between parents
- Increase parental consistency
 - Between parents
 - From moment to moment within the same parent

IN FULL DISCLOSURE...

- When used with children, the program actually does more to shape the parents' behaviors than the children's behaviors
- Changes in the parents' behaviors in turn change the behaviors in the children
- It is important to try to get all parental figures on board with the program, unless they have minimal contact. The program is still useful if only done in one of multiple households the child is at, but the benefit is the greatest when everyone are on board.

MAKING THE LIST OF BEHAVIORS AND ASSIGNING TOKEN VALUES

MAKING THE BEHAVIOR LIST

- Decide whether the program will target behaviors in general (usually 4-8 behaviors), or one or two specific behaviors.
- Unless targeting a specific issue, include some behaviors that are harder, and some that are somewhat easier
- Do not include behaviors the child already does perfectly – they may lose their existing motivation for it if you do
- Ask for the child to suggest behaviors to work on
- Consider having the child add an item or two of things they want to improve for their own sake (e.g., “practice basketball for 20 minutes”).

FOCUS ON WHAT TO DO

- As much as possible, all behaviors should be phrased in terms of what you want the child to do, rather than what not to do
 - See Appendix I
 - Positives often helps remove some arguments. If the rule is “don’t hit,” the child is likely to argue that it was not really on purpose and not really a hit, when it regardless is clear that the child did not meet the expectation to “be gentle”
- With young kids, or persons with little maturity, there are times you may need to use some “don’t” phrasing to make it specific and understandable, but avoid it if you can

SPECIFIC BEHAVIORS, PART 1

- The behaviors in the program should be easily identifiable and specific enough for the child to easily know whether they met the expectation or not
- Avoid words such as “attitude,” “back-talking,” “mean,” and “bullying” – they are too vague
- When easy, define what is good enough
 - Not “practice basketball,” but “practice basketball for at least 20 minutes”

REALISTIC

- Behaviors need to be set up so the child has a chance of success
- The behavioral expectations on the list should be shaped so that if the child puts in even just a little bit of effort, the child should be able to earn 2 or more tokens each day
- The behaviors in the program need to be almost entirely under the child's control (see Appendix I for examples)

REALISTIC – DIVIDING UP THE DAY

- For behaviors that are targeted that are problematic many times a day, it is usually best to divide the day up into three
 - Morning until lunch (or morning until school starts)
 - Lunch until dinner (or after school until dinner)
 - After dinner until in bed
- At each of these points, a token is rewarded for success with the targeted behavior. If you can, award it at that time. The next part of the day for earning tokens then starts immediately.
- Sometimes you have to award the tokens later (e.g., they are at school), but then give the tokens as soon as you can.

REALISTIC – DIVIDING UP THE TASK

- Some tasks or expectations are too big to complete in one sitting, or the child loses attention too quickly to do it. In that case, try to divide it up into parts.
- Example: Vacuuming the hallway, the kitchen, and the living room, earns the child one token. Vacuuming the rest of the apartment earns the child another token.

REALISTIC – DOING IT IN STEPS

- Some expectations are too daunting or unrealistic in their entirety when the child has not gotten used to it yet
- In that case, use “successive approximations” – a fancy way of saying, reward behaviors that are on the way to what you want, and then increase your expectations.
- The challenge is that you still want to make it specific and clearly understood by the child.
- Example: The parent wants the child to be able to come along for an hour trip to a store without the child wandering off (out of boredom or being unable to resist distractions). To begin with, the child is taken on 15 minute trips and is given a token for staying within reach of the cart (“Espen, can you still reach the cart?”) for these 15 minutes. After a few trips of success, it is increased to 30 minutes, then 45 minutes, and then 60 minutes. (If the child has attention difficulties or hyperactivity, 60 minutes may be unrealistic unless diverted with a video-game or other entertainment)

WEIGHTING BEHAVIORS

- Some behaviors may be seen as so difficult to change and so important that it is suitable to give more than one token for it.
- When you can, divide it up (see the 3 previous slides) so it is still one token at a time rather than either all the tokens or none of the tokens.
- Example: Jack has had a significant problem with hitting lately. The other behaviors on his program are not that important by comparison. Because he usually does not hit more than once each day, it did not seem the best to divide the day up into three for tokens. Instead, he is given 3 tokens each day he is gentle with others.

“PER”

- Some behaviors are better tracked on a “per” basis – that is, the child gets 1 token each time they do it
- Put a limit on it if the child starts to abuse it
- Try to give the token as soon as you can after the behavior was done

Examples:

- “1 token each time she takes a shower”
- “1 token each time he dunks his own head under water while swimming, up to a maximum of 2 tokens each time swimming”
- “1 token for making the bed in the morning”

“BEYOND EXPECTATIONS”

- It is okay to have a behavior or two on the program that is not an expectation, but that you want to reward anyway.
- Then treat it as a bonus, and do not put pressure on it.

