

Tip Sheet: Behavior Contract

Definition

A written agreement between a teacher and student that outlines specific academic or behavioral goals and specific contingencies for reinforcement in “if-then” statements (Kerr & Nelson, 2010).

Other Terminology

Contingency Contracting

Rationale

- According to behavioral theory, consequences control behavior. Developing and implementing a behavioral contract is one method to provide predictable consequences to students. Teachers can effectively shape appropriate behavior and minimize problem behavior (Kerr & Nelson, 2010).
- Goal setting has been linked to behavioral and academic improvements (Schunk, 1985).

Implementation:

A Behavior contract can be used with a whole-class or for individual students.

Steps (Kerr & Nelson, 2010)

Meet with student:

- 1) Explain contract.
- 2) Show examples.
- 3) Decide together on target behaviors for contract.
- 4) Determine rewards.
- 5) Negotiate how student will earn reinforcer; identify student performance criterion.
 - Bonus and penalty clauses are optional
- 6) Decide when contract will be reviewed.
- 7) Teacher and students sign the document.

Note: The wording of the contract will depend on the age and level of the student. For more information and for multiple examples of contract templates, see Jenson & Reavis (1997) and Jenson et al. (1994).

Considerations (Alberto & Troutman, 2009)

- The student must receive the “pay off” immediately after meeting the terms of the contract.
- Make initial contracts short term. Begin with smaller goals than gradually move the student towards the preferred target behavior (i.e., shaping the student’s behavior).
- Review the contract to make sure it is fair. Make sure that the behavior/goal is appropriate and that the reward is sensible in terms of the effort for the goal.
- Make sure the terms of the contract are clear.
- State the target behaviors in positive (“do”) language instead of negative (“don’t”) language.

Note: Many teachers combine behavioral contracts with self-monitoring.

Example (also see Downing, 2002)

Sammy is a 10-year old boy with ADHD. He has consistently demonstrated challenges in completing class assignments and homework. His grades are falling, especially in math. Assessment information indicates that, although Sammy has some math deficits, his skills are between 4th and 5th grade level. Sammy and his teacher meet to talk about the issue of Sammy not completing his math class work. Sammy states that he would like to do better, but he is easily distracted and just doesn’t like math.

Sammy and his teacher talk about setting up a behavioral contract, and Sammy said he would like to work for the chance to be the errand runner for the class. He also has a good friend in another class that he never gets to see. Sammy and his teacher set up the following contract:

Behavior Contract

I, Sammy, agree to complete my daily math practice sheet.

If I complete this by the end of the math class period, **then** I can take the attendance to the office.

Bonus: Once I have completed five math practice sheets, I can have lunch with Ethan.

Penalty: If I go for more than two days without completing my math practice, I will have to make my work up during Friday free time.

We will meet in two weeks to review this contract on February 27, 2010.

Sammy 2/13/10

Ms. Teacher 2/13/10

Evidence

- Empirical support for contracting focuses on the importance of goal setting (Kelley, & Stokes, 1984; Miller & Kelly, 1994; Ruth, 1996; White-Blackburn, et al., 1977; Williams & Anandam, 1973)
- Effective as part of a multicomponent intervention (Xin & Forrest, 2002)

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