

Catch Them Being Good: Using a Reward System at Home

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Almost all parents are confronted with difficult behavior from their child every now and then. However, finding a practical solution to the issue is not always as easy as one would expect. Well-meaning professionals may try to advise you to use behavior management techniques using technical language and “jargon” that can be overwhelming and sometimes incomprehensible. Anyone who has sat down to attempt to “record the frequency, duration, antecedent (A) and consequence (C) of a maladaptive behavior (B)” (aka, the “A.B.C.’s” of behavior supporting planning) knows the feeling of frustration that can accompany the task of developing behavior supports, especially for our children with disabilities, who may also exhibit more challenging behavior due to their communication difficulties. However, it is possible to navigate the sea of behavior support confusion by trying a couple of techniques that are straightforward, easy, and fairly successful--“fairly” because the truth of the matter is that nothing works *all* the time and no one strategies works forever. Parents and educators constantly find themselves rethinking, revising and reinventing behavior plans to meet the needs of the child. The key is to figure out how to make any good idea “fit” with your family’s daily activities and commitments. This “context” of your typical family life is what really matters!

One relatively straightforward behavior intervention to try at home is a system for identifying and then recognizing your child’s use of desired behaviors. This behavior modification strategy is typically referred to as a “reinforcement system” in which you reward your child’s use of positive behaviors in order to increase them and decrease the less desirable behaviors. The following details how to develop a reinforcement or “reward” system to use with your child(ren) at home, including how to avoid the most common mistakes and “pitfalls” encountered when setting up this kind of support.

The system described is considered a “token system”, in which your child earns tokens for exhibiting desired behaviors. This system is like the *opposite* of a “swear word jar” in which one is penalized for using bad language by having to forfeit money (aka “the tokens”) by depositing their own coins/dollars into a jar when one is caught cursing. In this system, the idea is for your child to get “caught” using the good behaviors you want to see. When you catch them doing this, you recognize this desired behavior by placing a token in a container for them. Once a predetermined number of tokens has been earned by the child, this can be celebrated by doing something fun as a family or by awarding your child with a reward.

One of the many benefits of this kind of token system is that it encourages everyone to recognize when children are meeting our expectations, rather than always focusing on correcting them when they fall short. Frequently acknowledging when your child follows the rules and meets your behavior expectations helps us learn to pay more attention to the behaviors we want to see happen again and again (rather than to the behaviors we wish would go away).

Another “plus” is that this system is based on the idea of intermittently reinforcing the desired behavior—this means that you don’t have to “catch” them every single time they do something good and put a token in the container. You award the tokens “intermittently”, which allows for the possibility to have day(s) when you might even forget to use the system. The specific steps to follow when setting up this “Catch Them Being Good Token System” are outlined in this article.

Step One: Decide what you want your child TO do.

We may know exactly what we want our kids to STOP doing, but what do we want them to START doing more often/more consistently? Do you want your child to *stop* an undesirable behavior (like arguing with a sibling, using bad language or “talking back”)? But what would you like to see them doing *instead of* that misbehavior? Being more polite? Following directions the first time they are asked? Taking turns with siblings? Solving their problems with siblings peacefully by using their words? These are the behaviors you want to reinforce with your token system.

Start by making a list of the problem behaviors you want to see eliminated, then identify replacement behaviors for these (what you want them to do *instead of* the problem behaviors you

listed). Keep in mind this step is about really identifying what you want your child *to* be doing, instead of this misbehavior. These desired behaviors are sometimes called “replacement behaviors”. The replacement behaviors should be stated *clearly* and *positively* (e.g. “speaking politely” instead of talking back, etc.). By identifying these “do’s” and using them as the basis for your token system, instead of only generating a list of “don’ts” or “no’s”, this will help you focus more on the “positive” things the child does (and most of our children already know exactly what they should *not* be doing!).