9/10 RULE

- If 5 years or younger, developmental delays, or a particular safety concern, use the following rule:

$$9/10 = 10/10$$

- If there are problem behaviors that once in a rare while are appropriate, treat the appropriate situations as not appropriate in terms of the tokens
- For example:
 - Play-hitting = hitting
 - Never touch medicines (even if trying to help)

MAKING THE PRIVILEGE LIST

USE EVERY-DAY PRIVILEGES

- Use the kinds of privileges that you may already give or take away depending on their behavior.
- Avoid “special” privileges that are not already in use in the family or that are one-time events. Most of the privileges should be parts of their daily lives already.
- If “special” additional privileges are relied upon, the child will often choose to forego the “special” privilege and the program falls apart
- If “special” privilege, they frequently regress when they have acquired the privilege
- Using every-day privileges will help them recognize the less structured behavioral system naturally in place in most good homes even when no token program is used
- Using every-day privileges makes it easier for the child to recognize the cause-and-effect relationships in real life

EXAMPLES OF PRIVILEGES

- Stay up another 30 minutes
- 30 minutes of TV
- 30 minutes of DS/PC/game console
- Treat (treats can be privileges, snacks can't)

Most of these examples would be repeatable (e.g., 2 hours of TV for 4 tokens), although most would limit the “staying up later” to trading in for it once or twice in an evening

NO SPECIAL PRIVILEGES, BUT...

- “Special” privileges may be added once the program has been set up without having to rely on them
- Having enough for special privileges would require making sacrifices in other areas (not enough tokens for all the daily privileges if the child wants to save up for the special privilege)
- Examples of special privileges:
 - New toys
 - Pokémon cards
 - New bike
 - Trip to the Wisconsin Dells
 - New vide-games
 - Xbox 720 Holographic System

CHOOSING PRIVILEGES FOR ACQUIRED BEHAVIORS AND SKILLS

- Using “bribes” and special privileges is suitable for behaviors that once learned are established:

For example:

- Wearing jeans every day for three weeks (needing to get used to it)
- Going to the bathroom appropriately and on her own
- Tie the shoelaces (with or without help) when the child has a hard time doing it

Special privileges are actually preferable when the child is not entirely in control because they don't yet have the skills to always complete it correctly.

NOT FRIENDS OR “I LOVE YOU TIME”

- Child should not be paying tokens to see friends, siblings, or parents (sends the wrong message regarding love and attachments)
- Still appropriate to pay tokens to be out longer or stay up longer to be with friends/family
- Family ice-cream stop on a hot day should not be there
- The daily kinds of treats in the evening should be on the program
- Family watches TV each night – tokens should be paid for that
- Family has a movie-night every Friday, then no tokens paid for that

NOT MONEY, BUT...

- Money is usually not suitable as a privilege
- Buying things at stores with tokens should not be part of the initial program design, but can be added (at the parent's, not the child's, discretion).
- For most parents, it works well for 1 token to have the buying power of a quarter, some go with 2 tokens for a quarter due to family finances.
- Example: The child sees a 1\$ matchbox car at the store that the child really wants the parent to buy. The parent's immediate response should then not be "no," not be "yes," but rather be: "that will be 4 tokens."

NOT MONEY, BUT... PART 2

- It can also be used for upgrades
 - The family is at Kelly's Creamery and the child wants the 3-scoop waffle-cone that costs 3 dollars more than the ice-cream the parents planned to buy => "You can have the child cone as usual, or you can upgrade to that ice-cream for 12 tokens"
 - The sensible shoes cost \$30. The adolescent insists on Nididdas Nitro Boost pancake soled shoes that costs \$70 => "Those look like really cool shoes. Seems like you really want them. That would be 160 tokens."
- Some parents are afraid of the money it may cost them with these tokens, but it usually results in saving money.
 - The child usually does not want to give up the tokens. That matchbox car may cost tokens that could have been used for 2 hours of videogames.
 - Parents often end up buying these things anyway and usually end up buying things less often when there is a token system in place.

CAN NOT BE GROUNDED FROM THE PRIVILEGES

- A child should not be grounded from a privilege that is on the privilege list. It is already built in. If they earn few tokens, they get little access to it by the way the token program is already structured.
- Exception 1: If the child abuses a privilege, the privilege may be removed.
 - Examples
 - A child looks up pornography after trading in tokens to use the computer.
 - A child repeatedly is unable to come off the Wii without becoming angry.
- Exception 2: A behavior the child has not (or very rarely) engaged in before and that is a lot worse than the child's other behaviors.

