THRIVE

Special Needs Strategies That WORK!

Sam's S

Today is _Tuesday_

Activity	
Write	✓
Gear Toys	🙂
Math	✓
Lunch	
Recess/Free Time	🙂
Read	✓

Figure 2.11

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Jenny Hubanks

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About the Author

Jenny Hubanks is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst® (BCBA®) and a licensed special education teacher. She obtained her undergraduate degrees from Sterling College and the University of Kansas. Later, she completed a Master's in Adaptive Special Education from the University of Kansas. To further enhance her expertise, Jenny completed her coursework from the Florida Institute of Technology, and obtained her certification from the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB). During her time as a classroom teacher, she primarily worked with students who had significant cognitive disabilities. This experience proved instrumental in teaching her the value of positive reinforcement, consistency, and fostering peer relationships. Jenny has also served as a Lead BCBA® in Northwest Arkansas, gaining valuable clinical experience, and started a company called Maven Learning Innovations.

Jenny loves seeing individuals from all walks of life succeed. In her leisure time, she devotes herself to her family, which includes her husband and her two young sons. Being a mother to young boys has provided her with invaluable insights into teaching and learning in a home setting. The remainder of her free time is dedicated to pursuing a doctoral degree in performance leadership improvement.
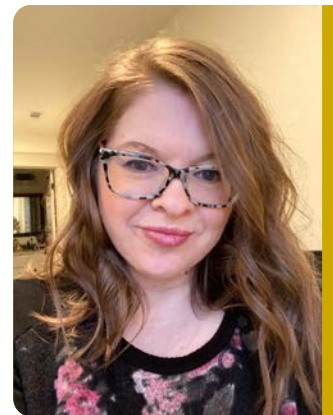
Nurturing Every Child's Unique Abilities

This is a practical and comprehensive guide designed to support educators, parents, and caregivers in helping children with special needs thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. In these pages, you will discover a wealth of knowledge, instructional insights, and valuable tools to create inclusive and empowering learning environments.

Every child has been created by God with unique talents and abilities waiting to be unlocked, regardless of their challenges or differences. The journey to empowering children with special needs begins with understanding, compassion, and the right strategies. This book is a compass, offering practical advice, evidence-based methods, and the latest insights in special education.

To make the learning experience even more engaging and effective, this book includes perforated pages featuring datasheets, visual aids, and manipulatives that can be easily incorporated into your teaching practices. These resources are designed to be practical, adaptable, and ready to use, ensuring that you can implement strategies seamlessly.

What You'll Find In This Book

Tailored Approaches: Discover a diverse array of customized methods, including innovative assistive techniques, designed to cater to the unique needs of every child.

Positive Learning Atmosphere: Acquire practical and proven methods for fostering an effective and empowering learning environment that encourages growth and self-confidence.

Sensory-Friendly Practices: Explore the possibilities and tools that enhance the learning experience, making it comfortable, pleasant, and enriching.

Nurturing Vital Skills: Equip yourself with the strategies needed to nurture essential daily skills in children with special needs, helping them build a solid foundation for their future.

Ready-to-Use Tools: Benefit from perforated pages featuring datasheets, visual aids, and manipulatives, conveniently designed for immediate use. Tokens and icons can be laminated, cut out, and sorted for use with the ready-made worksheets in the back.

A Grateful Acknowledgment

With sincere thanks to Darlene Magsam. Your collaboration and creative contributions truly elevated this project.

> For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.
>
> — Psalm 139:13-14

God made us each in His image with unique gifts and abilities. Many gifts and abilities are overlooked in today's society, but rest assured, our gifts were not given accidentally. We each have a purpose in God's kingdom. As a teacher, I had the privilege of helping children find their strengths and gifts and then teaching them how to use them. As a parent or educator, you have the same privilege. What an honor!

As I write this, I reflect on my years in the classroom; one of my top goals for each student was to teach them to be as independent as possible. I have spent most of my adult life working with children that have special needs in some capacity. My mission has always been to find the best strategies and tools to meet each individual's needs. The world of education is ever-changing, but some tried-and-true strategies give children with special needs better opportunities to learn new skills. Many of the strategies and tools in this book will apply to schoolwork and learning valuable life skills that will support independence throughout life.

The independence level of one child may not be the same as their sibling, cousins, or peers. Each child will learn independence skills at different rates. However, one thing all children have in common is the need to become more independent as they move through adolescence. Our job as a parent involves teaching our children many, many things. Continually teaching them to become more independent is one of the critical areas of focus. Essentially, we are working ourselves out of a job! Excuse me while I get a tissue just thinking about my boys moving out one day!

This book was written specifically for those teaching children with special needs, but these strategies can support all children regardless of diagnosis. My desire to create this book was to give educators resources to support a variety of challenges they face daily. This is not a one-size-fits-all book, but there are suggestions for modifying the strategies to different levels based on your child's needs.

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As you progress through the book, you may find that some children do not need all of the strategies, but one or more strategies will likely support them. You will also find that some strategies can be combined and will strengthen one another when used together.

As Andy Hargreaves said, "Change is easy to imagine, hard to implement, and incredibly difficult to sustain."[1] I have used these strategies and watched children blossom as they learn new skills and information with these supports, not only in a school setting but also at home. I have been using several strategies in this book with my children. It is not easy to make changes sometimes, but it is worth it!

As you work through this book, I encourage you to be patient. Some strategies will work quickly, while others need to be explicitly taught, and it can take longer to see the benefits of your hard work. Often it is easiest to make one change at a time, both for the adult and the child. Give yourself time to become familiar with the processes. Most importantly, I encourage you to give yourself grace while learning and implementing new things! Whether you are a seasoned teacher or this is a brand-new adventure, you can do this! The children will be blessed that you are taking on this challenge for them! I can't wait to begin this journey with you!

Using the Resources in the Back of This Book

❶ *Introduction to Figures and Teaching Resources:* You will notice the figures that correspond to the various strategies and teaching resources as you read through each chapter.

❷ *Location of Figures and Resources:* Many of these are provided in the back of the book in the Datasheets and Manipulatives section.

❸ *Identifying Available Resources:* You can see which ones were created for you by watching for this symbol next to the figure.

