This special report comes directly from my secret files at Behavior and Motivation. It examines the use of what is called a *Token Economy* (which is a type of reward system using "tokens") and how it can be used with children and adults. In this report, you'll find real-life examples that clearly illustrate how to effectively use a token economy as well as advice on what not to do. A good reward system should be supportive and reaffirming at all levels, and should also reinforce healthy relationships and good behavior in a dependable and consistent manner.

**Token Economy:** the systematic use of positive reinforcement "tokens" (symbols or objects) in exchange for the demonstration or use of certain behaviors, or to emphasize, recognize, or reinforce specific targeted behaviors.

I have used token economies in a variety of settings and with great results: in classrooms, in one-on-one instruction settings, in dormitory settings, etc. I have helped other people use token economies with their children. From motivating piano students to willingly practice for two hours per day to getting a classroom full of school kids with behavioral disorders to willingly participate in a reading program (that they hated), I have seen the effectiveness of token reward systems proven again and again. In this report, I'll focus on the basics of using token economy reward systems in three specific circumstances:

1. **Motivating Your Child**
2. **Motivating Your Students**
3. **Motivating Yourself**

**Token Economies: The Basics**

At the heart of every token economy, there is one objective: to influence behavior. More specifically, the person setting up a token economy wants to see certain behaviors met by those who will receive the tokens. Actually pulling this off in the real world takes some negotiating.

**Usage Overview:**

1) Figure out what your objective or target behavior is.
2) Select the tokens that you'll use to reinforce behavior or expectations, and to track progress.
3) Determine how many tokens must be accumulated in order to receive a reward.
4) Choose a reward.
Tokens: This can be anything, and I've used many different kinds. Some examples would be: points, candy, stickers, stars, toys, beans, beads, checkmarks, credit, and currency (both real and fake).

Application: This can be applied at home, school, work, or almost any setting or environment where influencing and cultivating specific behaviors is the goal.

Those are the basics. Now, let's get into some specific examples.

Motivating Your Child

My friend, Michelle, asked me for help in motivating her son, Matthew, to eat his breakfast. The following is what I suggested to her:

First, simply ask him why he doesn't want to eat. If it makes him sick while at school, for example, then you may only need to solve that issue and everything's good. If there isn't a clear reason, other than because he just doesn't feel like it, then try a little motivation.

For this, you'll need a clear jar or container with a lid and something fun to put into it, such as little, colorful puff balls, or something eye-catching that may interest Matthew. Whatever you select, you're going to need enough to fill the entire jar. After breakfast tomorrow (or whenever you start this), get the jar out and have Matthew put one puff ball in it for every item he finished from the breakfast menu. Say something like, "Oh, you finished your toast. That's great. Now you can put a puff ball in your jar. Tomorrow, if you also eat your fruit, you can put a puff ball in the jar for that too. And if you finish everything, you can put [#] puff balls in your jar. In fact, if you finish everything, I'll even give you [#] bonus puff balls, but only when you eat everything. I bet you'll have it filled up pretty fast."

Since this is brand new to him, naturally, he'll be curious and probably ask you what happens when the jar gets filled. If he doesn't ask, you can just tell him that when it's filled up, you'll do something special with him and ask what he would like to do. This is where you begin your negotiation. You might say something like, "Well, Matthew, eating breakfast is very important when you start going to school. That means you're getting to be a big boy. So when you fill up the jar, we can do something special. Can you think of something special that you would like to do?" Have a few ideas ready in your thoughts in case he can't come up with any.

Coming up with the right reward can sometimes be tricky. Your success depends on having the right reward. By getting Matthew to suggest his own reward, this might solve the issue for you. But often, you'll have to tweak it. But one thing is certain—when you find the right reward, it's a slam-dunk; you'll have absolutely no trouble getting him to eat his breakfast.

Keep in mind that surveys have shown that people tend to remember things they've done far longer than things they've owned. Also, doing things with friends or family tends to be far more meaningful to
our well-being, so try to focus mostly on special things you can DO with Matthew, rather than things for him to HAVE. However, if you’re out with him and you decide to spontaneously go for ice cream, that’s fine because it’s a part of the activity which is the reward.

Oh...try to never use, as a reward, something that he normally gets to do anyway (unless Matthew specifically suggests it, then it’s up to you). Also, many rewards will lose their appeal over time. If you set up a recurring reward activity, use it until Matthew gets bored with it, then change it up. No reward lasts forever.

As for the jar, and "puff balls", make sure you know how many fit in the jar and never use more than that number. Calculate how many days it would take for him to completely fill up the jar if he were to eat everything on his plate. If that works for you, great, if not, you can adjust the size of the jar or the amount of puff balls he gets for eating everything. Kids will get bored with any game that doesn't hold their attention. So Matthew is probably going to want to see meaningful progress every day. But no matter what, he has to earn it and you have to be relatively consistent.

For the sake of progress, you may want to start off with one puff ball if he eats half of an item. That way, he may be more likely to, at least, take a couple bites of each one. You can also give him a little more than he can eat, that way, eating half is still going to amount to eating a normal portion. (Sneaky, eh?)