ASSIGNING TOKEN COSTS TO PRIVILEGES

- 1) Calculate approximate tokens earned for a perfect day.
 - 2) Decide what, and how much of, privileges the parents think would be good in response to a perfect day
 - 3) Assign token costs so that 1) and 2) result in about the same number of tokens. It is appropriate that the child can earn more tokens than will be spent on schooldays so that they can have tokens left over to spend on the weekends that have more free time
- Put a high price when want to discourage something but do not want to say no to it

AWARDING THE TOKENS

WHAT TO USE AS TOKENS

- Can be almost anything, for example
 - Poker chips (my favorite)
 - Marbles
 - Acrylic jewels
- Best if something the child can hold and feel
- Should be easy to tell the difference between a big and small pile
 - “tickets” or fake money do not do as good of a job at this
- Do not use real money, and avoid fake money, as this tends to confuse the pricing on the privileges (“What? 8 dollars for a soda?”) – an exception can be made if a good fit for a specific theme (see slide 45 and Appendix IV)
- Make sure that if there are multiple children on a token program, their tokens can easily be told apart (e.g., color or initials on them in permanent marker)
- Make sure the child does not have other access to the tokens (e.g., finds more tokens in the game closet)

PRINCIPLES FOR AWARDING THE TOKENS

- Try to award the tokens as soon as you can after they are earned
- Make it a positive moment
- Do not “double-dip” – if the child gets a token for following directions, and another token for making their bed in the morning, then the child should still get a token for following directions, even if refusing to following the direction of making their bed (but will have to look to the future for earning a token for making the bed)

BEHAVIORS, NOT FEELINGS

- If the child does the positive behavior, give praise for it and give the token
- If the child did it begrudgingly, then it is particularly important that you reward the positive behavior they did.
- We often want our children to do their chores and act politely because they feel like it. What they need to learn, however, is that they need to be done regardless of how they feel.

POSITIVE FOCUS

- When reviewing the tokens – review what earned the tokens for
- No lectures regarding misbehaviors (have those at other times of the day)
- If child asks what did not earn tokens for, or there is a need to remind the child of where to make improvements, talk about future opportunities.

For example: “This morning you earned tokens for having a good voice level and eating with your mouth closed. This afternoon you can earn even more tokens if you do well on those and also are gentle with your brother”

TRADING IN THE TOKENS

TRADING IN TOKENS

- When the children trade in tokens for privileges, do your best to accommodate them
- Try to act happy that they are trading in the tokens even if it is an inconvenient time or you feel that they don't deserve it
- Make sure you have their privileges available at home (e.g., if ice-cream is on the list, keep it stocked)
- A child can trade in the tokens much later than when earned (months later even)

A “BAD DAY,” BUT HAS TOKENS! PART 1

- There may be a day when the child’s behaviors have been very poor, but the child has saved up loads of tokens from earlier days.
- The child now comes to you and wants to trade in tokens for 5 hours of movies and two bowls of ice-cream.
- Your answer should be: “Good job for earning all those tokens. What movies do you want and what flavors ice-cream?”
- Let the child trade in the tokens unless: Their instability makes the privilege very difficult or dangerous to give them. Make absolutely clear with the child and yourself that this is the reason and remind the child of all the other things the child can trade the tokens in for.
- Example: The child has not been following directions all day and has been very impulsive and has been running around at full speed for much of the day. The child’s swimming abilities are only so-so. The child trades in tokens to go to the pool. In this case, the child is told that the pool would not be safe at the moment.

A “BAD DAY,” BUT HAS TOKENS! PART 2

- When you let the child trade in tokens on a bad day, the child will have the following message go through their mind without you getting in the middle of it: “By the grace of my past good behavior, I have earned these tokens and I get these privileges. Making good choices pays off. I am sure not earning many tokens for my choices today.”
- The child will recognize that there are consequences to their behaviors because they know they are not earning as many tokens.
- On days children and adults do not make their best choices, they are usually in a worse spot emotionally and often need a “pick-me-up” to help them cope. We often have to take these “pick-me-ups” away from children so that they experience a consequence to their behaviors, but we don’t need to in a token program, but can still trade in to watch a movie at home.

IF SIBLING CONFLICT

- If siblings usually have a hard time agreeing on things, cooperation and negotiation can be rewarded by allowing them to split some costs.

For example: They can watch different movies in their rooms for 4 tokens each, or they can watch the same movie together for 2 tokens each.

- If a child does not do a chore that would have resulted in getting tokens for the child, do not assign it to a different child for tokens (unless it is with the specific approval of the child who did not do the chore). Doing so would only increase sibling conflict.

MISCELLANEOUS CONSIDERATIONS

STARTING OUT

- Start the child out with as many tokens as the child would have earned from a perfect day of behaviors
- Involve the child in creating any poster you may use and choosing boxes to have the tokens in
- A child does not need to fully understand that token program when it starts. They usually catch on after a few days even if the concepts are difficult.