❹ *Purpose of Elements:* These elements often include the tokens that will be needed as you work through the information with your students.

❺ *Maintenance and Reusability:* Most of these sheets and tokens work best when laminated so they are sturdy and can be used more than once. The tokens can also have Velcro applied so that they can adhere to the appropriate spaces on the sheets.

❻ *Example of Figure 4.6:* See the example below of Figure 4.6, which is cleaning off the table. The sheet is available in the back, as well as the tokens that can be placed on it with Velcro adhesives.
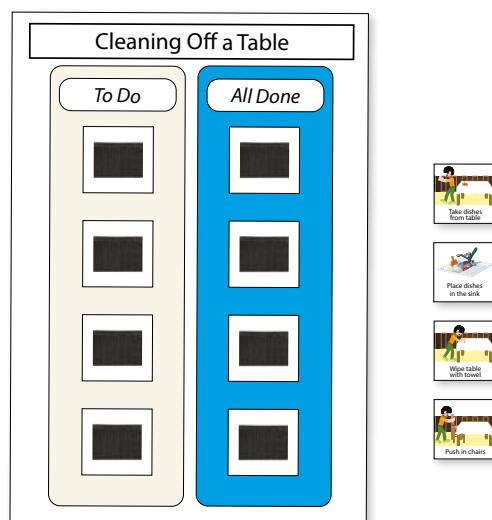
Creating a positive working environment is one of the essential components of teaching. Take a moment to think back to your favorite school or Sunday school teacher. What characteristics do you recall about them? When I've asked this question in the past, responses typically fell into one or more categories described by the following: People fondly remember teachers who made them feel loved, safe, successful, independent, and valued, and they remember teachers that they thought believed in them. As an educator, many, if not all, of these characteristics will be something you already do!

One area that parents of children with special needs often ask me about is how to support their child in becoming more independent. Using positive reinforcement, we can take those significant characteristics listed above to help support independence.

A second key component to creating a positive working environment revolves around structure. When I started working from home during and after the pandemic, I had to create a work environment. As I prepared to set up my office space, I investigated what others used for a home office. I found a wide range of examples. I observed three main themes during my research.

❶ The first was that the office did not need to be expensive to be functional.

❷ My second observation was home offices were most often spaces dedicated to work. In other words, the area was structured to be conducive to completing work tasks.

❸ Lastly, I noticed the area was organized for efficiency. Most people had items they needed right in their workspace.

As I reflected on these three main themes, I realized how similar these ideas are to a conducive learning environment for children. All humans desire positive and productive environments. For some adults and children, those come very naturally. For others, it will need to be explicitly taught. As a public school teacher, I typically used what furniture and materials were available. My first task as a self-contained teacher at the beginning of the school year was to structure the classroom to benefit my students. My next goal was to organize materials to be easily accessible and in the needed areas. These beginning components set the stage for learning.

Motivating Children

Positive reinforcement happens when you provide children with a reinforcer (an item THEY desire) after each child gives the response YOU want. If that response continues or is maintained, that item is currently reinforcing to the child and positive reinforcement is taking place.[2] Most of us do this naturally throughout the day. Reinforcers can be any item, food, social interaction, or activity. If a child finds it motivating and the item or activity is appropriate, you can use it as a reinforcer. Below, you will find a list of examples to get you started.

Potential reinforcers (items listed can often overlap categories):

Items/Objects	Toys	iPad/computer	Bubbles	Pet	Noise maker	Fan	Slime	Light-up toys
Food	Candy	Fruit	Juice	Popcorn	Chips	Peanut butter	Cereal	Pudding
Social	High five	Tickles	Fist bump	Verbal praise	1:1 time with adult	Hugs	Phone call	Cheering
Activity	Water play	Fingerpaint	Games	Shaving cream play	Bike ride	Go for a walk	Pretend play	Swing

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Often, educators will need no help coming up with ideas. They know exactly what a child desires. Other times, you might have difficulty finding items that a child likes. In that case, I encourage you not to give up! Here are some tips for finding potential reinforcers:

- ⦿ Keep introducing new potential reinforcers. Don't give up!

- ⦿ Introduce potential reinforcers multiple times. You never know when something will grab their interest.

- ⦿ If you run out of ideas, do some research. There are many websites with potential ideas.

- ⦿ Think outside the box. Sometimes children like things adults wouldn't expect.

- ⦿ Watch them when they have free time. What are they doing when they look happy and engaged? That is your item or activity!

Now that we have laid the basic groundwork of positive reinforcement, you might be asking yourself, "Why should I use this?" We should use positive reinforcement to teach, increase, or maintain a skill or behavior. When adults ask why I recommend using positive reinforcement with children, I always ask the same question, "Would you continue going to work if your boss told you that you would no longer receive a paycheck?" Of course, the answer is always no! If you go to work and do your job, you get paid for your time. If you continue going to work to keep getting paid, that paycheck is positive reinforcement for you. I like to suggest teachers and parents think of school as our children's job. We expect them to go all day and complete specified tasks. It sounds like a job to me!

The following section will go through a few key components to brush up on when preparing to implement positive reinforcement. You probably do many of these things already.

