

# Behavior Contracting

## Strategy Brief, December, 2013.

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**B**ehavioral contracting is an intervention used by schools to help monitor and change student behavior. Using a simple contract, the expectations of an individual student or class are spelled out in detail, along with the adult responses to achievement of those expectations, making it a useful planning document. This intervention is widely used in schools around the country, and it presents a positive, goal-oriented method to motivate behavioral change. Behavior contracts can be implemented in isolation or as part of a larger packaged program (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). In addition to being efficient and effective in eliciting more appropriate school and home behaviors in children (Carns & Carns, 1994), behavioral contracting can also be implemented as an alternative to suspension (Brownstein, 2010).

### What is Behavior Contracting?

A behavior contract is a written contract between a student and a teacher or administrator outlining the child's behavioral obligations in meeting the terms of the contract, as well as the teacher's obligations once the child has met his or her agreement. Usually the latter entails privileges or other reinforcers desirable to the student. While contracts can be used with an entire class or small group, most often it is a strategy used with an individual child who is at-risk, has an emotional or behavior disorder, or has already been in trouble or suspended for behavior issues. In developing the contract the educator can discuss the goals with the student soliciting input from the student on the development of the contract. It also permits effective reinforcers to be identified. This process builds commitment on behalf of the student to successfully complete the contract.

**Components of a behavioral contract.** The contract is typically a positive-reinforcement intervention that includes a listing of the specific student behaviors that are to be increased and the inappropriate behaviors to be reduced (Intervention Central, 2011). It also includes the reinforcers or actions of the adults when those behaviors happen. Behavior contracts often include "Who, What, When, and How well" components. The Who specifies who will perform the task and receive the agreed upon reward. The What includes the task that the student must perform. The When emphasizes what time the task or behavior will be completed. Finally the How well aspect of the contract highlights to what degree, how frequently, or to what extent the behavior must be performed (Cooper et al., 2007).

Also included within the contract is a section explaining the minimum conditions under which the student can earn a "reward" for showing appropriate behaviors, which can take the

form of a sticker, collecting points, a privilege, special activity or another reinforcer agreed on by the student. The reward given must be contingent on completing the goals indicated, so if the student meets the behavior goals stated in the contract, the reward is then received (Gurrad, Weber, & McLaughlin, 2002). Because of this contingent relationship, behavioral contracting is sometimes referred to as “contingency contracting” within the professional literature. In their book on classroom management, Jones and Jones (2010) recommend that behavior contracts include a statement related to the following variables:

- What is the contract’s goal?
- Why has the contract been developed?
- What specific behaviors must the student perform in order to receive rewards or incur the agreed-on consequences?
- What reinforcers or consequences will be employed?
- What are the time dimensions?
- Who will monitor the behavior and how will it be monitored?
- How often and with whom will the contract be evaluated? (p. 395).



**Advantages.** The advantage of using a behavioral contract with a student is that it provides explicit expectations, structure, consistency, routine, and organization for everyone involved, including the teachers, student, administrators, and parents (PBIS World, 2013). In doing this, the expectations and responsibilities for both the student and adults are clear, and the process of negotiation can be beneficial to the insight of the student about his or her behavior. Smith (1995) also suggests that the contract emphasize improvement of positive social behaviors.

**Reinforcement v. Punishment.** Experts also recognize that the use of punishment procedures has several possible side effects or negative consequences such as emotional reactions, escape or avoidance, undesirable modeling, etc. (Cooper et al., 2007), and as a result should be and used in contracts only when essential. As a result a behavior contract should always include positive consequences for appropriate behavior, rather than only negative consequences for inappropriate behaviors. In many cases negative consequences for inappropriate behavior or for lack of completion of the contract are not included unless there is some other overriding reason for them.

### What Do We Know About Behavioral Contracting?

An early study of parent-child behavior contracting conducted by Smith (1994) reported that implementing a parent training workshop and parent workbook (i.e., behavioral contract, evaluation and monitoring charts, award certificates) intervention resulted in goal completion for 65% of intervention students as compared to 19% of control students. Although this study only had 12 participants in each group, it emphasizes the importance of home-school communication in developing behavioral goals and contracts. The training also aided parents in identifying measurable goals, delivering corresponding rewards, and communicating with their child’s teacher.

