

25 POINTS ON GIVING POINTS

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Point or token systems are widely, if not universally, used in schools and programs for children and youth of all ages as means for communicating and reinforcing academic, behavioral and social standards. Point systems are also widely used in homes by parents as an important non-punitive behavioral development strategy. From early childhood through the teenage years such systems are used for access to a wide variety of privileges and entertainment options as tools for teaching prosocial behavior.

All point systems are fundamentally variations of the basic underlying principles that drive our market economy—the exchange of goods and services—in which we all participate and depend upon. In contrast to the barter system—the direct exchange of goods and services—money (i.e. tokens) is the medium of exchange which provides almost infinite system flexibility. An example of a basic market principle is the belief that “the customer is always right.” In essence, each customer has unique wants and needs (for goods and services) and will only go to those stores that offer them at affordable prices. Another well known example is the law of supply and demand. An easily accessible or over supply of goods and services will drive down prices. Shortages or supplies that are difficult to access will drive up prices. Economists continually try to manage these variables to control for both inflation and recession.

Fortunately, the concept is quite easy to understand. Unfortunately, the implementation is also very easy to misuse and abuse, particularly when applied to systems for behavioral development of children and youth that are poorly constructed. Effective systems require knowledge of both learning theory and market economy.

A note about bribery: Some adults contend that such systems are merely “bribery” and should be avoided. A bribe involves an exchange of goods or services for behavior that is illicit. However, points earned are the common standard in nearly every school by which students are informed of their achievement, which function as an effective incentives for most, and that are ultimately recognized in the form of letter grade (e.g. A-F). The letter grades themselves are a medium of exchange for later access to reinforcers. For many children and youth who struggle and fail in the schools’ generalized incentive system, letter grades or their variants, do not function as reinforcers and in fact may acquire the properties of punishment.

Below are points on giving points to help address some common problems.

1. A “token economy/point” system must be balanced. If points are too easy to obtain, little behavioral achievement is gained, and the solution will require increasing the cost of items – “inflation.” If the points are too difficult to earn, or the cost of items are too high, the students will reject the system (not perform the desired behavior), and the solution will require lowering expectations and/or prices – “recession.”

2. Points should be used to help students acquire new behaviors or strengthen desired behaviors.
3. Students must know exactly what behavior is expected to earn points, and how many points may be earned for the behavior. Provide requirements in writing.
4. Be certain that administrators, parents and other involved persons know about the points system—how points are earned and what the reinforcement menu is. Their support will help the system work more effectively and facilitate generalization.
5. If other teachers or adults are also giving points in the classroom, or the system is being used in several classes or other settings, be sure all are awarding points in the same way and for the same behavior(s).
6. Create a specific structure which clearly indicates the intervals when points will be awarded. This will vary depending upon the students' age, abilities and setting/task demands. The interval (how many minutes-5, 10, 20 30, 60 etc.) should be brief enough to ensure that the students will have a high probability of succeeding in the system. It also serves as a framework to ensure that the adults attend to delivering reinforcers on predictable schedule.
7. The reinforcement menu should include a variety of items (goods and services) with varying "prices," and the menu should be changed from time to time as the interests of the students change. Highly desirable items or activities can be priced higher than less desirable items.
8. It is wise to emphasize activity reinforcers over tangible items as much as possible. Make many preferred activities contingent on purchase with points.
9. Ask students from time-to-time for their suggestions for new menu items, but be careful to explain the limits.
10. Initially, students should receive points as soon as possible after the occurrence of desired behaviors. Gradually, students can be expected to work for longer periods of time, or increase the expected quantity or quality of the desired behavior before points are awarded.
11. Use prompts or cues to signal appropriate times for the desired behaviors to increase the likelihood of opportunities for reinforcement.
12. As a student acquires desired behaviors, points should be given less often and for other new behaviors, but his/her earning potential to purchase from the menu should not decrease. In other words, s/he should not be punished for getting better by not being able to earn as many points. Or, as s/he progresses, fewer points may be given, or given less often, but s/he still has the same purchasing power.
13. Bonus points are often very helpful, but should be given with careful consideration. They should not be too easy or impossible to earn. They should be given for specific and extra achievement or performance, and generally on a variable schedule. Be careful to not create an expectation among students that can always anticipate bonus points.
14. When awarding points, the adult should also verbalize what behavior(s) the point(s) are being earned for (say "You earned points for..."). If the student does not perform the desired behavior, the adult should not say, "You lost points for..." rather the adult should say, "You did not earn points because..." It is not possible to "lose" points that you do not have!

15. Avoid giving points for behaviors that are already appropriate and intrinsically reinforcing except intermittently to maintain those behaviors.
16. Avoid giving points for “not doing...” (an unwanted behavior). It is not really possible to reinforce (get more of) a behavior that did not happen. Use points to reinforce specific behaviors that are incompatible (cannot occur at the same time) with behaviors that are unwanted.
17. Avoid negotiating with students over points earned. There may be circumstances when it is appropriate to negotiate such as when helping a student assess his/her own behavior, but generally negotiation leads to power struggles and often teaches students that you can be talked out of a decision.
18. The student should be responsible for keeping his/her point sheet/card throughout the day and producing it at times when points are to be awarded. If s/he loses it, typically it should not be reconstructed which may reinforce careless behaviors. Rather, a new one should be provided on which points may be accumulated from that time of the day forward. If it is stolen or damaged by another student, it should be reconstructed as best possible.
19. Use redirects or other signals to interrupt emerging inappropriate behavior to minimize use of punishers.
20. Some systems include the use of “fines” (response-cost). These must be used with great care to insure that students do not end up with a negative balance – “in the hole.” This circumstance can be worse than no system at all. Fines may be most appropriate option for behavior such as damage to property. However, the use of fines may easily lead to increased focus on the undesired behavior and can lead to the alienation of students from a system that is intended as an “incentive” system.
21. Accurate records are necessary. The student should have a daily point record card or sheet, and a cumulative record sheet showing daily earnings, savings and spending.
22. The use of “point checks” (simulated bank checks) as the means to make purchases can be very helpful to prepare students to use “real” checking accounts, with skills to balance the account and correctly spell related vocabulary.
23. The best practices that apply to the use of points with individuals also apply to groups.
24. Teach, nourish and provide frequent opportunities for students of all ages to engage in non-contingent altruistic activities that coexist with the point system. There are many natural and potent reinforcers that occur within daily interactions that should be acknowledged but
25. Have faith in your system. Give it time to work. Take time to evaluate problems and make modifications accordingly.