On the other hand, you may not need to generate a list of misbehaviors and replacement behaviors if you already know what you want to see your child *start* doing more consistently such as making the bed, sitting down to do homework without extra reminders or putting toys away. These can also be used as the targeted behaviors that you will be recognizing with this token system.

Additional Tips for Selecting Behaviors:

- Be sure to start by choosing a behavior that your child can begin to work on immediately and that s/he will realistically be able to change. It is not very motivating for children (or anyone!) to fail in their initial attempts. This might cause your child to want to give up right away.
- Allow your child to be involved in identifying the behaviors, rules or “expectations” that will be reinforced using this system. When a child becomes part of the plan and is able to have some “say” in the matter, s/he usually will be more invested in it.

Step Two: Set up the token system.

Find some *tokens*, such as colored chips, marbles, cotton balls, buttons, raffle tickets, coins, puzzle pieces, cubes, etc. (even small laminated slips of paper will work); 10-20 per child should be enough. You can call the tokens something “catchy”, if desired.



Even these cute “fuzzies” can be used as tokens!




Token containers with “jewels” as tokens.


You will also need a *token container* in which to put the chips or tokens once your child has earned them. Use a clear container, so that your child can see his/her progress toward meeting the goal (and earning the reward). This also provides a constant visual reminder of rewards and also helps adults remember to “sprinkle” praise generously throughout the week. An important part about giving behavioral feedback to children is remembering to “catching them being good”

with a high enough frequency. As a general rule, they should hear us telling them “Nice job being responsible—you remembered to take out the garbage without me asking you!” more often than they hear “You forgot to take out the garbage AGAIN.” When children (or even spouses!) constantly are being told about what they did *not* do correctly or how they did *not* meet our expectations, eventually they will begin to “tune us out”.

In addition to visually displaying the tokens as they are earned, so that your child can view his/her progress toward rewards, it is also important to post a list of the desired behaviors that you will be recognizing (and that the child can earn tokens for using). Often we assume the child just knows what we want them to do and understands it the same way we do. For instance, asking a child to clean up their room assumes that the child’s idea of a “clean room” and your idea of a “clean room” are the same. Is this *really* the case? If there is a possibility that our expectations are not crystal clear to the child, then our first step in getting the room cleaned to our satisfaction is clarifying our expectations of what we want the child to do and

John’s Rules

1. Be Respectful means:
 Say nice things (or nothing at all)
 No name calling/profanity.
 No talking back to adults. 

2. Solve Problems Safely means:
 Use words when upset.
 No hitting or kicking others. 

Example of visually displaying expectations

clearly communicating this. Visually displaying something that clarifies our expectation is often a helpful way of getting the point across. This is especially important for children with processing delays, cognitive issues, and/or difficulties with attention and focus. So in addition to writing down the behaviors to be rewarded and posting them near the token container, it is also helpful to find images that clearly illustrate these behaviors. You can take pictures of your child using the desired behavior (e.g., use a photo of your child unloading the dishwasher or making her bed), cut images out of magazines, draw pictures, use clip art or any other images that accurately depict what you want to see your child doing. Remember to keep the images simple so that your point does not get lost. Once you have your images, print or cut them out and glue them on a sheet of construction paper, then label the image.

Step Three: Decide on a “goal”, then determine the reward for meeting this goal.

Examples of Rewards for Children:

1. Go to the park
2. Go bowling
3. Go see a movie
4. Go skating
5. Have a friend over
6. Have a sleep over with a friend
7. Go out for ice cream
8. Go out for pizza
9. Spend the night with grandparents
10. Play dress up
11. Stay up 5 minutes extra before bed
12. Family game night
13. Computer game time
14. Do a puzzle with a parent
15. Read an extra bed time story
16. Pick what's for dinner for the family (from a choice of approved meals)
17. Help plan weekend activities
18. Ride bikes with a parent
19. Help decorate for a holiday
20. Special activity day with a parent
21. Pick what we watch on TV
22. Bake something with a parent
23. Roast marshmallows outside
24. Have a campfire in the backyard
25. Listen to music
26. Family dance party
27. Family karaoke night
28. Trip to a toy store to buy one item
29. Buy a book
30. Help decorate their room

