

Setting Up an At-Home Behavior Contract With Your Child

In every family, there comes a time when problem behaviors are on-going, the child is struggling with and resistant to changing those behaviors, and parents feel that their demands are being ignored - or worse yet, that they and their child have entirely opposite goals.

One way to address this situation is with the creation of a behavior contract.

What is a Behavior Contract?

A behavior contract is a written agreement between a caregiver and a child to help the child achieve a goal.

Anova Behavior Analysts, Aides, and ACE teachers all use behavior contracts to reinforce positive behaviors and reward students for reaching goals.

At home, a behavior contract typically establishes clear rules and reinforcement expectations to motivate the child to demonstrate safe and appropriate behavior or independently complete some household activity or chore.

Where to Start

To set up a behavior contract, sit down with your child and describe what a behavior contract is and how it will help them to be more successful at home.

This first step is crucial and often can be a big step toward reaching a resolution. Parents often find that the conflict that once surrounded the targeted behavior eases when both parent and child are working together within the contract for the benefit of both parties.

Make a list with your child of their strengths and challenges. Talk with your child about what their goals should be for helping the family to function better. Work together to set specific objectives, and use those objectives to write down a contract that you both will sign.

Establishing Goals

The contract goal is stated in clear terms



that the caregiver and child can both understand, the behavior is defined, and a reward is agreed upon and made available upon meeting the conditions of the contract.

Studies support the use of behavior contracts, especially when a clearly defined behavior is identified which can be easily monitored.

Having both the child and the parent sign the contract lends an air of formality to the process of addressing behaviors that are often emotionally fraught. The contract sets up a system in which both parties are calm and unemotional and have an eye toward finding an agreement that everyone will feel good about.

Tasks and Rewards

There are two major sections to every behavior contract:

1. a description of the TASK
2. a description of the REWARD.

The task section describes who will be performing the task, what the task is that will be performed, when it must be completed, and how well it must be completed.

A task record is very helpful as part of the contract to set the occasion for revisiting the contract regularly and to document a certain number of completed tasks toward earning the reward.

The reward section describes who will be determining when the task is complete, what the reward will be, when the reward will be received, and how much of the reward can be earned.

Creating an Appropriate Contract for Age and Ability Level

Some students can be active participants as the contract is being developed, negotiating the reward they will work for and the level of effort required. Other children will not be able to make these decisions without significant adult assistance.

For younger children or those with cognitive impairments, visual supports such as visual schedules, pictures, or icons may be needed to accompany the contract to help them remember what is expected.

Nearly all children will need supportive reminders. Other children may need to role-play the behaviors to

fully understand what is expected of them.

At a minimum, assure that your child can repeat what they are expected to do, what they will earn for completing it, and about how long it will take for them to earn it if they apply themselves.

For older children, it can be beneficial for both parties to have goals and rewards regarding their behavior. For example, when teenagers see that their parent is willing to adjust their own behavior as well, the child will be less resistant to fulfilling the contract.

Dos and Don'ts

- DO use frequent small rewards.
- DO NOT simply set one, long-term goal as the only reward.
- DO have a companion form that visually displays the child's progress toward earning the reward. Post the contract in a visible place. DO look at it and talk about it often.
- DO NOT write a contract that will eliminate the child early. If they fail once DO NOT throw out the idea completely; consider whether the expectation set originally was too high.
- DO build in several layers of rewards
- DO NOT give up on the contract if either party is unhappy with it. Instead, renegotiate the contract.

Using behavior contracts can be very effective in helping children to complete less preferred tasks at home, decrease problem behaviors, increase motivation, understand expectations and boundaries, and accept more household responsibility.

An effective behavior contract will change the dynamic between parent and child from adversarial to cooperative.

Sample Behavior Contract

I, [NAME], hereby declare on this date, [DATE], that I agree to do the following:

Child's signature _____ Parent's signature _____

My efforts at meeting this goal will be considered acceptable and complete when:

By successfully completing the terms of this contract, I will be rewarded by:

Ending Date of Terms _____