1. Make items special.

The first task is gathering the items a child likes. You will want to have more than one item if a child becomes tired of something they choose multiple times. It is good to have items across various categories (food, activities, objects, social). Once you have those items, you want to ensure that a child does not have unlimited access to them throughout the day. You want these items to be special! If the items are only available during "work" times, they will be more powerful. It is also wise to rotate objects so that children do not become uninterested in some items by seeing them repeatedly. If a child only likes one or two objects, swapping in new things and providing access to them multiple times is a great way to allow them to explore new possibilities.
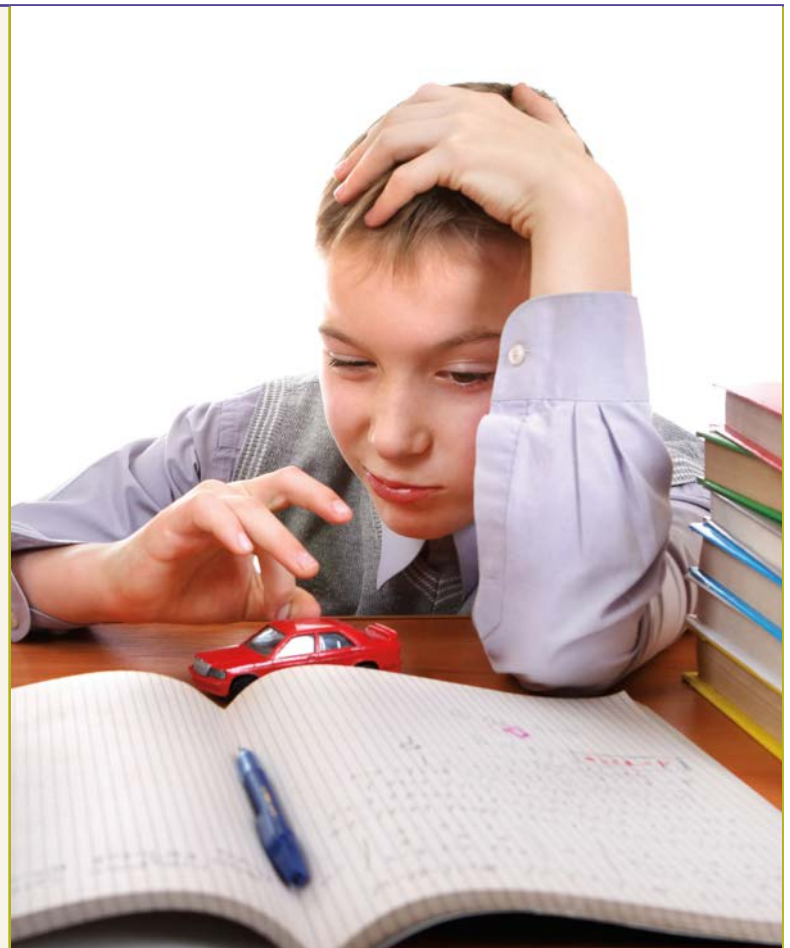
2. Follow through every time.

When you tell a child they can earn a motivating item for completing a task, it should hold the same weight as a promise. It is so crucial that you follow through with the deal you make. Kids figure out adults quickly and will remember if you do not follow through with your end of the agreement. Completing your end of the deal helps build trust and a positive working environment. A vital piece of being a person that always follows through is to only promise an item if you have access to it in the moment. It is also essential that you provide the reinforcer as soon as possible when they finish their task so its arrival will strengthen the desired behavior.[3] I always instructed my paraprofessionals and behavior technicians to get the item to the child within three seconds. The faster you provide their reinforcer, the more likely they will connect completing a task and getting a motivating thing. When adults consistently provide reinforcement, children learn if they do _____, they earn _____. This is an essential skill. To put it another way, it helps teach them cause and effect.

3. Neutral is necessary.

If you are a parent, you know that when you begin to implement new procedures with your child, they will not always be happy with the changes. I always told the other adults working in my room to try not to take the student's behavior personally in the classroom setting. When children have undesired behaviors, their goal is typically not to ruin the day of the adult they are near; the adults are collateral damage. Often, children with special needs have difficulty communicating, difficulty with change, emotional regulation challenges, and the list goes on.

In my experience, it is much more difficult as a parent not to take challenging behavior personally than it is as a professional. We work so hard to raise our children to the best of our ability, and it sure does feel personal when their behavior isn't what we desire. Take heart! Take a deep breath or any other strategy that works for you and give yourself time to think. Remind yourself, "This isn't personal." Do not try to reason or barter with children while in that intense emotional state. Let them calm down, then move forward. An additional piece of advice I gave adults in my classroom was to have a neutral or pleasant tone of voice and facial expression when working with a child. Even when things are tough, if your voice level rises or your face looks angry, it will likely escalate a child that is already feeling out of control. These slight shifts can make a big difference.

How to Provide Positive Reinforcement

Now to the fun part! How do you use positive reinforcement during a child's learning time? I will describe the process and add some tips that I have learned along the way. For many kids, you may need to begin with a type of visual support. We will dive into different types of visual schedules in Chapter 2 and various visual supports in Chapter 3. Until then, keep the general term "visual support" as a placeholder for the specific types we will discuss in future chapters.

Process

- Have your visual support ready. Ask a child what they are working toward.

- State the instruction in short, simple terms.

- The child completes the task.

- Immediately hand them the item they chose to work for or a token. Remember to pair the token or item with praise telling them precisely what they did right.

Voila! You are on your way to positive reinforcement. The key to knowing if something truly is positive reinforcement is data. If you complete paper-based activities, you will have data from that source. However, if a child is working on hands-on tasks, I have included a datasheet in the back of this book to use or adapt to fit your needs. This data will allow you to see if your strategies are successful and will support making data-based decisions. After reviewing your data, if the desired behavior (the task you want the child to complete) continues to be completed or increases, you have achieved positive reinforcement success!

Figure 1.1. This datasheet can be used for many types of skills. The scoring code can be marked as you wish, just note your code at the top. I recommend using a new sheet for each skill so your data does not get mixed.

Datasheet by Opportunity
(Figure 1.1)

Name: _____ Skill targeted: _____

Directions: For each opportunity the targeted skill is presented to the child, mark a (___) for correct responses. Mark a (___) for incorrect responses. *Example: + for correct, – for incorrect.*

Date	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Notes

Now that you've seen the basic process, let's look at an example. This example assumes the child is seated in their work area.

- Present the child with a choice board for reinforcer selection. What are you working for (extend the visual toward the child so they can select an item)? When the child makes a selection, move to the next step.

- Present your demand (the task). For example, "Cut out the square."

- Make sure the child completes the task you requested.

- Immediately provide verbal praise ("You stayed so close to the lines, awesome!") and hand them the item or a token.

