Why Tokens Aren’t Working

By Heather T. Forbes, LCSW

“If you finish your chores today, you’ll earn five more tokens and that will help you get to your goal of 25 by the weekend, Billy!” And Billy turns to his mother and says, “It’s your damn house, you do the f***ing chores,” slams his door, and remains in his room the rest of the day.

Using tokens as rewards or motivators for our adopted or foster children not only does not work, it often makes it worse. There are several reasons for this, all of which stem from one word — trauma.

**Trauma.** Any child who has lost his or her biological family, either temporarily or permanently, has experienced trauma. The event or events that led to this trauma were experiences that rendered the child to feel powerless, hopeless and/or helpless. The result of such vulnerable feelings shifts a child from a state of love to a state of fear.

The child then lives from a belief system that says, “The world is unsafe. I must protect myself. No one can be trusted. I am in charge in order to protect myself. No one, and I mean no one, will tell me what to do.” When a parent is raising a child filled with fear already, adding more fear to a child through the threat of not earning tokens, can be completely ineffective and even disastrous.

Brain science is showing that when children are in a state of fear, they are not operating out of their rational brains, the neocortex. Instead, they are operating from the limbic system, the emotional brain. Their decisions reflect their emotional state, fear in this example with Billy. Their interpretation of what you say to them will not be processed from a logical, sequential or reasonable perspective. It will be processed from a perspective of fear and negativity. Thus, what Billy hears from the parent is this, “If you don’t finish your chores, you won’t get five more tokens and that means you are a failure and nobody loves you.” Billy thinks in the negative, always. That’s what trauma does to children.

Additionally, Billy’s ability to think sequentially has been compromised by trauma. Trauma happens by surprise, so children like Billy live in a hyper-vigilant place, where they have to live moment by moment. Life happens in the next 15 seconds! There is no future. They are too consumed protecting themselves in the now. They dedicate all their resources to ensuring their survival in this moment. Thus, when a parent says, “…and that will help you get to your goal of 25 by the weekend, Billy,” Billy cannot comprehend this type of sequential logic. In his world, the weekend does not even exist…there is no future. Logical and sequential language becomes confusing and irritating to him. The result is that Billy becomes more unsettled and his negative behaviors intensify.

Children with histories of severe trauma literally do not have the wiring for sequential thinking in their brains because when the traumatic events happened, they experienced chaos and overwhelm. Their worlds became scattered and disorganized. Nothing made sense. All stability was gone. Because this all happens during the developmental years of a child’s life, the developing brain becomes wired in a haphazard and fragmented way.

Additionally, the memory of the traumatic event gets stored in fragments. Billy’s understanding of the world is not sequentially based and the result is that he has difficulties understanding “how the world works.” This leaves Billy in a disorganized and dysregu-
lated state until the trauma can be processed and released and until he can learn to understand the world in reality.

Using tokens, point charts, stickers or any other type of behavioral intervention does not address these deeper issues. These behaviorally based techniques are surface solutions. It's like putting a Band-Aid on a patient who is bleeding internally.

**Solution.** What children like Billy need first is understanding. As parents, we have to start by understanding why Billy does what he does...why he reacts the way he reacts. We have to begin to trust that what our children do is perfectly logical — logical to them. When Billy says, "It's your damn house, you do the f***ing chores," we need to get past the attitude, the cursing and the defiance in order to get to the heart of the matter. We all agree this is inappropriate and needs to be changed, however if you try to correct Billy in the moment, you will find yourself getting sucked back into an all too familiar vortex of negativity and resistance.

Read the meaning behind the words. What Billy really is saying is, "I lost my home. Nothing will ever substitute this loss, not even this home. I don't really belong here and I don't want to even try to belong here because then I would be at risk of losing again. I can't take any responsibility because that would mean I am placing myself in a position of being vulnerable again. And I can't afford to do that. It is too painful. It's much safer to argue and resist."

Billy needs to experience what it feels like to be in a safe and loving relationship, above all other lessons he needs to learn. People in his past did not take responsibility for him, so he is naturally going to be resistant to taking responsibility in return. Focus on getting Billy back into a place of safety and back into a place of security before expecting him to pleasantly adhere to the requirements of your household.

Use chores as an opportunity to build relationship and focus on the process of getting the chores complete. Offer to do the chores with him in order to create time with him. If he is still resistant, offer to do it for him, while he hangs out with you. Use this time just to connect, even if it means he is not helping. That will come later. Trust that if you focus on the relationship, Billy will eventually shift back to a place of helping when he gets more secure and more settled.

Additionally, Billy needs to go back developmentally and learn how to think logically and sequentially. He most likely is not "just going to pick it up." He needs to learn to think in reality and rewire his brain to understand the logical flow of how the world operates. Billy needs instruction on learning that "if A happens, then B will follow, and that will result in C happening." This instruction cannot happen in the moment like in the beginning example; he is too tied to it emotionally.

Billy has to be an observer in the instruction, not in the lead role where his fear will create resistance. There are various children's learning tools to teach sequential thinking and problem solving skills by reading stories or using picture cards. Using tools like these removes Billy from his own story and his own fears. They create needed distance (safety). Continual repetition of these teachings can help Billy to eventually learn how to integrate this thinking back into his own life.

Yes, the "real" world does work on more of a token/reward system, but Billy is not ready for this real world...yet. Shifting your focus and your interpretation of Billy's negative behaviors will, ironically, better prepare him for the real-world in the years to come rather than what was shown with the opening example. Billy needs emotional safety, patience and understanding to help him heal and to help him redefine his perspective of how the world works.

In short, Billy needs your full abiding love instead of tokens of your love.

To find out more about the Beyond Consequences parenting approach or to purchase a copy of one of this author's books, visit www.beyondconsequences.com.

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