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Behavior Contracting: A Win-Win Approach to Parenting

It’s Saturday morning. Twelve-year-old Christine and her mother are engaged in their weekly battle. Mother yells, "This room looks like a pigsty." Christine sticks to her guns and maintains, "My room is clean. I just cleaned it."

Oddly enough, it has never occurred to Christine's mother that all this arguing is not resolving the problem. Fortunately, there is a solution. It’s called behavior contracting.

What is Behavior Contracting?

Behavior contracting is an aspect of parenting that is based on the premise that rewards and praise are more likely than punishment to encourage desirable behavior. Some parents tend to use behavior contracting as a way of disciplining a child. But many parenting experts believe that its goal is not to discipline—it is to teach responsibility.

In its simplest form, a behavior contract is an oral contract between a child and a parent. For instance, a father might say to three-year-old Tommy, "Help Dad put the toys away and then you can have a cookie." Or, he might reward Tommy with praise for doing the task well. It is important, however, to praise specific behavior rather than just saying, "You're a good boy."

A written contract can be used when a child is old enough to understand what a contract is all about. However, it should not be used for every little difficulty that comes along. Reserve a written contract for a situation where an oral contract has not worked. It is especially helpful when a disagreement with a teenager has resulted in a deadlock. Let us find out more about these written contracts.

Benefits of a Behavior Contract

What is noteworthy about the following benefits is that they benefit both child and parent:

- Helps both parties to be more objective by focusing their thinking on the goal rather than on their feelings.
- Allows children to feel that they have some say in their lives and, therefore, reduces the power struggle between parent and child.
- Leaves less room for misunderstanding and procrastination because the facts are in black and white.
- Provides parent and child with a sense of accomplishment, because it is a goal-centered approach.
- Encourages mutual respect by expecting both parties to honor the terms of the contract.

Features of a Behavior Contract

Now comes the difficult part—the actual writing of the behavior contract. Basically, a good contract—one that is likely to work—will have the following features:

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- **It will be a mutual agreement.** This means "both the parent and the child must agree without being coerced", says Sansom. In other words, the parent must treat the child as an equal when negotiating the contract. Sansom also points out that the contract must be in the interests of both parent and child.

- **The contract should be specific.** It must say exactly what the child is to do. For instance, in our scenario, Christine and her mother had never agreed on what actually constituted a "clean" room. Is Christine to hang up her clothes? Make her bed? Dust the furniture? Vacuum the rug? By being clear about these points, they will ensure mutual understanding and prevent problems.

  The contract should state not only who is to monitor the contract, but also when he or she is to do it. And, it is just as important to stipulate how long the contract will last. As a general rule, it is a good idea to evaluate a written contract after one month and either terminate it, or renegotiate it after three months.

- **The contract should contain either a reward, or a reinforcer.** A reward could be a new toy, favorite food or the privilege such as extra TV time. What is important is that the reward is something that the child really wants. Effective contracts also spell out exactly when the reward is to be given to the child.

Sansom points out that the reinforcer may simply be greater family harmony. For instance, Christine's mother might promise neither to nag nor to threaten.

When a Behavior Contract Does Not Work…

If the desired change in behavior is not achieved, a parent will often blame the child. Sansom believes, however, that the fault lies with the contract, not the child. There are a number of things that you can do to increase your chances of success with behavior contracting. Here are some of them.

Now you know—behavior contracting takes time and commitment. You may have a win/win situation —provided that, when all goes well, you could succeed in this endeavor.

You've just read a number of really good reasons to use contracts between you and your child, and you may be able to come to an agreement to the terms on your own, for the terms to which you have both contributed.

Life is not as simple, nor ever will be, between parents and children, as we would like. You may need the help of someone outside the relationship to introduce the concept and help to define terms, and then assist in the implementation of the contract. Professional help could be of particular help, especially when your child's behavior has been more than just a minor issue, and in the case of your child not being as open to the idea of a contract as you are.

- Keep the goal within easy reach. For instance, Christine is more likely to be successful at keeping her room tidy for a week, than a month.
- Give small rewards and positive feedback along the way. A point system is one way of doing this. A child can trade the points for a reward.
- Provide a child with the necessary training if the contract involves mastery of a task.
- Remind the child about his or her commitment. This is something that should be discussed when the contract is negotiated, because some children may consider a reminder as a form of nagging.
- Take the contract seriously. Parents are just as likely as children to forget about the contract after a few days or weeks.
- Do not delay in giving the reward. Remember that a deal is a deal.
- If a contract must be redesigned, allow the child to help. Discuss why the previous contract is not working and ask for the child's input.