  - Specific: "close to the lines"

  - Praise: "awesome"

  - Concise: extra language was avoided

  - Quick delivery

1:1 Reinforcement

1:1 reinforcement is defined as having a child do one task, then providing them with one item or activity for reinforcement. If your child needs to start with 1:1 reinforcement, keep their breaks short if they choose an activity or item as a reinforcement. If they prefer an edible item, such as a gummy candy, they can eat the item and you can get back to work. Give 1–2 minutes at the most when giving them a break after every single task. Once they understand the concept of working to gain an item, you can increase them to completing two tasks for a reinforcer, and so on. When I add another task, I ask the child to do something that I know they can do quickly and easily so they see it is still the same promise. Once they complete more tasks (and take more time), you will increase the amount of time they get for a break.

I typically stick with a 5-minute reinforcement break at the most. It all depends on how much work they completed. The process of extending to working longer can take time, depending on your child, but it is well worth it. Some children will need a visual to support this learning. If your child has difficulty moving beyond doing one task and then getting one item, this next section is for you.
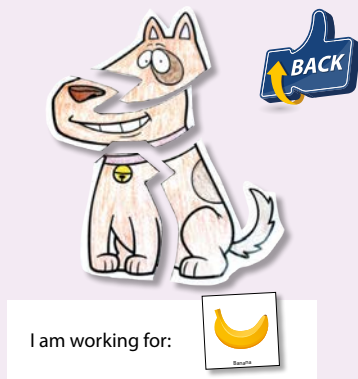
Token Boards

Some children will need to start with 1:1 reinforcement. Others will be able to do multiple tasks before receiving a reinforcement break. A token economy is another way to implement positive reinforcement. A specified number of tokens are earned and traded for a reinforcer.[4] A token board is a type of token economy and can have varying styles. I have seen token boards begin with one token and build up to 25. After that, the sky is the limit! I am providing some examples of token boards. If your child loves specific toys (e.g., cars, figures), you can buy token boards with specific designs by searching for the item and "token board" online. You will notice there are many options.

Figure 1.2. Token boards can be created in Google Slides or another computer program. Once they are printed (I suggest cardstock), you can laminate the page and cut out the tokens. Placing Velcro on the back allows the tokens to be used on the front and stored on the back.
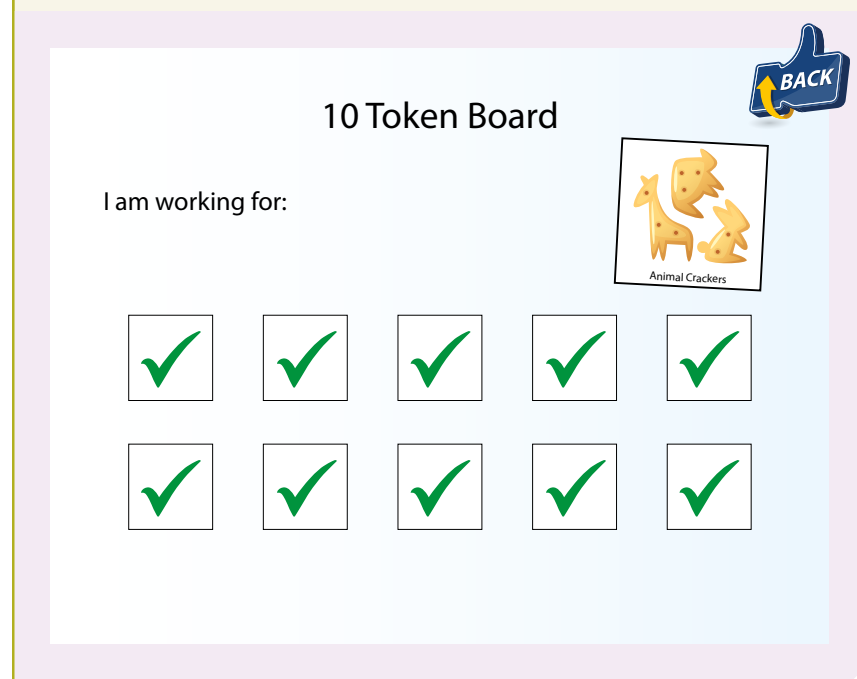
Figure 1.3. This token board was created from a coloring book. I colored the image, cut it out, and glued it to cardstock. I then cut it into four pieces, laminated it, and cut it out again. I also outlined the image on the other half of the cardstock and laminated it for a landing board. I then added Velcro to connect the top pieces and the bottom. You can use any picture to create this type of token board. In the past, I took character folders you buy before school starts and cut them to make boards. If you selected a favorite item, be prepared for your child to think they are only working for that item. However, an "I am working for" sentence at the bottom will provide space for them to select an item and remind them that there are other choices.

Figure 1.4. Token boards can be handwritten on a piece of paper. You can draw this anytime and anywhere you have paper and a writing utensil. In this example, the child's task is taking bites of their meal to earn ice cream. The behavior of taking bites is being reinforced with smiley faces until they reach the end goal of ice cream!

Figure 1.5. Token boards can be created on dry erase boards. They are erased and drawn again to reset.

Figure 1.6. This token board was created using an old DVD case. Construction paper was written on and added to the inner sleeve. Velcro was placed on the outside and pennies were added for tokens. This is a great way to practice learning money! (Tokens for this are provided in the back.)
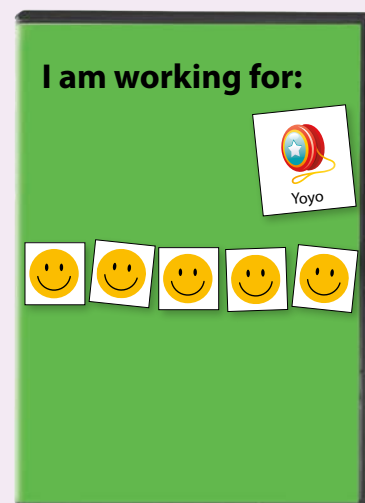
Figure 1.7. Placing Velcro on the back of token boards provides a place for extra token storage and extra reinforcer icons!! (Tokens are in the back.)
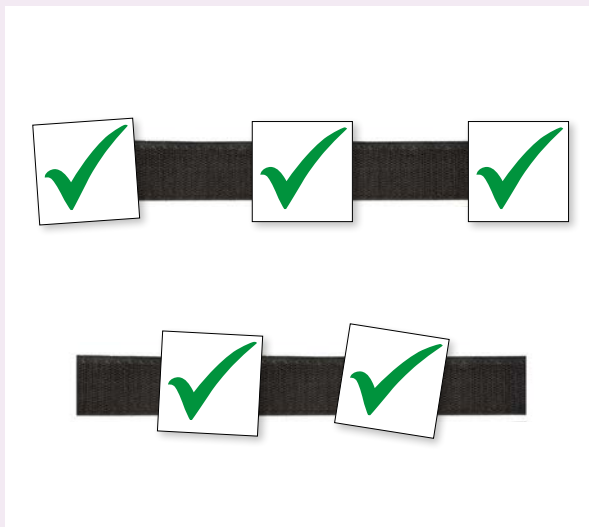
Figure 1.8. This choice board has space for six reinforcer choices. It is made with Velcro, lamination, and labeled images from a program designed for creating icons. If more choices are needed, it could be made a full sheet.