REWARDING PLANNING

- Once a program is well established there is an easy way to provide some natural rewards for planning
- Let the person plan for, and commit to, the use of some tokens ahead of time, with when, and with how many tokens, to do it.
- As a reward for having planned it ahead of time, the person gets a discount.
- It should be entirely up to the person on the token program whether or not to do it
- For example, Koreanna sits down with mom on Friday and commits to on Saturday spending 2 tokens on a fair-sized treat after lunch, 4 tokens on one hour of video-games after the family is done shopping at Wal-Mart, and 8 tokens for a movie that night. Although equaling 14 tokens, Koreanna only has to pay 12 tokens. For the family, it also got a lot easier, because they know when to plan to get other things done (e.g., mom will fix the leaky sink while Koreanna plays the videogames), and when to let Koreanna have the TV.

ROUGH WEEKS

- Keep things going through rough weeks
 - They usually need the consistency in place
 - Ensures that positive behaviors are caught immediately
 - Makes sure that credit is given where credit is due
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GRADUATING BEHAVIORS

- When a behavior has been consistently good for a few weeks, it may be time to replace it with another behavior to work on
- Some families choose to have a graduation celebration for a behavior, with some special event attached to it (e.g., go to Pizza Ranch).

ADDING FLAVOR

- Some children will need some extra flavor to the program for it to hold their attention
- If you want to do this, start with the basic program and then add such flavor for a few weeks.
- Such flavor usually needs to be changed to a new flavor every few months.
- When changing the flavor, it is a good time to also review the behaviors and see if they can be graduated (see last slide). A “graduation party” in the theme of the preceding theme/flavor may be fitting.
- Don't change the basic privileges beyond their wording, although some extra theme-consistent privileges can be added.

NEVER TALK ABOUT TAKING AWAY TOKENS

- Horrible: “You may lose that token if you don’t quiet down”
- Bad: “May not get that token if you don’t quiet down”
- Good: “Cay get that token if you quiet down”

Doing the “horrible” and “bad” too much will make the whole program seem like punishment

KEEP THE FOCUS ON THE TOKENS

- Treat the token program as if it is in full control. “ I can’t give you ice-cream sweetie, you don’t have enough tokens.”
- Empathize when you can... “I know you really wanted those tokens.” “If you try hard, I bet you can earn even more tokens tonight.” “I am sorry you can’t have the ice-cream. I know you really were looking forward to it. You just need a few more tokens first.”

PHASING IT OUT

- When the child is doing well, and the behaviors are stable for 2-4 months, with no particular need to transition to new behaviors or privileges, the token program can be ended.
- Many find it useful to eliminate one behavior and one privilege at the time (meaning that the child can get the privilege without trading in tokens for it)
- Keep the program in storage and bring it back quickly if things deteriorate, and then be slower to stop it again.
- Make sure to maintain all the principles of the program even when it is ended, including frequent attention to the child's positive behaviors and consistency of rules and expectations.

INTEGRATING SCHOOL

- Sometimes we want to get school on board and target behaviors that happen at school.
- Minimize what school has to do
- Give the school a form to fill out (see Appendix III) for the morning and afternoon that mirrors the home token program – tracking the same behaviors at home and at school (home may have a few additional behaviors)
- The teacher simply checks off the appropriate box if the behavior was good and leaves it blank if it was not (no frowning faces).
- It is the child's job to bring home the form if possible. No form, no tokens for it. As such, a form with one check-mark is still work bringing home. If a form comes home a day or more late (the teacher forgot to send it), the tokens are given when the form is brought home.
- If the teacher wants to send any remarks or descriptions, this should be on a separate piece of paper.

IF IT DOESN'T WORK...

- The reasons it is not working is very useful in assessing the underlying problem
- “Things are just too hectic for us to give out the tokens” usually means that the family needs to get more structured and less busy in general, and the child is not getting enough positive attention for good behaviors
- “He threw tantrums, so we gave him the privileges anyway” usually means the family gives in to tantrums (which trains the child to tantrum)
- “She is earning too many tokens” could mean : 1) time to revise the behavior list, 2) they are giving tokens when they should not, 3) the program was set up incorrectly, or often 4) the child’s behaviors have been a lot better all along than the parents realized.

CHILD AGREEMENT IS DESIRABLE

- It is highly desirable if the child is in agreement about the program, and most are so immediately or fairly soon after starting it.
- If the child is not in agreement, it can still be used. If the child does not accept the tokens, put them in a jar. If the child wants something on the privilege list, refer to them and do the paying of the tokens for them.
- Do all the other parts as expressed here, including checking in with the child and giving the child credit for what the child did well.