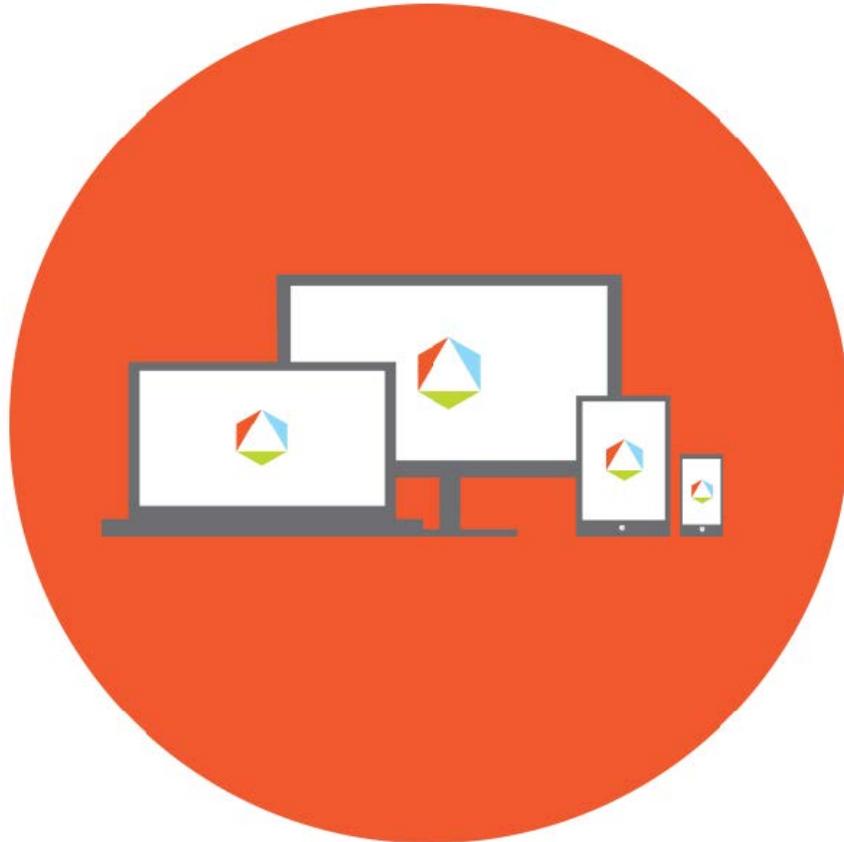




**FIRSTPATH**  
AUTISM



Lesson Guide  
**79. Token System**

[www.firstpathautism.com](http://www.firstpathautism.com)

# Token System

## Overview

<p>Operational Definition:</p>	<p>A Token System (also called a "Token Reinforcement System" or a "Token Economy") is used to increase appropriate behavior and learning. Tokens are the reinforcers (sometimes called "rewards") that the child earns, that are then exchanged for a larger reward (called the "back-up reinforcer") based on the child's success.</p>
<p>Function:</p>	<p>Token Systems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a visual representation of progress and what the child is working for.</li> <li>• Help to structure the breaking down of complex skills into smaller, more-manageable steps.</li> <li>• Assist in gaining instructional control, and in teaching self-monitoring skills and delay in gratification.</li> </ul>
<p>Reactive Strategies / Suggestions:</p>	<p><u>Token Systems require two components:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) The tokens.</li> <li>2) The back-up reinforcer (i.e., what the tokens are traded in for).</li> </ol> <p>TIPs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Make sure to have a wide variety of back-up reinforcers to maintain motivation, and to avoid satiation and boredom. However, do not offer more than 3 choices at a time for a back-up reinforcer -- otherwise, you may risk the child getting stuck at the "choosing" stage and not moving on to the "learning" stage.</li> <li>○ Make sure the back-up reinforcer is an easy item/activity to offer and is always available if using as a choice.</li> </ul>

	<p><u>How Do Tokens Work &amp; What Can I Use for Tokens?</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tokens acquire their power by being exchangeable for items that are reinforcing.</li> <li>• Tokens should be easy to handle.</li> <li>• Tokens do <u>not</u> have to be expensive. Poker chips, buttons, stickers, gold stars, play money, paper clips you hook together one by one, check marks on a form, hole punching in cards, happy faces, building blocks stacked one by one to build a tower, dot-to-dot picture to draw of the back-up reinforcer, puzzle pieces put together one by one, hand stamps, and token cards with blank circles to be filled in, are just a few examples of what you can use for tokens and Token Systems. Always make sure that tokens are not something that your child may put in his/her mouth and that can be a choking hazard. You can use many different kinds of things so long as what you use is something that you and your child can collect/count toward the back-up reinforcer, and will be something that the child likes (for example, if you use stickers, use stickers of your child's favorite cartoon character).</li> </ul>
<p>General Strategies:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Token System rules and guidelines must be made clear and easy for your child to understand.</b> Your child is already working hard at the skill you are teaching him/her; there is no need to make it harder by making the Token System confusing.</li> <li>• <b>Make sure to specify with your child how much time s/he will have with the earned back-up reinforcer, after all tokens have been earned.</b> Use visual reminders and/or a timer as needed to assist your child in knowing how long the child may access his or her reward (back-up reinforcer) and when it's time to relinquish it, to get back to work or to another activity. A good rule of thumb is no longer than 5 minutes of time with a back-up</li> </ul>

reinforcer.