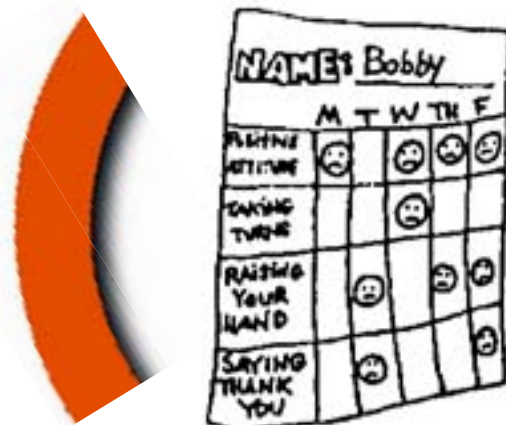
In many cases, behavior contracts can also be beneficial as an element included in a larger intervention package for more complex issues, such as truancy. The factors that contribute to truant behaviors in adolescence range from individual student variables to parenting practices to systemic level variables (e.g., lack of consistent consequences for truancy in schools). Behavior contracts may increase student or client compliance in addressing these issues. Enea and Dafinoiu (2009) conducted a study in which they implemented a multi-modal intervention for truant behaviors that consisted of “motivational interviewing, solution-focused counseling, successive approximations of behavior, behavior contracts, and reinforcement techniques” (p. 185). This study also had a relatively small sample size (i.e., 19 students each in the control and experimental groups) but found that the intervention group demonstrated considerable gains over the control group. The experimental group showed a 61% decrease in truancy for the experimental group, while there was a 0% decrease in truancy for the control group. In this study, the researchers used a written contract that specified the actions agreed upon by the client for the attainment of particular behavioral and counseling goals. Therefore, behavior contracts can be effective interventions in isolation, but also serve an important function as part of larger intervention modules.

Another study illustrated the effects of a behavioral contract on decreasing interrupting behaviors and increasing academic participation during reading lessons of a student with ADHD (Gurrad et al., 2002). The contract specifically included a changing criterion for the number of interruptions allowed in each reading lesson, as well as candy rewards for meeting performance goals. As the criterion continued to decrease, so did the number of interruptions by the study participant. Again, although implementing behavior contracts is often an individual undertaking, increasing the sample size for behavior contracting intervention research will be necessary in drawing firm conclusions about the success of these techniques. For example, Dodge, Nizzi, Pitt, and Rudolph (2007) used a larger sample

of 89 third graders to highlight the effectiveness of behavioral contracts and positive reward systems in improving student responsibility. In particular, students improved on the outcomes of turning in assignments, staying on-task, and follow a daily routine.

Hawkins et al. (2011) echoed these findings when implementing behavior contracts for assaultive, destructive, and out of seat behaviors displayed by four students with autism. The study also reported that including a home component as part of the behavior contract helped to generalize behavioral improvements. Behavior contracting has also been found to be related to more on-task behavior and completing daily homework assignments (White-Blackburn, Semb, & Semb, 1977), better grades (Williams & Anandam, 1973), better self-control by the student (Drabman, Spitalnik, & O’Leary, 1973), and better student productivity (Kelley & Stokes, 1984).

Their findings suggest that behavior contracts are a cost effective, proactive intervention that serves as an alternative to exclusionary discipline practices. According to some researchers, behavior contracting should be considered to be an evidence-based practice (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai 2008). While the research on behavioral contracting is promising, few studies have examined the intervention in the last 10 years. More research on behavior contracting is warranted, including research utilizing larger sample sizes.





### **How Can Behavior Contracting Be Used?**

Behavioral contracting is an intervention that is relatively simple to implement, and when constructed effectively, can successfully induce changes in a student's behavior. Contracts can be used for an entire classroom as a flexible tool for managing a highly individualized program or for one student in a specific situation (Anderson, 2002).

It is frequently best to begin with contracts that are relatively easy for the student to complete successfully, allowing for the student to build on success rather than tackling the most difficult behavior problems immediately. In some cases, using a formal looking contract form adds to the student's perception of the importance of the contract. Further, according to Cooper et al. (2007), behavior contracting is an appropriate intervention to implement when the desired behavior is already in the student's repertoire. If the behavior is not in the student's repertoire, other skill building interventions that focus on modeling the components of the behavior should be tried first.

Several strategies can increase the effectiveness of behavior contracts. When students play a significant role in the creation of the contract, they are more likely to be invested in abiding by the terms. Therefore, it is important to include the student in the development of the contract,

and each party must have a clear understanding of the terms and conditions. Another motivating factor for the student is the opportunity to earn points or rewards (Intervention Central, 2011). According to Intervention Central (2011), the rate in which the student can earn a reward may have an impact on the effectiveness of the intervention. Each student may react differently to reward systems such as behavioral contracts, and increasing the frequency of a reward can have a substantial influence on shaping a student's behavior. If the student is not rewarded regularly enough, then the student may lose interest in completing the contract.