Decide ahead of time what the rewards will be and what criteria will need to be met in order to earn those rewards. Children must know from the start of the system what they are working to earn and what they will need to accomplish in order to earn that reward. Wait for a child to use misbehavior, then telling them they can have a preferred item if they stop this poor behavior might be considered “bribery” (e.g., saying “If you stop whining while we are waiting on line at the grocery store, I’ll buy you a candy bar.”) and will not be effective in teaching the child to make better behavioral choices in the future. But having the child involved in establishing their system from the beginning by proactively providing them with opportunities to express their preferences (including what “good behaviors” they should be using, what they want to earn, what they want their tokens to be, etc.) will lead to better outcomes.

While some systems will expect the parent to track the child’s behavior daily (or even hourly!), this token system is designed to be easier to implement. Rather than using a behavior chart to track progress toward meeting a goal/criteria and earning a reward, this system uses a simple “fill line” to show that a goal has been met. This simple way to establish the “criteria” for receiving a reward is to draw a “fill line” or “success line” (e.g., draw with a sharpie, make the line with tape, place a rubber band around the jar, etc.) on the clear container in which the tokens are placed as they are earned. Once the child has earned enough tokens to meet the line on the container, then a reward is earned.

If using this token system with more than one child, the criteria of meeting this “success line” drawn on *one* clear container for all children’s tokens can still be used. This will also encourage your children to “work together” to earn tokens to fill the jar so that they meet their goal. This aspect of the system encourages siblings to support each other in using appropriate behavior, rather than compete with each other for recognition.



Step Four: Introduce and start to use your token system.

When introducing the system to your child, have the materials ready to show to the child as you explain it in language that s/he can understand--make this presentation very positive and upbeat.

After explaining the system to your child, begin using it right away. You can “catch” your child “being good” (i.e., following the rules you established during “step one”) at any time. There is no set number of times per day that you must do this, but there are some general guidelines for this. On average children typically comply with the rules much of the time. But how often are they actually complimented for their behavior or even told that they met your expectation? It’s important to remember to recognize successes frequently. One way to acknowledge when the child follows the rules and meets your expectations is to give very specific, verbal feedback (“Nice job cleaning up—you got all the clothes in the drawers or in your hamper”). Another important part about giving behavioral feedback is “catching them being good” with a high enough frequency. The goal is to aim for a ratio of positive to negative interactions of at least 4 to 1—this means that for every 1 time you give corrective feedback (“That’s *not* what I meant by ‘pick up your clothes’, they need to go into the hamper if they’re dirty”), you also try to tell the child about 4 things he did well (“Thanks for clearing your breakfast dishes”). Try to recognize effort and progress by praising *small* successes, too.

When you “catch them” doing the right thing and praise your child for this, you will also intermittently “pair” your use of verbal praise with awarding tokens to be placed in the token container. These tokens should be awarded intermittently and *at the adult’s discretion*, making the implementation of this system very flexible. Use the tokens frequently during the first few weeks of implementation so children can learn how the system works and make connections between their behavior and privileges. Remember that it is best to provide the token immediately after the child engages in the desired behavior, rather than waiting until later in the day to give them a token for something they did in the morning. Once the tokens in the jar reach the fill line, then you and your child should celebrate this success. This celebration might involve doing something fun with the child and/or giving the child a reward he has selected. Keep in mind that whatever you and your child have decided will be the reward, it must only be earned using the system. For example, if your child picked “extra TV time” as his reward to earn with his token system, but then he is allowed to have extra TV time not connected with earning tokens, this will impact the power of the system. If he can get the reward without having to earn the tokens to do so, then why should he bother trying to earn the tokens? So be sure that all family members in the house and babysitters are aware of the system, so that they do not inadvertently sabotage things by giving the child a reward that must be earned.