Choices

pop tube

ight up ball

Toys

Dinosaur puppet

Glitter wand

Squishy ball

Teaching Token Boards

If a child needs to start with 1:1 reinforcement, teach them to use a token board and strategically extend the number of tokens (and amount of work completed) they collect before each reinforcement break. Initially, to use a token board, you will need to pair the reinforcing item they choose to the tokens to help them understand that getting tokens equals getting their item. Small edible items such as a colorful treat work very well to aid in helping a child connect the token board to reinforcement. They eat their treat, and you are quickly ready to move forward. With a toy,

you will have to go through getting the item back.

Choose the number of tokens you believe a child can successfully work toward to begin. I typically start children with five and extend to ten. For this example, we will start with five tokens. To teach a token board, you will begin with four tokens pre-loaded on the board. When the child completes the assigned task, you immediately deliver the token. This can happen in one of two ways. Some children will need the adult to place the token on the board, while others will be able to take the token and put it on themselves. Once the token is on, the adult

will count the tokens from left to right (this reinforces pre-literacy skills). This might sound like, "One, two, three, four, five. You got the iPad. Way to go!" The child does not have to count the tokens. That is an extra task. Consider it a bonus if they do! Once they understand the concept of gaining a token, you will pre-load with three tokens, then two, then one, and finally, start with a blank token board. I suggest stopping at a ten-token board. Once they are in a groove with ten tokens, you can begin extending the number of tasks they do for each token (two tasks for one token and so on).

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Removing Tokens

I do not recommend removing tokens. Earlier, we likened school to a child's job. I love the following example and have used it for a long time to explain this concept to adults because the message always rings true. Imagine you go to work one day, and you are five minutes late. Later in the day, you make a snappy comment to a coworker. When you clock out to leave, your boss notifies you that you are fined for those infractions. You were there ALL day. That's not right! Do you see where I'm going? Leave those tokens on until you reset. You might be thinking, "Well, what do I do if I hand them a token and they rip their paper?" Those things happen. When they do, I recommend reminding them what they chose to work toward. "You are working for the light spinner. You need two more tokens. Let's tape this paper." The first desired behavior you see, give them a token and tell them why.

A word of caution, though: kids will figure out loopholes in places we would never imagine them. I want to give you an example I often see to help illustrate how to best use the strategy I just suggested. In classrooms, teachers will generally want students to sit. One method often used is providing tokens for sitting. Usually, an adult is close enough to give the child a token after a designated number of seconds (and eventually minutes) of sitting. I have seen a loop that I want you to watch for so that you do not get stuck in it.
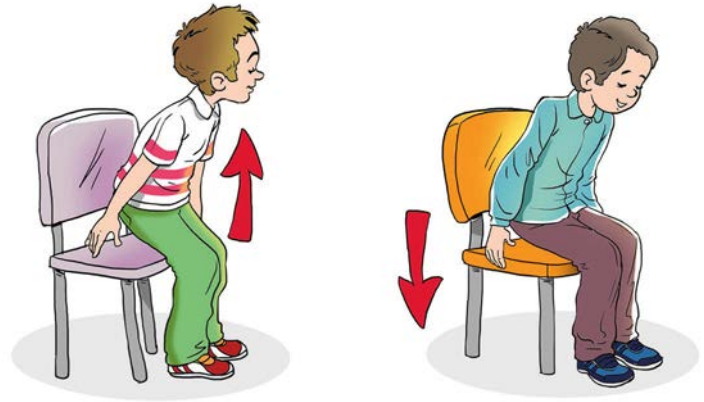
The student stands up.

The adult says, "Sit down."

The child sits down.

The adult says, "Great job sitting, here's a token."

This plays on a loop because the child has figured out if they stand up and then sit back down, they get a token. That's smart! What do I do instead? Let's look at a different way to use tokens for sitting.

The student stands up.

The adult says, "Sit down."

The child sits down.

The adult says, "Count to five. Touch your toes. You counted to five and touched your toes, AND you are sitting! Way to go! Here's a token."

This is just an example. Different behaviors than sitting could be exchanged, and the adult could assign other tasks, depending on the student's skills and as long as they are easy for the student to complete. The key is that the student has to engage in "work" before getting a token for sitting. This also often distracts them from the stand-up/sit-down game to get them involved in the activity.

Presenting Reinforcement Choices

Some children will need assistance in making choices regarding what they want to work toward, while others will tell you. Below are some visuals that can help a child make a selection. To use these visuals, you need pictures of the items a child likes. The number of things you present depends on how many visuals a child can scan, how many options you have available, and how many items you are willing to let them play with in that moment.
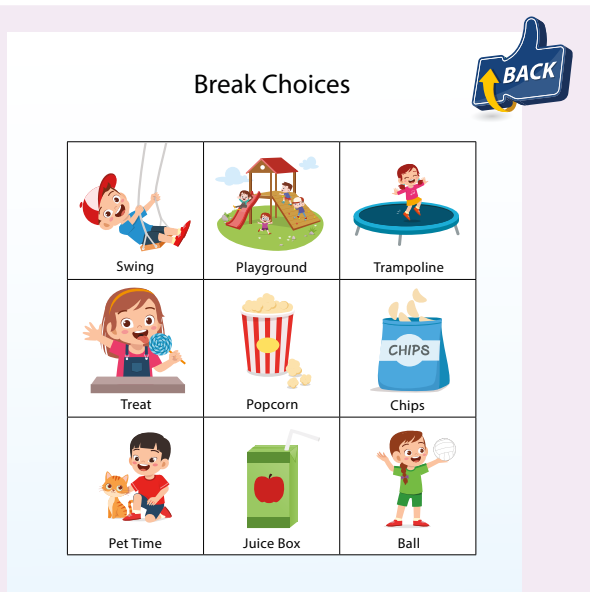
Figure 1.9. This choice board has printed choices on a piece of paper. The choices are not interchangeable and would need to be reprinted if something was not available on a particular day. Remember, do not offer it if it is not available!

