How to set up a token board that works.

Esta lección en español

What it is. A **token board** is a card with a few spaces. The child earns a token, like a sticker, a star or a check, for the behavior you're teaching. When the spaces are full, they trade the tokens for something they want, called the **backup reward**.

Why it matters. Some rewards can't be handed out every few minutes: a trip to the park, time with markers, a turn on the tablet. A token closes the gap. It says "yes, that" right away, and the full board delivers the real thing.

HOW TO DO IT YOURSELF

How to set up a token board yourself, in seven steps.

1. **Pick one behavior, said as a "do."** "Hands on the table during work," not "be good." One behavior to start.
2. **Let them pick what they're working for,** from things they really want. A preference assessment helps. Ask before every board: "What are you working for?"
3. **Start small: three to five spaces,** so the first trade comes within minutes.
4. **Teach what a token means.** The first few times, hand over a token and trade it straight away, so the token and the good thing go together.
5. **Give the token within a couple of seconds of the behavior, and name it:** "Hands on the table, token!" No token for anything else.

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6. **When the board is full, trade right away.** Then clear the board and say the rule again.
7. **Stretch it slowly.** After a steady week, add a space or ask a little more per token. If the behavior drops, step back. Keep praising the whole time, so your words can carry the weight when the board fades.

Settled: token systems are among the most studied tools in behavior analysis. A review of four decades of token economies for children with intellectual disability or autism called the method powerful and efficient (Matson & Boisjoli, 2009). The science of why tokens work is reviewed in Hackenberg (2009). One more rule: keep the board earning-only at home. Taking tokens away for problem behavior is a separate procedure, for a BCBA's plan to decide.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Ana and the math rows.

Made-up example. The child, the worksheet and the numbers below are invented to show the method.

Ana is seven and stops after two rows of her math homework. She picks ten minutes of drawing with the good markers. Her board has five spaces, and each finished row earns a token.

When	The rule	Rows finished
Before	No board	2
Week 1	1 row = 1 token; 5 tokens = drawing	5

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Week 3	2 rows = 1 token, after a steady week	9
Week 5	2 rows = 1 token, praise after every row	10

What made it work: the token came right after each row, the trade happened the moment the board was full, and the stretch came only after a steady week. The praise never stopped, so it can take over when the board fades.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

Ways a token board goes quiet.

- A vague behavior, like “be good.” Nobody can earn it fairly, including the child.
- Too many spaces at the start. The first trade is so far away that the board stops mattering.
- A reward they get anyway. If the tablet is free after school, a board that earns the tablet means nothing.
- Late tokens. A token handed over minutes later doesn’t say which behavior earned it.
- Taking tokens away in the moment, on the fly. It turns the board into a threat.
- Never fading it. Plan from the start how the praise will take over.

TRY IT

One question, then the answer.

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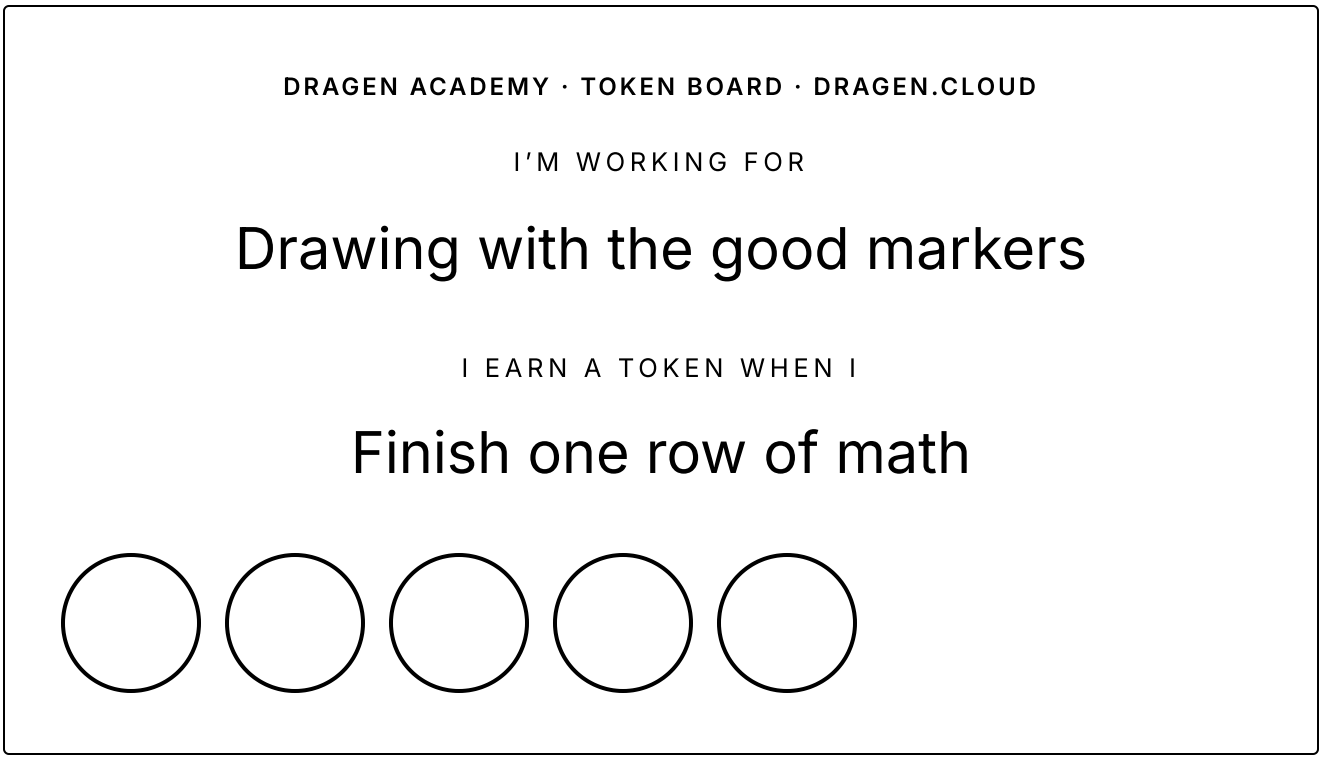
A made-up case: Sam’s board has ten spaces, and he earns a token only for being “good all morning.” He has never filled it, and now he ignores it. What would you change?

▼ Show the answer, and why

Make it winnable today. Three to five spaces, a behavior he can see (“hands to self during circle time”), a token right after each time he does it, and a reward he chose. Why: a board he can’t fill teaches him that the board doesn’t matter.

Something to keep

Make your token board, then tap it or print it.



WHERE DRAGEN HELPS

Every adult, the same board.

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A token board works when every adult runs it the same way: the same rule, tokens within seconds, the trade right away. The four-step training lesson uses exactly this skill as its worked example.

DRAGENfamily, the hub at home, logs what you see as it happens and shows the last two weeks as a graph, so every adult works from the same page. The paper version above works tonight.

Free on this page, and yours to keep: the lesson and its 2 printable sheets. No email, no login.

SOURCE

Where this comes from.

Matson & Boisjoli (2009), *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 30, 240–248: token economies for children with intellectual disability or autism. Hackenberg (2009), *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 91, 257–286: token reinforcement, reviewed.

Examples on this page are made up. They contain no client, student or family information. This lesson teaches a method; it does not replace your BCBA, your program, or your payer’s written rules.

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