Using Token Economy Systems to Increase Skill Acquisition

Token economy systems (TES) are tools that can be used to help students self-manage their own behavior. In ABA, as it relates to skill acquisition, the use of the word "behavior" refers to the objective of increasing the frequency of correct responding. With TES, by providing reinforcement at appropriate times, you are increasing the probability that the "correct" behavior will occur with greater frequency in the future.

A TES is a system comprised of a token board or box and individual tokens. Placed on a token board, individual tokens provide visual representation of the progress that is being made towards earning a larger reward. A token board has an area called "I am working for" to allow students to select his/her desired reward for displaying appropriate behaviors or not engaging in inappropriate behaviors.

A token economy system utilizes principles of delayed reinforcement. In order for this type of system to be effective with students, they must understand how delayed reinforcement works. Prior to implementing a token economy system, instructors should review the token economy program with the student(s) and establish clear expectations so that students understand the types of behavior that will allow them to earn these tokens.

How to Create a Token Economy System

You can easily create your own token system in just a few simple steps. When creating and implementing a token economy system, it is important to remember that the system be easy to use and understood by the student or group of students for whom this is designed. Take care to ensure that the token board and tokens cannot be easily reproduced to minimize cheating.

Although tokens can be pictures of favorite characters, smiley faces, stars, or other favorite items that are motivating to the student(s), use caution when using favorite characters or favorite items as some students may become fixated on these items, thereby reducing the potency (reinforcement power) of the actual reward.

Steps to creating a token economy system:

MY TOKEN BOARD
I AM WORKING FOR:

1. Create a token board by drawing or placing an image of the reward. Draw token boxes on which to place or affix the tokens. Token boards typically contain 3/5/7/10 token boxes.

2. Laminate the token board and affix Velcro on each token box.

3. Create tokens.

4. Cut tokens into individual pieces and affix Velcro.

5. A token box can also be used in place of a token board. Cut a hole on top of the box into which students can drop tokens.

6. Create a document dividing activities of the day into individual lessons or blocks of time with an area for a smiley face or sad face. This visual support offers the benefit of providing a permanent product to track progress.

IMPLEMENTING A TOKEN ECONOMY SYSTEM

When implementing a token economy system, it is important to give it a trial run to ensure that this system of reinforcement will be effective. When giving tokens to students, pair it with a praise. This will be helpful when the actual tokens are being faded out.

One of the most important features of the token economy system is the process of exchanging the tokens for rewards. Upon attainment of goals, student must be able to exchange tokens for a reward. Keep in mind that rewards do not have to be tangible. Privileges can also serve as rewards. Examples include computer time, longer break time, being the teacher's helper, etc.

IN ORDER FOR TOKEN ECONOMY SYSTEMS TO BE SUCCESSFUL…

- Instructors and students must understand the contingency. What is the expectation? What is the reward for meeting those expectations?
- Make sure to follow through with providing the reward for token trade-in.
- Provide visuals of reinforcers (see reinforcer menus).
- Be enthusiastic, excited and genuine.
- Do not create a system that is too aggressive. Start with 1 or 2 target behaviors.
- When possible, choose to reinforce the presence of positive behaviors that are incompatible with negative behaviors (e.g. Students can't engage in screaming if they are reading quietly. Students can't run if they are walking) versus reinforcing the absence of negative behaviors only.
- Take data! Yes, it may be a challenge, but how else will you know if the system is working? (see data collection section).
- Token systems should be used as temporary forms of behavior change and should be faded as soon as possible to promote independence in students.

REFERENCES AND LITERATURE

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