Figure 1.10. This board was made from food/toy labels kept from shopping. Not only is it clever, but it is also an environmental print.

Figure 1.11. A clear container is another way to present potential reinforcers for selection if the child does not grab items and refuse to return them.

Getting Reinforcing Items Back

Often, adults want to provide children with items they have earned, but they cannot get the items back when they do. It is always advised to warn children that their time is coming to an end. You can tell them verbally, use a visual timer, a timer sound, or a combination. Below, I explain how to use three similar methods to get items back from your child without challenging behaviors.

Open Hand Method

Reach your hand out toward the child with an open palm facing up.

Say, "Put in."

When the child places the item in your hand, immediately respond with, "Thank you for handing me your (item), you can have more time."

Set a new timer.

Repeat, adding in a delay on returning the item to the child.

As the child becomes faster at returning items, you can continue to increase the amount of time you keep the item (and they work). Be sure to throw in a surprise freebie every once in a while so they are always wondering when it will happen.

Container Method

The container method will often work for kids because it is like a neutral party. You aren't taking their item, they are just putting it in a container. I recommend placing the container where they can see it but not reach it. I recommend a clear container. While not necessary, it allows your child to see the item so they know it is still there waiting on them to complete their task.

Hold a clear container (large enough to hold their reinforcing item) out toward the child.

Say, "Put in."

Continue with the same process as the open hand method above.

Promise Procedure

If a child is very resistant to returning items, this is a great strategy to use to begin teaching them how to return an item. This procedure can be used with the open hand or container method.

Hold up an item the child likes (small edible item recommended) where the child can see it but not reach it.

Reach the other hand out, palm up, toward the child (or hold a container).

Say, "Put in."

As soon as the child places the item in your hand or the container, hand the edible item to them as you pull back your hand/the container holding the reinforcing item.

As the child becomes quick to return items, begin reducing the size of the edible item until you fade it out completely.

What If the Process is Still Not Working?

Stop and assess. Where is the process falling apart? Is it at the beginning? Check the task you requested them to complete and consider if it is too hard or too much work for the size or amount of the reinforcer. Make sure you have reinforcers the child really wants to earn.

Are you having difficulty at the end? In that case, I recommend you slow down the process. Spend more time immediately giving them back the item until they are comfortable knowing you will give them the item back. Once they know you will give it back when you say, this process becomes much easier! I do not recommend taking the item from them. When you take an item, they are less likely to think you will ever give it back.
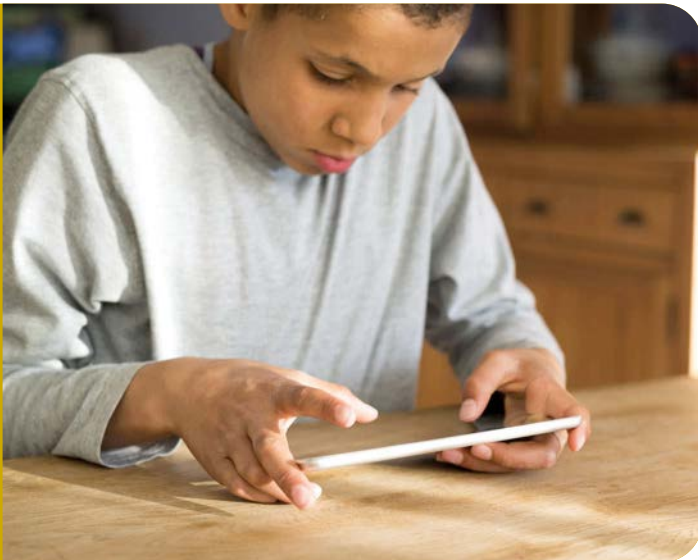
Pro tip: For getting back iPads/iPhones: Set guided access with a timer if you have a hard time getting your child off of the iPad or iPhone when their timer goes off. You can find many tutorials using a search engine. It is a quick and drama-free way to end your child's electronics time and keep them in the apps they can use.

Additional Tips

- *Be mentally present.* Make it fun — interact with children during their free time. Play with them! However, keep questions at a minimum; children can see questions as demands. If a child is hesitant to let you touch their toy, don't push it. You want the time to be enjoyable to them. You can slowly build up engaging with items.

- *Give the child choices.* Let them choose what they want to work toward each time. Do not assume you know. If something is unavailable, offer controlled choices. Controlled choices would include items that you do have available or are willing to let them select while still allowing the child to make the selection.

- *Make sure you pair the token with verbal praise.* We eventually want to use praise as reinforcement for a child. Some children need to have verbal praise paired with their favorite items over time so the verbal praise becomes valuable too. Smile — give high fives, fist bumps, and hugs too.

- *Examples of verbal praise:* "Awesome job writing your answer!" "Thank you for sitting in your seat while you work!" "Super job counting; here's a token!"

- *When you give directions, be clear, concise, and to the point.* As adults, we often add more language than necessary to get our point across. Some children with special needs stop attending after 2–3 words. Keep it short and simple.

- *Get items ready.* If your child often chooses iPad games, videos, or other electronic games, get the item ready while they complete their task. You want to make sure they can access the item immediately when they are finished.

- *Storing Tokens.* Store extra tokens on the back of token boards with Velcro.

