

USING REWARDS IN THE CLASSROOM

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Research highlights the effectiveness of positive reinforcement with ADHD students. Positive feedback can take the form of verbal praise, group appreciation/recognition, free time, achievement certificates, games or toys, individual time with teacher or parent, etc.

Negative or controlling feedback is so frequent and has such an impact upon a youngster's self-esteem, that positive feedback is particularly critical. We know also that the ADHD child does not always process or appreciate the positive feedback, suggesting even more the need for a high rate of positive reinforcement.

Since ADHD children satiate to reinforcement more quickly, it is very important that we vary rewards and reinforcers. This suggests the use of a reinforcement menu which allows us to utilize an array of rewards that may be of interest to the student at that point in time. Some families develop reward categories (level one rewards require 10 tokens, level two rewards require 25 tokens, level three rewards require 50 tokens) and then allow the child to choose a reward from the reward categories. This also allows the student to decide where he or she wants to deposit the tokens, almost like buying items in a store.

Many researchers and clinicians have emphasized the power and utility of a token economy. Sometimes token economies are considered cumbersome by teachers. We would suggest the following steps in implementing a token economy in the classroom:

1. Have the whole class participate in a token system together.
2. Establish a correspondence between different amounts of tokens and different rewards, trying to keep it simple by relating varying amounts of tokens to different amounts of the reward (such as offering more free recess time for more tokens).
3. Discuss with the class ways that they can earn the tokens. Also use examples to discuss how many tokens the class might get for different types of accomplishments (1 token if the class is paying attention, 2 tokens if the class is paying attention while children are outside playing).

4. Allow the students to initiate request for tokens which are deposited by the teacher in a clear container. Ask the class how many tokens they think they earned and why. The teacher has the final say in how many tokens are given.
5. Do not worry that the students will be abusive in asking for tokens; if necessary, establish a rule that tokens can only be given if giving them does not distract from the lesson or classroom work.
6. Consider using an interval timer or beeper system (Casio watches are great to use for this purpose) to remind everyone to use the token system. You can change the intervals as you wish, starting initially with shorter intervals. Still allow students to request tokens for the class.
7. When the teacher gives tokens to the class, allow the class to "double their money" if they can figure out why you are giving the token. Even if they guessed wrong, the students have been thinking about their behavior and perhaps identified other areas that might have earned tokens. We sometimes give the class double tokens even when they guessed wrong, particularly at the beginning (Who's to know what you were really thinking?).
8. Once the system is well established, consider implementing a response cost system, where the class might lose tokens for particular problems that develop. Do not isolate a specific student as the reason for the class losing tokens.
9. As the system runs smoothly, the class can then move to earning tokens on a small-group level. This allows you to have each group work on specific goals. We can then move to individual token systems where the children give themselves tokens at regular intervals. Again, it is possible for each student to have different goals. These tokens can be used to earn rewards at school or at home (x number of minutes playing a game with mom or dad). Don't worry about the students "cheating" initially but feel free to ask a student to justify his self-evaluation. If you feel that there has been "cheating," then the student loses tokens, at least double the amount they gave themselves. Initially, it will take some discussion to help the students learn how to self-evaluate and be fair.
10. If the students are getting distracted by their tokens, they must develop a plan for handling this problem. If they continue to get distracted, then they lose a token each time that they do.
11. We have had one teacher use a color-coding system to reduce the number of tokens and to encourage her students to do some math. Another teacher used special green poker chips which were given for particularly outstanding accomplishments. The system has ample room for creativity and individualization.

12. Don't forget to participate in the token system and give yourself tokens.
You've earned it!

A token system such as the one described above is helpful because it promotes discussion and self-awareness. It is manageable because the whole class participates together. Children do not stand out and everyone works together. It also forces us to be more positive than our busy schedules and the many teaching demands ordinarily allow us to be.

There are also some interesting variations for giving positive feedback to the class:

1. Winding down at the end of the day by giving positive feedback to the class. Before you start, set a goal with the class for how many positive things you can find. Have the class look for mistakes you might make, positive feedback that was from yesterday or the day before or simply never happened.
2. You can also ask the students to see how many positive things they can find for themselves.
3. Ask students to raise their hands if they think they might be the person you are thinking of when you describe a positive accomplishment or behavior. You may be thinking of two or three people, but when students raise their hands, they are actually giving themselves the positive feedback already. You can then indicate who you were thinking of but agree with the others who raised their hands appropriately. Make sure they are honest by mentioning some things that no one did. You can also ask them to give you an example of what they were thinking of when they raised their hands.
4. Students can also try to guess who you are thinking of, even if it is not them. This promotes positive feedback amongst the students. Sometimes we pick out a group of students and ask them to complete a feedback chain where one student gives positive feedback to another until they all have been complimented once.
5. One creative teacher used a camera to capture the positive moments and sent pictures home to the parents.
6. Another teacher used form letters which were filled in at the end of the day and sent home. The form letter included the most interesting fact the child learned that day, the easiest and hardest assignments, what they did for recess, etc. It helped promote home/school communication, and the written language practice did not hurt either.

Researcher Virginia Douglas and her colleagues suggest that hyperactive children respond to reinforcement in unique ways. Although their ideas are not completely supported by research data, they suggest that ADHD children are overly sensitive to the

loss of rewards and to the failure to obtain expected rewards. Several authors have suggested that, because of their attentional problems, hyperactive children may require more explicit explanations of reward contingencies. There is some evidence to suggest that inconsistent rewards can impair behavior and performance. The children can be distracted by potential rewards and over-aroused by other rewards. The literature suggests that we need to teach the children how to handle the frustration of not earning rewards. When that seems to be happening, we need to establish times when it would be less disruptive to offer them reinforcement.

It is sometimes counterproductive to offer a reward that is particularly valued by the child. ADHD children get overexcited by the prospect of the reward, and this can often affect their ability to successfully earn the reinforcement. We should choose rewards of value, but not of such high interest to be counterproductive.

Reinforcement provides information as to the desired behavior or goals. We should be clear in providing the reinforcement, using the timing of the reward and the statements that we make to make it clear what it is that we appreciate. It is also helpful to identify what skills or attitudes we see in the student that are enabling him or her to achieve the goals and earn the rewards.

Studies have looked at the relative merits of rewards offered to the individual alone or to the entire class. It appears as if both types of reinforcement can be effective, and the choice of contingencies depends upon the preferences of the teacher and the class.

ADHD students do not always consider the potential rewards and consequences in making choices about their behaviors. That is one of the reasons that promises of rewards do not necessarily result in behavior change. We have found it helpful to allow the students to use visual cues (e.g., posters, stickers, note cards on a desk) to remind the students what they are working for.

We can maximize the effectiveness of a reward if we recruit the ADHD student's evaluation in determining what behaviors and skills should be reinforced. Some students are offered the opportunity to earn additional rewards if they can correctly identify the reasons why the teacher is reinforcing them.

Research shows that while reinforcement alone can be effective, the combination of reinforcement with a mild response cost system can be even more beneficial. The response cost aspect seems to help reduce impulsive actions and encourage more reflective decision-making and task accuracy.