



# Token System

## Keys to Failure/Success

Most token systems fail because the child doesn't gain enough tokens and rewards in the beginning to "buy in." Buying into the system is critical for advancement down the road and addresses all those other behaviors later.

## Preparation

Spend a week and make three lists:

**List 1: Bad behaviors you would like to address.** Hitting, biting, cussing, disrespect, manipulation, spitting, fighting, refusal to eat meals, refusal to go to school/refusal to get ready, running off, yelling, etc. Pick one behavior to put on the list initially. You are going to assign a penalty value to it. (See below.)

**List 2: Good behaviors that will earn tokens.** You will want to assign relative values to them, like 1 yellow (1Y), 2 yellows (2Y), 1 blue (1B). Examples:

- Brushing your teeth = 1Y
- Brushing your teeth without being told to = 2Y
- Doing homework = 1B.
- Doing homework without being told to = 2B
- Getting out of bed the 1<sup>st</sup> time = 1B
- Getting clothes on = 1Y
- Getting clothes on without being told to = 1B
- Eating everything on your plate = 1Y

You'll notice that we are trying to reward the behavior no matter how much drama surrounds. If there is no drama, then there is a bigger reward. You're probably only going to put half of these on the final list initially. Ideally, the child will negotiate to add more things to the list in the future, but you may choose to add them once you are convinced the child has bought into the system.

**List 3: Rewards.** Basically, everything the child currently gets is now a candidate to become a reward. They will have to pay to acquire that reward now and this is now the only way they can get that particular item or action. This can be tricky initially because they have to be targeted specifically for the child. Similar to List 2, put everything down but only pick ½ of them to work with initially. Examples:

- Getting to wear the special pajamas at bedtime
- Getting to wear makeup
- Inviting someone for a sleepover
- New Xbox game
- Pack of Yu-Gi-Oh!/Pokemon cards
- Playing with special toys (train sets or dollhouses, toys that require significant setup)
- 15 or 30 minutes of extra TV/PlayStation/Xbox/computer time\*
- Special cereal for breakfast as opposed to the boring one (i.e. Lucky Charms vs. Whole Grain Cheerios)
- Special snack as opposed to the now standard/boring snack
- Sleeping with the parent\*\*
- Trip to Graham's for ice cream
- Trip to McDonald's\*\*\*

*\*The American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation is no more than 2 hours a day. I usually like to have them start with 15 minutes on their own (just enough time to watch ½ of their favorite show), then they have to pay for more screen time.*

*\*\*No, I'm not personally recommending sleeping with the parents, but this can be a big motivator for some kids.*

*\*\*\* No, I'm not recommending fast food, but this also teaches that fast food is a special treat rather than a staple and, again, can be a big motivator for some kids.*

I recommend putting the lists on poster board and putting lines on it, including blank lines to add things in the future. Laminate the lists (they have a tendency to be pulled down and torn up in anger). This also lets you use a dry erase marker to add things rather than redo the list every time you want to change it. Hang them where they can be referred to and pointed to.

## **Tokens**

I usually recommend the glass rocks that they use in fish tanks because you can easily get different colors and can find small quantities readily in a lot of stores. Younger kids will enjoy playing with them at the end of the day and they can have a “treasure box” to store them in. Older kids can have a jar. I usually like a jar for them because they (and you) can look at it and get a visual sense of how they are doing. The stones can also be a useful tool to practice math skills with. You can even make up games to play with them or read up on games that use rocks or pebbles like “Pente.” Anything can be used as a token. Some people like to use poker chips.

## **Implementation**

Sit down and talk to your child and explain what is going to happen, read through the lists, think about the day and give them rewards immediately based on their performance for that day, with no penalties. This allows them to start out with tokens and have the opportunity to begin with a reward rather than a punishment. You will need to pick a time at the end of each day to review the lists and assign rewards.

## **Manipulation**

Every system has a few weaknesses. One weakness of this system is that the child can manipulate the system in a purposeful attempt to annoy you/test your resolve/test their sense of fairness right after they have had a consequence for something else. This usually takes the form of trying to force you to reward them right after or during a consequence for something else (i.e. get a timeout and they ask to buy an extra story right now). If you break from the system at this point, they will lack confidence in it/not trust you, and you will get a lot of “I don’t care,” and probably fail in the long run. You must continue with the system and possibly reward them at this time. This drives parents crazy, but this behavior can be identified as a manipulative behavior, added to the negative list, and then penalized just like any other behavior. Alternatively, you can give them the reward, inform them of their manipulative behavior, and assign a consequence outside the system (like a timeout). You can also try to make a rule that you can’t get a reward for 15 minutes after receiving a consequence. It is very important that the child sees the rules that you have set up (visually), sees you stick to them (consistency), and that you go over them completely each day (reinforces and allows memorization) for them to continue to buy in to the system.

## **Building on the System**

Ok, you’ve had some success, now it’s time to up the ante. Add more bad behaviors to List 1. At the same time, ask your child about other things they would like to add to List 2 and List 3. Ideally, the child will begin to point out things that they do throughout the day in an attempt to get more tokens and may even negotiate for some (ex: “Uh, if I take out the trash or help fold the laundry, can I get some blue tokens?”). This can motivate them to globally improve their behavior but also make you more conscious of all those times they are doing well and provide some positive feedback at those times. We have the tendency to focus on all the negatives. My personal belief is that this is a family; everyone is supposed to pull their weight. Because of that, I always recommend having at least some chores that don’t get payment. Usually you want to pick things like “cleaning your room.” This is an example of a behavior that a child can manipulate unhealthily. If they are rewarded for cleaning their room, they may choose to mess it up in an attempt to get a daily reward for cleaning their room, so this becomes a better candidate for an unpaid behavior.