

Behavior Contracts

Module 2

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Mrs. Allen has noticed that a normally cooperative boy in her class has become more noncompliant with her directives and unwilling to complete assigned tasks. When confronted with an activity he doesn't like, Alex either erupts into a defiant tantrum or wanders off to work on the computer. During small-group instruction, he refuses to work with peers he says are "out to get him." Grouping him with friends and offering frequent verbal praise for meeting expectations did very little to decrease his inappropriate behavior. After reviewing his IEP and a couple of weeks of careful observation, Mrs. Allen revisited Alex's questionnaire she required him to fill out at the beginning of the year listing his likes and dislikes. Using this information, she began preparations for working with Alex to create a behavior contract.

Description of Behavior Contracts

A behavior contract (also known as a contingency contract) is a written agreement between two or more individuals—typically a student and his or her teacher(s)—that specifies the desired behavior and set consequences for the behavior (Vaughn & Bos, 2009). Prior to introducing the behavior contract, teachers need to evaluate the areas of concern (academic or non-academic). There may be multiple behaviors that need to be addressed. If so, teachers should select the specific behavior that will render the most positive impact (Downing, 2002). In Alex's case, he dislikes social interaction and working with peers during small-group instruction. When forced to do so, he will either tantrum or escape to use the computer. Alex's tantrums are his most disruptive behavior so Mrs. Allen decides to focus on this undesirable act.

Next, Mrs. Allen would describe the circumstances under which the behavior occurs, including possible precipitating events, individuals involved, and the classroom environment. If the goal is to decrease inappropriate behavior, she would determine if there are any alternative classroom events that can decrease or prevent the behavior from occurring. Mrs. Allen would develop a hypothesis about what the student gains or avoids by engaging in the inappropriate behavior. Then, she would observe and summarize the behavior using the most effective means to collect data on the frequency, duration, and/or intensity of the behavior (Downing, 2002). If the goal is to improve academic performance, Mrs. Allen would determine an appropriate amount of progress and establish a timeline for evaluating student performance.

Based on this information, Mrs. Allen understands that effective behavior contracting requires:

1. the student and teacher collaborate on the contract process together;
2. behavioral goals are identified, defined, and prioritized;
3. daily and long-term goals and expectations are explicitly stated--as appropriate;
4. if applicable, a review of prior interventions and the reason(s) they did not work;
5. a replacement (more appropriate) behavior(s) is selected and clearly defined;
6. when, where, and by whom the conditions of the contract will be implemented;
7. an explanation of how rewards are linked to the student behavior(s) and if any negative consequences will apply for failure to abide by the terms of the contract;
8. a small and easily manageable choice of rewards and a delivery timetable is mutually agreed upon; (For some students, a series of short contracts is useful in demonstrating the relationship between engaging in the appropriate behavior and being reinforced.)
9. the student and teacher write, review, and sign the contract, then copies are distributed to all involved individuals (the student, other teachers, parents, administrators, etc.);
10. the teacher establishes a baseline of the behavior(s), selecting the most appropriate data recording methods and continually monitoring student progress to assess compliance, efficacy, and proficiency of the replacement behavior(s);
11. after the student demonstrates mastery of the replacement behavior(s) for inappropriate behavior or predetermined academic gains the teacher would lean the delivery of reinforcement to a less frequent schedule; and
12. the contract should be regularly reviewed, revised, or rewritten contingent upon student cooperation and progress (Downing, 1990; Epstein & Cullinan, 1991; Yell, Meadows, Drasgow, & Shriner, 2009).