Be flexible, but always make sure the numbers work with the reward and the time it takes to get it. Also, you may find it helpful to agree on the rules and repeat them to Matthew and have him repeat them back to you, and maybe even write down the rules and hang them somewhere. That way, if he tries to change them, you can point to the rules and remind him what they are. Although the rules are negotiable, don’t negotiate during a meal. If he wants to change the rules, say, "We're going to stick with these rules for now, but we'll talk about it later when you’re finished."

Obviously, you can adapt this strategy to fit your specifications. But be careful that the reward isn't out of balance with the objective. If Matthew sees the reward as underwhelming, he's not going to be motivated. If the reward is way too big for what you want him to do, he'll know you're up to something and it will backfire. Kids may not be able to articulate their suspicions, but they instinctively know when you're up to something. It's as if they detect that you desperately want them to do something so you're going to try to trick them into doing it. That's why it's a good idea to get him involved so that he'll feel like he's playing a valuable role in the process. That way, the whole thing won't even be noticed. You want him to feel like you're on his side working with him, not working against him to force him to do something he doesn't want to do.

Sometimes it helps to give kids some autonomy. Let them feel like they're in control and making their own choices. If they don't feel pressured, this system can work wonders.
Motivating Your Students

I used to work as a Mental Health Counselor in a school for children with behavioral disorders. We had students of all ages in our school, from 1st grade up to 12th. Most of the students were reading below their grade level, usually because they had so much trouble in the public school setting, that their education was frequently interrupted, which put them behind, academically.

Along with the rest of the staff, I was trained in a specific reading remediation program. I would stand before the classroom of about 12 to 15 middle-school-aged students and attempt to get them to follow the program. If you guessed that this was not easy, you win a prize. We were struggling to get through a lesson every day and they were, again, falling behind. Something had to be done.

One day, going on a gut feeling, I wrote "Brownie Points" on the white board before I started. As expected, just when we were about to begin, a student asked what it was for.

"Oh...you noticed. Good. I'm glad you asked. Obviously, this reading period is important, but it's not easy and I know that most of you would rather be doing almost anything other than going through these lessons. I totally get it. But because I know it's hard work, and I feel your pain, I've decided to give you something to work toward. Heck, if you've got to work so hard at doing something you really don't want to do, it would be nice if you got a little break along the way to eat some of Mr. Milford's World Famous Brownies, right?"

Yes, this idea did, indeed, go over well. Plus, I know how to sell a good idea. And when there are fresh-baked brownies at stake, it's a pretty easy sell. So I explained to the students how the process worked.

"Basically, if you're all following along and everyone is staying on task, you will all get points. Anytime someone gets distracted or is off task, you all, collectively, will lose points. By the end of this period, I'll write down how many brownie points you have. And when you reach 50 points, you'll get brownies. Oh...by the way, did I mention that my world-famous brownies come with toppings? Peanut butter, chocolate, marshmallow...mmm, these brownies are probably the best you'll ever taste."

I'm all for theatrics, now and then. It gets the job done. When I finished explaining the rules, I could tell by the look on the student's faces, that they were in. The rest of that period, the students collectively self-corrected. I used the points not only to keep them on task, but to reinforce respectful behavior and anything I wanted to emphasize. So if a student started making wise-cracks about the story or someone's reading, I'd start subtracting points. I would simply say, "off task and being disrespectful" and erase two points, then I would continue or ask the student who was interrupted to continue.

During the first week, the principal poked her head in to make sure everything was okay, since it was so quiet. So, let me just summarize how this worked in a classroom filled with kids who had very short fuses and attention spans to match, by saying, "Slam-dunk!" And the brownies were every bit as good as they expected. Another token-economy success story.
Motivating Yourself

Everyone needs a good set of tools in their motivation tool box. You can add this one with a few caveats. Motivating yourself using a token economy is different than using it to motivate others. When you’re trying to motivate your child or a student, or even a classroom full of students, your goal is to find a reward that makes sense and will be worth earning. That doesn’t change for yourself, but it's harder to hold yourself accountable.

When you're dealing with a classroom full of students, for example, you set up the expectations beforehand and you control the distribution of tokens. So the students are held accountable by you (external accountability), plus they hold each other accountable in some circumstances.

It can be a little tricky when you control your own tokens. So let's examine how this can work if you're using it for yourself.

Let's say you want to quit biting your fingernails (this can work for quitting smoking or any other habit you want to change as well). It's a habit you've had since you were a kid and everything else you've tried hasn't worked. I would suggest the typical token system using points, "X" marks, or checkmarks. Grab a calendar, mark your starting date and your first reward/milestone date. Since three weeks is typically cited as the length of time for developing a new habit (or in this case, replacing one habit with another), I would make the three-week point your first milestone and reward date.

Every day that you don't bite your nails, you earn four points. If you bite your nails once, you only earn two points. Bite your nails a second time and you're down to only one point for the day. Biting your nails three or more times and you earn zero points.