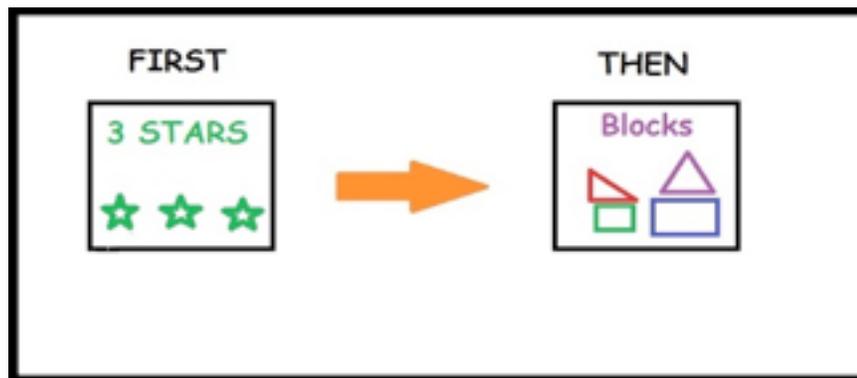
- **Pair praise with earning tokens as much as possible.** Praise is used in our world as a "natural reinforcer", but often our kiddos don't find praise by itself reinforcing. By pairing praise with delivery of tokens and the back-up reinforcer, praise will gradually gain power through association. Not only will praise start to gain its own magical power, it is easier and cheaper to apply across environments: you can apply praise anywhere and it doesn't cost a cent! Remember though to use behavior-specific praise -- in other words, don't just tell your child "Good Job" over and over, which will not only begin to get boring for both you and your child, but will also not indicate to your child precisely what s/he is doing correctly so your child can know what to do again, like "Good clapping your hands" or "Great use of the word CAT!" would.
- **Tokens that have already been earned should not be removed based on maladaptive behavior.** That would be like my not paying you this week for good work you did last week. However, an opportunity to earn a token can be delayed, but make sure to remind your child how s/he can start earning tokens again. The sooner your child is back on track, the sooner your child is again earning AND learning!
- **All people using the Token System with your child must consistently apply all Token System rules.** If someone doesn't follow "the rules", your child will have a more difficult time learning and following the rules, and will be less likely to trust the Token System.
- **Although there are "general" guidelines as to the use of a Token System, these systems should always be individualized, with your child's unique needs in mind.**
- **Token Systems often need to be "tweaked" along the way.** In fact, they are expected to need adjustment from time to time, as the child's learning and waiting skills increase (number of tokens to be earned are gradually increased over

	<p>time); as your child matures and needs a more advanced Token System (e.g., your child may graduate from physical tokens to a points system); and, to eventually be faded as your child learns to respond appropriately under more natural circumstances. You actually not only start fading the system by increasing the number of tokens earned over time, but also by utilizing the</p> <p>Token System more randomly as the child learns to behave appropriately and learn skills more "naturally". Also, letting the child begin to operate the Token System (so long as the child can do so appropriately) is a good way to teach the child self-monitoring skills that can later be transferred away from a Token System. But remember: we ALL still use Token Systems. If you don't believe me, open your wallet and look at that green rectangular piece of paper-like cloth in there, with a \$1, \$5, \$10, or \$20 stamp on it.</p>
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## Teach

When starting a token system, the child should be informed **in advance**:

- What behaviors and responses are required to earn tokens? These could be many things. Examples could be your child earning a token:
  - Each time your child accurately matches a color.
  - Each time your child reads a sentence in a paragraph.
  - Each time your child has 'nice hands'.
  - Each time your child does one step of a chore.
  - Each time your child appropriately asks for help.
  - Each time your child stays 'x' number of minutes on task.
  - Each time your child points to the right answer.
  - Each time your child does a correct Math problem.
  - Each time your child appropriately vocally imitates a letter sound.
  
- Make good use of "First -Then" statements to explain how the Token System works: (First you do "x", Then you will earn "x"). You also can use a visual "First-Then" card as a supplementary aid as needed. Put Velcro on the back of your picture icons and you can use as many as you can make!



TIP: If needed, make visuals for your child of the behavior/response you are expecting. For example, if your child must "clap hands" before earning a token, the visual icon would show "clapping hands."

Your child will also need to know in advance:

- **What** the back-up reinforcer will be.
  - Often, a picture/visual icon of the back-up reinforcer is attached

at the end of the token earning spaces if you are using a Token System chart, so the child can see not only how many tokens it takes to get to the back-up reinforcer, but also what the child is working for. If you are not using a Token System chart, you still can have either the back-up reinforcer itself (if it is an item you can show to your child) or a picture/icon of it (helpful for activities the child is earning).

- **How many** tokens it will take to earn the back-up reinforcer.
  - At the very beginning of using a Token System and while acclimating your child to the system, especially with very young children, it is not uncommon to start off with one token = earn back-up reinforcer.
  - In other cases, generally speaking, Token Systems start at 3-5 tokens = earn back-up reinforcer.
  - As your child learns skills and how the Token System works, the number of tokens to earn before getting the back-up reinforcer is gradually increased over time (over days, weeks, or months – time period depends on your child); for example, from 3 tokens to 5 tokens to 10 tokens, etc. Along with learning appropriate behaviors and learning responses, the child is also being taught valuable waiting skills!