

## A more positive response cost procedure

**Response cost is a punishment technique that involves the loss of tokens or points following the occurrence of some specified inappropriate behavior.**

*-Dr. Russ Dewey*

Some students display high rates of difficult or challenging behaviors. As you address these behaviors, it is unlikely that the student will go from “many” incidents a day to “none” quickly. More likely, there will be **less frequent incidents**. Your behavior plan will address **proactive supports in the environment** as well as **skills that need to be taught**. As students get the right supports and begin learning better ways to get what they need, how can we help students go from **high rates** of a specific behavior to **lower rates** (and maybe none)? One strategy might be a version of a **response cost procedure**.

Response cost procedures can be described as imposing “fines” or “tolls” for students who exhibit targeted behavior (Response Cost, n.d., Mather and Goldstein, 2001). A token (or point) is taken from the student each time he exhibits a targeted behavior. Any tokens or points left at the end of the designated time can be exchanged for a reward.

These response cost procedures can feel punitive. For some students, especially those with difficult behavior, that feeling of being punished as he “loses” a token can cause negative side effects that are out of proportion with what has actually occurred (Reeve, n.d.) So, rather than completely avoid response cost, how about a modified, more positive response cost?

In my version, the procedure involves using the tokens to represent the number of *gentle reminders* of the expectations that the student will receive. He will receive a reminder when the targeted behavior occurs and a token will be removed. When tokens are removed, they represent the *giving of a reminder*. This may feel less punitive to the student. The goal is to reduce the amount of reminders the student needs over time.



*My version should only be attempted if the student has good proactive supports in place and has learned some more appropriate ways to get his needs met besides that “behavior.” This is not a teaching procedure!*

If, at the end of the predetermined time (like a class period) he has any reminders left, he gets some predetermined preferred activity. In my version, it is imperative that the adult is clearly rooting for the student to make it to the end with at least one token left. As he is successful with the initial number of tokens, the number of tokens available is reduced slowly.

### Here are the steps.

**Identify a specific behavior that happens frequently**

Just like in a typical response cost procedure, identify a clear discrete behavior you want to target with the child. Something like “disrespect” is not a good choice for this procedure because it is hard

to make clear to the student what that means (if it's a matter of "I know it when I hear it," it's not likely to be clear for the student – "Yes, Ms. Smith" can come out nicely or not so nicely.). A better choice would be a behavior you can see and that is clear and understandable to the student (like getting out of his seat without permission). I've seen some teachers use my version with entire classrooms to help the class remember to get quiet within a set period after the "silent" signal is given.

**Decide on how many reminder "tokens" to start with**

Once you know what behavior you are going to target, figure out how often it is currently occurring. It is important to know this so that you can set up the procedure effectively. You might need to count for a few days to be sure!

You are going to give your student as many "gentle reminders" that he needs to succeed in the procedure. So if he usually talks out 10 times a day, you might set up your procedure to have 12 gentle reminders available to him. In the beginning of the procedure, you want him to be successful. The number of reminders will be faded over time.

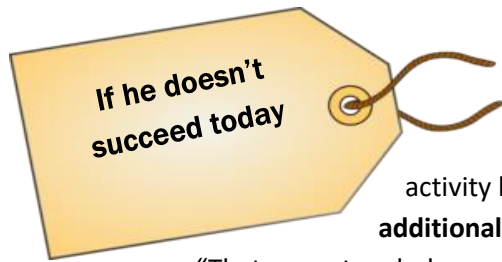
Each gentle reminder will be represented by a visual signal – I'll call them "tokens." These tokens might be sticky notes, actual number cards, ribbons tied on a hanger, etc. It is important that the student be able to easily see them as they themselves are visual reminders of what he is working on.

**Talk to the student about the procedure you are setting up**

Talk to the student about the procedure that you are trying. Tell him it is an effort to help him remember to use his newly learned skills. Tell him that sometimes having a fun activity when he is successful can help him remember to use his new skills. Offer him some choices of things he might like. These activities do not need to be giant (like a trip to Disney) or time-consuming. They are just a "pat on the back" for him needing less and less reminders over time. Show him the tokens, walk him through how the procedure works and then get started.

**If he achieves the goal**

You want him to be successful the first few times. You might offer him some **non-verbal encouragement** along the way. You might **engineer** the classroom activities to make it easier for him to do what you expect. Your goal is his success! After a few successful days, you might reduce your non-verbal encouragement and engineering. If he remains successful, then you can reduce the amount of tokens you'll give him because (share this with him), "he's doing really well and needs a greater challenge (but you know he can do it)" As you reduce the number of tokens gradually, you will increase your non-verbal encouragement and your engineering initially. Don't reduce tokens before you've reduced the non-verbal encouragement and engineering successfully at each step.



If he doesn't  
succeed today

At some point, he might use up all his tokens. It will be important to handle this sensitively. Losing all the tokens does not mean he gets punished in any way other than he doesn't get to do that activity he would have had if there had been tokens left. **Don't add additional punishment!** Be sure to debrief his using up all the tokens with him.

"That was a tough day, wasn't it? But I know you can do it and we'll try again tomorrow! Is there anything I could do tomorrow to help you save your tokens?" Then tomorrow, consider adding back in some non-verbal encouragement and engineering!



Keep track of how many times he gets and doesn't get the activity. If he is not consistently getting the activity, figure out why. Maybe you are reducing the number of tokens too quickly. Maybe you are reducing the non-verbal encouragement and engineering too quickly. Maybe he needs more choices in the activity at the end when he is successful.

## References

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