Using a Token Economy to Encourage Positive Behavior in Children with ADHD

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Creating a Token Economy

Whether it is resisting homework, arguing with siblings or failure to complete chores, children with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) tend to engage in some level of undesirable behaviors. Medications will help improve symptoms but it is up to you to create systems at home to capitalize on these improvements.

A token economy is a great tool for parents and their children. In a token economy, the parent rewards the child with a sticker, chip or any other token that the child later turns in for an earned reward. With a successful token economy, everyone wins. The child receives a reward for a completed job and the parent receives the satisfaction of their child finishing the needed task.

Some will argue that a parent should not have to reward behaviors and that the child should complete it independently. This notion is great in principle but not in practice. Children with ADHD typically have lower levels of intrinsic motivation and require some outside influence. Don't worry, though. Eventually, the extrinsic motivation can be removed and the behaviors will continue on their own.

Create your Economy

Good token economies are collaborations between you and your child. Their feedback will ensure that the arrangement is mutually beneficial and more likely to succeed. Three parts comprise the economy:

- **Target behavior** – This is what you want the child to do. Keep it simple and behavioral. "Being respectful" is not a behavior but "saying please and thank you" is. Find a way to make the negative a positive. If your child argues frequently with their sibling, suggest "Playing with your sister for 30 minutes without hitting or yelling" as a target behavior. Target behaviors are beneficial for focusing on the wanted behaviors rather than the problematic ones. Start your economy with a target behavior that your child is likely to complete. Having a target beyond their ability will seem like a waste of their time and they will not even try.
- **Tokens** – The token has no actual worth, only the value that the system puts on it. Find a token that grabs your child's interest. Stickers, tickets, or pictures work well. Stickers have the added advantage of being collected on a chart to keep track of progress. If your child likes baseball or football, sports cards might make a good token. Tokens serve to give your child some immediate feedback for their behavior. The closer in time that the feedback is given to the behavior, the more likely it is that the behaviour will be reproduced.

- **Reinforcers** – Your child will trade in the tokens to receive the reinforcers. Communication is a necessity here as well. If the reward is seen as too small or lacking value, your child will not try to earn it. The reinforcer can be a good or a service. Does your child despise cleaning his room? Maybe the reward is a week without needing to clean it. Does your child love the movies? The reward can be a weekend movie for the two of you. Be creative and be sure to overly reinforce initially. This will create more interest in the

system and allow you to back off later.

Conclusion

Token economies are so valuable but so often underutilized. Stop the cycle of yelling and giving your child punishments. Work today to begin an economy in your home. If you stay consistent and communicate well, you will see amazing results.