Step Five: Review progress and refine your system as needed.

What about “taking away” things as part of this system? Taking away a previously earned privilege or reward is called “response cost”. Unfortunately, response-cost procedures are often over-used at schools as well as at home. Research shows that over time this will *not* work if it is over-used. If you keep taking the tokens away, you are going to lose the “power” that this system has because it is going to take the child too long to reach the goal. And, eventually, the child has nothing left to lose, so they might as well misbehave. So if you do decide that you must take away tokens, be sure to do so very, very sparingly.

If bad behaviors do occur, another option is to use that as a “teachable moment” to remind your child of what he should be doing. You can bring the child over to the list where the rules or expectations are displayed and discuss with him what he should be doing. Show him the tokens to remind him visually what he is striving for. Tell him, “The rule is, we play safely. Is ripping things playing safely? (wait for answer—provide answer if child cannot). So what do you need to do so you can earn tokens? (wait for answer—provide answer if child cannot).” If possible, you can have your child repair what he damaged, clean what he messed up or otherwise perform an act of ‘restitution’. To say “You just lost that token, mister” may feel better in the moment but you end up losing the opportunity for highly-motivated effort. Your child figures that he doesn’t get anything for the rest of the day so why should he bother being good now? Punishment can affect morale in the family, too. Use the opportunity of a negative behavior to learn what to do in the future.

What about phasing out the system or “weaning” your child off of it? This can get very tricky, because if you phase out too soon, your child may lose his motivation. Often the reward itself will

begin to wear thin over time. Your child will get saturated after a while, and you will know when that happens. At that moment, it will be time to let the reward system fade away and you can either go without the motivator or find a new one, if necessary. Weaning can also be accomplished by changing the “level” of the reinforcers you are offering. An example of this might be moving away from a tangible reward (like buying a toy from the toys store) to earning a “special privilege” for desired behavior, such as being able to sit at the head of the table for dinner. Moving away from awarding privileges to students in favor of using “social approval”, is another example of weaning. Even just switching from an edible reward (referred to as a “primary reinforcer”) to a “tangible reward” i.e., something that can be held/touched but is not eaten (such as a prize from a prize box) is taking a step toward weaning the child.

Final Thought: The Magic of Consistency

We all know that children can benefit from structure and consistency, from clear rules and the judicious use of praise. But too often we shy away from setting up structures and systems in the home because they are too complicated to use. Hopefully this system has enough flexibility to be able to be implemented in your home. But remember that it’s okay to adapt and bend the techniques you hear about from the experts so that you can construct a system that works for your household. If adapting something means that you will be better able to use it and use it consistently, then by all means give it a try. Don’t be burdened or intimidated by jargon if it is going to keep you from trying something.

It is also important to give any behavior plan time to work. Remember that change takes time if it’s to be long-lasting. Nothing happens overnight. Remember that for every 1 year that a problem behavior has been in place, it takes 1 month of consistent intervention to see a major decrease in the behavior. If the intervention is not implemented consistently, it will take *longer* to work. For example, if you’ve set a limit and said “no”, then given a reason, you should *not* say “no” *again* or give *another* reason when the child whines/protests. This only tells the child that you have a breaking point and to keep trying. Try to be as good as your word. Then when your child accepts your answer and your reason, don’t forget to compliment him or her on this good behavior. The most important lesson here is about consistency and practice, practice, practice. And keep it simple so you and your child will succeed.

Additional Resources

The following websites provide access a variety of free reward charts:

- <http://www.kidpointz.com/printable-charts>
- <http://www.freeprintablebehaviorcharts.com>
- <http://www.playcreategrow.com/1/post/2013/09/homework-tips-and-2-free-reward-chart-printables.html>

For additional information and resources related to this topic, please contact Michelle Lockwood at michellelockwood@njcie.net.