FAQs for Positive Reinforcement

- *What if they stop working?*

The first thing I would look at is the amount of work presented for their chosen item. Is it too much work for the item? The amount of work needs to match the reinforcer. For example, if the child decides to work for one Skittle® and is given ten tasks to complete, that one Skittle® might not be enough. Some children may not find a Skittle® "worth it" for ten tasks. The second thing I would check is to see if they like any of their item choices enough to work for them. Even if they love an item, they can get tired of it for a while. For example, I love chocolate-covered toffee, but I might choose to work for something else after two or three pieces. The next day I might be interested in my chocolate-covered toffee again, or maybe I will have moved on to popcorn.

- *What if they refuse to choose an item?*

Again, I would make sure there are enough choices available that they find appealing. It might be that you need to rotate in some other options. If you get something they want enough, they will make a choice.

⊕ *What if they choose an item to work toward and then refuse to complete the task after I present it?*

Again, we want to make sure the task matches the reinforcer. Let them have a different reinforcer choice if they desire and see if that makes a difference. If not, consider the amount of work you are presenting and break it into chunks.

⊕ *What if I give them their earned item and they do not want it anymore?*

It is okay for kids to change their minds. We all change our minds sometimes. Make sure to set a timer and show them so they know even if they switch toys, the amount of time stays the same.

⊕ *What if I can't get a child to give the toy back, etc.?*

Reread the section from before on getting reinforcing items back.

⊕ *What if a child can't manipulate Velcro for a choice board?*

No problem! Not all children need a choice board. You can use a plastic bin that holds their options. They can select from the container, and you can place the item at the top of the table where the child can't reach it but can see it while they work.

⊕ *What if a child doesn't seem to care about positive reinforcement and still engages in challenging behavior?*

Some children value adult attention above all other things or prefer their items with adult attention. If a child likes adult attention more than items or wants you to engage with them while they have their items, you will need to ensure that you are providing high-quality attention. When we are in the high-quality attention zone, we want to focus entirely on the child.   Cell phones and electronics are unavailable. We are not working on anything else. Kids know when we are pretending to be engaged. If children do not get the positive attention they want, they will settle for negative attention. If that is your child, lay the positive attention on thick.

If you continue to follow the positive reinforcement steps and find that things are not going as you expected, use this checklist to track your efforts next time. Sometimes even when we know how to do something, we forget a step. This is a quick and easy tool to help troubleshoot issues.

Figure 1.12. This checklist can be used to ensure that all of the steps necessary for successfully using positive reinforcement are in place.

Positive Reinforcement Checklist

#	
1	☐ Let the child choose the item they are working toward (verbal, gesture, visual). Troubleshooting: Are they genuinely interested in any of the items at this moment in time?
2	☐ Present your demand. Troubleshooting: Use a neutral or pleasant voice and facial expression.
3	☐ Give the child adequate time to complete the task. Troubleshooting: Remind them what they chose to work toward if stalled.
4	☐ Present the child with the reinforcer they selected. Troubleshooting: Was the item delivered within three seconds?
5	☐ Set a timer to signal the end of reinforcement time. Troubleshooting: Does the child need to see a visual timer, or will a verbal reminder do?

BACK

Fidgets

The term "fidgets" can mean many different items. Any quick internet search using the term "fidgets" will bring up a plethora of options. Common examples of fidgets include chair bands, spinners, tangle toys, squishy balls, gum, and pop-its. However, a fidget can be anything that a person uses to engage in motor movements while at the same time engaging in their current activity. In my opinion, the best fidgets can be held in one hand. If there are other learners in the same area, fidgets should be quiet so others are not disturbed. Finally, you must teach the use of fidgets. Children should know that they are supporting tools, not toys. If they become distracting and are not being used appropriately, they should take a break and try again in the future. Not every type of fidget will be appropriate for every learner, so be sure to try different types of fidgets.

Structuring the Learning Environment

Creating a structured learning environment is essential for many children with special needs. Providing structure allows them to have a predictable and consistent environment, which is vital for children. Within the design of your learning setup, some children will need additional visual boundaries to organize and support their day. The space for a child will depend on their specific needs and skill level, but you can adapt the suggestions in this section to provide varying levels of support. Structure doesn't have to be boring. Make it fun! Let a child help choose and create what they can.

If teaching in a home, and you have access to a room in the home that is not used daily, that is a great place to set up for teaching and learning. If you have a room in the home to dedicate to education, that allows a child to have a visual change when it is time for school. For some children, this can be very important. They need that visual cue that it is no longer free time.

As you create your learning environment, many families use areas currently in use for other living activities due to space constraints. That is absolutely acceptable. Use what you have! There are ways to add items to change the environment so that children see a visual cue that it is time for school. For example, you can have a child pick out a special pillow to sit on or a particular "school time" lamp for the table. Be creative when designing your spot. You want the items to visually say, "It's school time," to a child. Another idea is to have them decorate a tri-fold poster board that you pull out for school like the one on the next page.

Figure 1.13. A workspace barrier can be created from a tri-fold poster board. It could include as many or as few accessories as desired. This example has a schedule, token board, choice wheel, first/then board, and a morning meeting visual.

Remember to keep your space simple. The more items included, the more opportunities for distraction. As a teacher, I kept a three-tier plastic rolling cart at each student desk to store any items I needed for each child so their work area remained clutter-free. If you find yourself removing items often, try a cart for supplies and see if it helps. The three-tier rolling cart was a tremendous support to me as a teacher. You want to ensure that you have all the needed supplies when you sit down. I could store task supplies, reinforcers, token boards, timers, crayons, and many other items right next to me. Wait time is hard for many people, especially children with special needs. Have everything ready to go! In Chapter 3, we will review specific visual boundary strategies that can support the learning environment.

WRAP-UP

If you are struggling with having your child complete tasks, you can begin this process today! Begin with positive reinforcement, structure the workspace, and get organized. These seem like small steps, but they make a huge difference and set the stage for success. In Chapters 2 and 3, we will discuss other ways to structure a child's day with visual schedules and visual supports.

> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
>
> his mercies never come to an end;
>
> they are new every morning;
>
> great is your faithfulness.
>
> —Lamentations 3:22-23

Imagine you have the task of keeping all daily appointments, activities, and events for your family organized in your head. For this task, you only have access to your memory to ensure that everyone in your family makes it to all events on time. I can imagine that those with memory as a strength will be able to succeed in that endeavor. For the rest of us, that would prove to be a daunting task.