Contracts have also been widely used by special education teachers to improve student social skills or other behavior in the classroom, but could also be used with students referred for school discipline. Using a behavioral contract in this way can be a discipline alternative to suspension or expulsion. Having the student meet with an adult to discuss the behavior that is contributing to him or her becoming at-risk for suspension, or the behavior that had caused the previous suspension, is the first step in creating a contract with that child (Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2003). The goal is to discuss the root cause for the behavior and alternative reactions that the student can make to avoid being in trouble or suspended again. The student and adult establish the alternative behaviors and also the consequences that they will face for not following through with these behaviors, which are then written down in the form of a contract (Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2003). This intervention is done in hope of reducing discipline problems for all students, thus reducing suspension and expulsion rates within a school.

To further motivate the child in adhering to the behavioral contract, the form may be taken home for a parent signature. Informing parents of a child's behavior contract and his or her progress helps to generalize behavioral expectations and consequences between the school and home setting. Parent training may be necessary in order to execute the contract

effectively; however, parental support is even more critical to the student's success (Hawkins et al., 2011). Aspects of parent training may include defining parents' goals for their children, accessing necessary materials for implementing the contract at home, and clarifying the role of the parent in administering the behavioral contract (Smith, 1994). Collectively, these strategies can serve to increase home-school communication (Smith, 1994).

Some additional strategies to bolster the effectiveness of the behavior contract include:

- Building in several layers of rewards
- Posting the contract in a visible place
- Modifying the contract when either party is unhappy with it (Cooper et al., 2007)
- Including student input regarding the conditions of the contract (Intervention Central, 2011)

## **Benefits of Behavioral Contracting**

Of course, a major benefit to using a behavioral contract is assisting in the process of increasing positive student behavior, and reducing the use of suspension in schools. When used in the correct manner, behavioral contracts can improve a child's behavior issues and help teachers and administration continue to monitor that change.

Another advantage of using a behavioral contract is that it is an efficient, flexible, and fairly simple intervention tool. Teachers can choose to use the contract either regularly or on an as-needed basis for specific types of situations (Anderson, 2002). The intervention is also highly individualized, and teachers can customize the contract using rewards that they know will match a specific student's interests and needs. Further, a behavioral contract can be used again and again once the student has reached his or her goal. Once the time line is finished, and/or the child reaches the defined objective, the teacher and student can celebrate the success and move on to the next behavioral target and start the process again (Anderson, 2002).

A behavioral contract is a good way to get a student and his or her family pro actively in-



involved in both behavior and academic success. Parental involvement is important in the long-term improvement of a child's school-related behaviors (Smith, 1994), and a benefit for parents is that they may continue the contract into the home environment, or create a contract of their own. Including a home component for behavior contracts also aids in forming collaborative partnerships between home and school (Hawkins et al., 2011; Smith, 1994). Additionally, home components demonstrate that behavior contracts do not need to be excessively complex and can be implemented by individuals other than behavior interventionists or specialists. With the collaboration and support of the adults who are important in a student's life, a behavioral contract can not only improve both school and home-related behaviors, but foster positive interaction for the rest of their life.

## **Conclusion**

The research on behavior contracts suggests that the procedure is a positively oriented intervention for students with problematic and disruptive behaviors. Behavior contracts are also a tool in which students can generate input in deciding their own goals and rewards for academic and behavioral performance. In addition, behavior contracts are often a smaller element of a larger intervention package that is

used to gain compliance and reward the student for adhering to and participating in the intervention. Although much of the research on behavior contracts is outdated and uses small participant sample sizes, behavior contracts may serve to increase student engagement through setting reasonable goals for behavior. The contracts can also be implemented by school staff and parents, and with adequate and consistent training and follow-up, do not require intensive or expensive resources. In summary, behavior contracts may be an effective choice for teachers and administrators who seek to encourage students to choose positive behaviors on a more frequent basis.



**Recommended Citation:**

Strawhun, J., Oconnor, A., & Peterson, R. L. (2013, December). *Behavior Contracting Strategy brief*. Lincoln, NE: Student Engagement Project, University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the Nebraska Department of Education. <http://k12engagement.unl.edu/behavior-contracting>

**Note:** See related *Strategy Brief on Behavior Monitoring* which is also available from the Student Engagement Project at <http://k12engagement.unl.edu/behavior-monitoring>.

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