Questions at follow-up should include:

- Were the goals and expectations appropriate?
- Did the student understand what is required and expected of him?
- Was the timetable sufficient?
- Were there any events that interfered with completing goals and expectations?
- Did the student begin and complete tasks in a timely manner?
- Were there difficulties with resources or the implementation of goals and expectations?
- Were there any classroom or other environmental factors interfering with student goals and expectations?
- Were reinforcers readily available and delivered promptly?
- Were they appropriate and effective? (Downing, 1990)

Research to Support Use of Behavior Contracts

The supporting concept behind behavior contracts is the Premack Principle. The Premack Principle states that the implementation of preferred reinforcers (rewards) encourage students to participate in non-preferred activities (Homme, deBaca, Devine, Steinhurst, & Richert, 1963; Premack, 1959). In Alex's case, he is not motivated to work in small groups, but he is more inclined to work on the computer. Realizing this, Mrs. Allen can offer working on the computer (a higher desirable activity) as a reinforcer for complying with the expectations and obligations as stipulated in the behavior contract (the lesser desirable activities) (Yell et al., 2009).

Considerable research over the past half century has validated the use of behavior contracts as a strategy to improve a range of academic and non-academic behavior. In a meta-study of 12 research papers, contingency contracts were proven useful at improving social skills, school attendance, academic engagement, and performance accuracy of all age groups from elementary school through college (Murphy, 1988). Another study that applied behavior contracts in combination with group counseling to increase academic performance by reducing the frequency of truancy in urban middle school students rendered limited yet promising results. The most frequently requested reinforcers by the students were money, food, a pizza party, music, and school supplies; while the most frequent explanation for their truancy was lack of supervision and structure within the home. The authors' noted that behavior contracts in combination with other interventions, such as group counseling, can be an effective short-term means for reducing the tardiness rate of students with mild disabilities (Hess, Rosenberg, & Levy, 1990).

When to Consider a Behavior Contract

Behavior contracts can be employed in general classrooms as well as inclusion settings for students with and without disabilities, in groups, or with the entire class. They are flexible documents that can easily be adapted for use by a wide variety of students and behaviors. Behavior contracts are an effective method to introduce and teach new behaviors, increase the rate of appropriate behaviors, support the maintenance and generalization of skills, decrease or extinguish undesirable behaviors, encourage the completion of tasks and objectives, and document the results of crisis or problem-solving sessions. The most important aspect of the behavior contract is that both the teacher and the student fully understand the conditions of the contract and reinforcement is delivered in a consistent and timely manner as stipulated in the contract (Downing, 1990; Downing, 2002; Miller, 2009).

Guidelines for Implementing Behavioral Contracts

Behavior contracts should be considered when less intrusive interventions, such as verbal praise and social reinforcement, are not effective. Behavior contracts can also be used to build student self-esteem and self-accountability (Downing, 1990). Behavior contracts can be used in combination with other behavioral and academic strategies, as appropriate.

Behavior contract rewards can be anything of value to the student, such as tangibles (stickers, toys, games, etc.), social reinforcement (verbal praise, free time with peers, lunch with an adult, etc.), and activities (work on the computer, visit the library, or operate the SmartBoard, etc.). However, when selecting an appropriate reinforcer, teachers, with student input, must ask themselves some important questions:

- Which reinforcement is most effective?
- How will reinforcement be delivered?
- How will the effectiveness of the reinforcement be evaluated?
- Will naturally occurring reinforcement be effective or will extrinsic reinforcement be more appropriate?

- If necessary, are extrinsic reinforcers practical, available, and able to be applied consistently?
- Will contingencies for reinforcement apply to an individual student, a group of students, or the whole class? (Downing, Moran, Myles, & Ormsbee, 1991).

Cautions Regarding Use of Behavior Contracts

Drawbacks to behavior contracts include the fact that some teachers may not provide reinforcement as stated in the contract, or not at all. Time and energy requirements may also limit reinforcement availability and delivery. In order to avoid any differing opinions, it is best to consult all individuals involved with the enforcement of the behavior contract during the process of drafting, finalizing, and approving the contract (Downing et al., 1991). In sum, behavior contracts are an evidence-based strategy with a wide range of applicability. Teachers should remember that some students may require a brief, easy-to-complete contract. Depending on the goal of the contract, either a single or series of contracts may be more appropriate.

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