Adults have access to unlimited resources to help organize their lives. We use our phones to set ourselves reminders. We schedule our days, weeks, and months out on digital and paper calendars. We fill out planners and leave sticky notes to ensure we remember to do the thing we can't forget! Shouldn't we provide that level of structure and support to our children? Yes, we should!

Visual schedules are a type of visual support that provide structure and help a child navigate their day. They are detailed and fully customizable, allowing each child to have a visual schedule that fits their current developmental level. When taught to use visual schedules, children can learn valuable life skills.

Parents and teachers get excited when they learn visual schedules are an excellent strategy for decreasing challenging behavior and increasing independence. They should! In elementary and middle school, visual supports such as schedules have proven effective in reducing transition time, increasing on-task behavior, and completing self-help in the home.[5] Visual schedules can help children learn to sequence and organize their day.[6] As with many adults, some children will feel a sense of accomplishment as they check off tasks throughout their day. When additional teaching strategies are employed, visual supports can also support a child when learning to accept change and use self-management strategies.

You might be asking yourself, "Does a child need a visual schedule?" Ask the following questions with this child in mind.

Does a child become frustrated during a typical school day?

Does a child show signs of anxiety during a typical school day?

Does a child need frequent or constant support to be successful with school?

Does a child have a difficult time understanding directions presented verbally?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, research indicates that the child would likely benefit from a visual schedule.[7]

In this chapter, we will dive into the many types of visual schedules. We will discuss selecting one that is just right for the child and teaching them to use it successfully. There are customization examples in each section to help give you ideas as you prepare to create a visual schedule for the child. I also throw in some tips and tricks that I learned along my journey. Let's get started!

Visual Schedule Types

There are several options to consider when selecting a visual schedule for a child. We will review several variations of visual schedules and some key details that will help determine if that type of schedule is a good selection. The following schedule types begin with the most intensive and progress to the least. The suggestions are a guide educators should consider, along with the information they know about a child. If you try a schedule type and find it unsuccessful, use the information gathered from the trial to inform your next attempt. Then, keep trying until you find the right fit! It is also a great idea to take a child's preference into account. If you are concerned they will choose a type that is not on their learning level, give them controlled choices. When giving controlled choices, you present two or three options to a child that you are willing to accept. Giving choices allows the child to feel a sense of control while allowing the adult to control the outcome.

The end goal is for the child to use the visual schedule as independently as possible. After the teaching component, we want them to use their visual schedules without our help. Since independence is our goal, it is essential to select a visual schedule that will allow the adult to systematically fade support. I recommend combing through all of Chapter 2 before making a selection.

You can present a visual schedule in a left-to-right or top-to-bottom format. After selecting the presentation style, you will need to determine how many items to present at a time. If a child does not sequence, you should begin with one item displayed on the schedule.[8] Then, when the child attends to one item and transitions without difficulty, add a second and build up to the total number of possible items on your selected format.

> **Pro tip:** If in doubt, use a schedule! It is better to have the structure available and the child not need it.
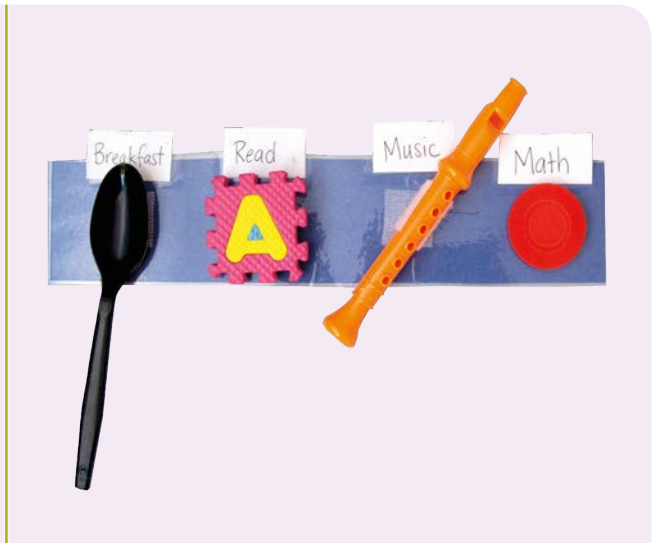
Object Schedule

Object schedules are the most distinctive type of visual schedule. When creating an object schedule, you will need to select objects representing activities or locations the child will need throughout their day. If a child already associates an object with an activity or location, use it!


Figure 2.1. Object schedules can be created on hard, portable surfaces such as a clipboard. Items should attach to be removable so the child can take it with them to their next location.

Figure 2.2. This object schedule was created using construction paper, Velcro, tape, and objects that represent activities.

Figure 2.3. This object schedule was created for a visually impaired child using objects and items with different textures attached to foam pieces. The foam is attached to laminated construction paper and can be pulled off and transported to other locations.
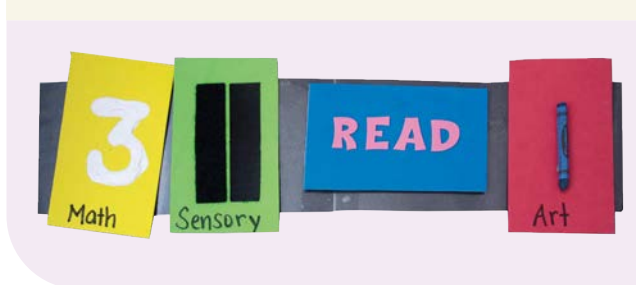
Object schedule selection considerations: Object schedules are beneficial for children not yet communicating with words or signs. Many times these children will communicate with gestures and objects. If a child's current communication style does not have shared meaning with others (do you find yourself guessing?), object schedules are an excellent place to start! They are also suitable for children with visual impairments.

Transitioning to a new schedule style: When a child attends to their schedule objects and transitions without challenging behavior or adult support, you can begin the transition process. Start by pairing each object with a photograph that will replace the object. Once a child begins to attend to the photograph, you then fade out the object.

Variations: The way object schedules are presented vary based on how you decide to create the layout. Above you will see several variations. I hope that seeing different options will allow you to explore features that could benefit a child. It is always acceptable to use what you already have around your house if you have something that works.