Visual reinforcement systems (token boards) are positive and extremely powerful teaching tools. Within the Pyramid Approach to Education, one of the cornerstones is the use of powerful reinforcers to motivate learners. Once individuals understand the “art of the deal” – that we are honest brokers who will deliver the agreed upon reinforcer upon the demonstration of a behavior or completion of a task, it is important to stretch these deals. Over time, the goal is to thin or reduce the overall rate of the delivery of reinforcement so that more time can be spent teaching and less time reinforcing. Ideally, by the time the learner is ready to compete with others in the job market, these deals should extend to 1 ½ to 2 hours. The use of token boards to visually represent deals is an excellent way to help both the individual and the teacher “remember” that the deal is in place.

During a recent visit to a school I was able to observe a team working with Leda, a young girl with autism. Over the course of two days, she worked with quite a few different team members. It was clear that she understood her visual reinforcement system regardless of how it was presented to her!

In the morning and during various group activities in her inclusion Kindergarten classroom, Leda used a token board made of plastic with Velcro spots for plastic chips. When given a token she immediately placed it on the board. Upon receipt of the last token, she quickly removed all of them to exchange for the negotiated reinforcer.

For a more difficult reading lesson, Leda received 1:1 instruction. Since Leda loves to draw and work with markers, the teacher drew the elements of the token board on a write-on/wipe-off board. Once Leda chose the item, her teacher drew it on the board. Instead of handing Leda a token each time she earned, she offered Leda the green marker and Leda gave herself a checkmark on the token board. Upon giving herself the last checkmark, the teacher provided immediate access to the reinforcer.

Leda’s mother also uses token boards with Leda at different points throughout her day, but found that keeping up with the tokens and the token boards was a bit cumbersome. She was delighted when the Working4™ app became available. She added the app to her iPhone and showed it to Leda. By her report, it took Leda no time at all to understand that even though the format was different, the principles were the same! Leda chooses the preferred item from the choice board menu within the app and giggles with delight when either her mom or she makes each star “jump” to the next spot on the token board!

It was delightful to observe Leda moving with ease throughout her school day interacting with and learning alongside many adults and peers. While she was not always thrilled with the lesson at hand, she worked diligently to complete tasks and earned “tokens” of various forms throughout the day for her most preferred reinforcers.