Now, the next part may take some tweaking. But don't be in too big of a hurry. Establishing habits can't be rushed and you'll know when you're making progress, even without the points or checkmarks.

With your three-week date in mind, calculate how many points you would earn, maximum, if you never bite your nails in the next three weeks. In this case, you would have 21 days at four points per day. So your maximum would be 84 points.

I would make this token economy a graduated system. So in the first three weeks, you set the bar low, requiring only 65 points before you get rewarded. Over the next three-week interval, you will need 75 points in order to get your reward. And in the final three weeks, you'll need the full 84 points to get rewarded.

You can, however, adjust the number of three-week phases to include more phases and more point ranges so that you're stepping up to the full 84 points more slowly.

So that's the breakdown on points. Now comes the reward. Since this is a graduated system, you'll want to make your rewards more meaningful and enticing for each phase, culminating at your grand prize.
This is the hardest part. If you get the rewards right, you'll likely succeed. If you get them wrong, it's all up in the air. That said, I suggest you try to combine the consequence and reward in some way. I'll talk about this in just a bit.

Don't worry if you get the reward wrong the first couple tries. For example, if you have the wrong reward set for the first three weeks, you'll probably know it by the end of the first week. Why? Because you'll catch yourself biting your nails and won't instantly stop yourself. You'll think that since you've already slipped up, you'll finish the job and count it as only one slip...one long, luxurious, drawn-out slip-up, that is.

The type of rewards that will work for you is something I can't even guess at. But, as an example, my wife and I set a joint goal where we put concert tickets and a vacation at risk if we didn't accomplish our goal. Of course, accomplishing our goal meant we were rewarded by getting to enjoy our vacation and the concert we went out of town to see. We combined the consequence and reward into one nice little (and very motivating!!) package.

My personal example is actually a perfect demonstration of how you can set consequences as well as a reward, and, as in my case, they can sometimes be the same thing. By the way, my wife and I loved the concert and the time we spent at the beach. And even though it worked like a charm for us, that wasn't our first choice for consequence/reward. The other one just wasn't motivating enough for us, so we changed it. Also, the first one was a reward only. But we just weren't thrilled with it.

So how will you know if you find the right reward? When it's working and you're making meaningful progress toward your goal. If it's helping you change your behavior, you're on track. If you're using a consequence coupled with a reward, it's a little easier to know when you've picked the right consequence because it will scare you to think about not achieving your goal. I'm not joking either.

My wife and I were having a talk about what consequence would be the best one for our goal, and when she suggested the idea of putting our vacation at risk, we both winced. Our goal was big. Our consequence was big. And our reward was big. So everything matched up. We literally felt that the pressure was on. We agreed with each other that if one of us held up our end of the deal but the other one didn't, we both lost the vacation. That added even that much more pressure and accountability for each of us to come through. I knew that if I failed, she would suffer by missing the vacation and the concert.

Okay, here's the kicker: we agreed that if we failed and couldn't go on vacation, we could cancel the room we rented, but the tickets we would have to give away to someone for free. Can you say PAIN(!!)!? The stakes were high, but we had to have a complete buy-in on the whole deal, otherwise, it would undermine the goal we set and wanted to achieve.

So you can see how critical it is to get the incentive just right. If you're trying to quit biting your nails, perhaps your first reward will be treating yourself to a nice dinner at a place you like but rarely go.
Maybe you'll reward yourself with a movie that actually includes buying popcorn and a drink...kind of expensive, I know, but it might be worth it to you.

Play around with the rewards. Find things that are meaningful to you but, whenever possible, focus on doing things rather than getting things. Ultimately, you need to find what works for you.

Okay, on to the subject of accountability. With a goal like changing a bad habit such as biting your nails, it would help if you had someone to check in with who can visually inspect your nails to see if it looks like they're improving. Also, it's good to have someone in the loop who can bring it to your attention if you start biting. Our behaviors can be so automatic sometimes, that we aren't even aware that we're doing it. Personally, I put a piece of bright, white tape on one nail of each hand when I was trying to get myself to stop biting my nails. Every time I brought my hand up to my face to start munching, I would see the bright glow of the tape which interrupted my behavior and I would stop and put my hand down.

So if you have a buddy or spouse who can help you, let them know what the plan is and be sure to check in with them every day. It may take a bit of effort to set up the details of this one, but when you get all the details just right, the results are amazing!

**Conclusion**

This special report is a snapshot, an examination of one specific technique or method of motivation. Each scenario presented is based on real-world application. There are nuances within each plan that can be discussed in volumes. The purpose of this report is to give you practical examples in real-life situations—it's a starting point. Even though I've addressed using a token economy as one specific method to motivate a child, a classroom full of students, and even to motivate yourself, all strategies and examples can be applied in a multitude of ways, and in countless situations.

**An Invitation**

I hope I've covered enough details for you to use a token economy reward system successfully. If you have any success with using my suggestions, I'd love to hear from you. I might even use your story in a future report, article, or book. Also, if you're having trouble using a token reward system and could use a little help, you can contact me at: scottmilford@behaviorandmotivation.com

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