

Independent Behaviour Programs

Contracting for Behaviour Gains

Good classroom management should ensure that all teaching space has sound structures in place to deal with potential inappropriate behaviours. However, even with a systematic approach to management, there remains the possibility that a small number of students will continue to display disruptive behaviours.

A successful approach to the behaviour of these extreme cases is the use of an independent behaviour program, a behaviour contract that applies to just one student. This contract is a written agreement between the child, the classroom teacher, the parents/guardians, peers, and/or other significant stakeholders. They spell out what is expected and what will happen following the students' behaviour—positive or negative.

Why They Work

For children with severe behaviour disabilities, there is often a gap in their knowledge of how to act in an appropriate manner. They may have developed their current behaviours in an environment where the apparently dysfunctional behaviour is an effective way to get their needs met.

Behaviour contracts provide an opportunity for students to learn new ways to behave that will give them a sense of certainty between action and consequence. Students can best learn how to manipulate their behaviour if there is a certainty of consequences linked to a prescribed behaviour. That is, they learn to avoid negative outcomes and to maximize their chances of success. The children gain a sense of ownership over their behaviour; they know, 'If you do this, this will happen.' They become empowered to take control of their own behaviour.

Creation of Contract

Behaviour contracts are definitions of targeted behaviours deemed as acceptable or unacceptable and the consequences that will follow each. The description of behaviours must be precise, and all participants must understand the benefits or impediments of the behaviours described. The behaviours and the consequences will be written to define the conditions that apply to the student and the teacher while they are in the school setting. It is really a case of 'If you do x , y will happen.'

The contracts should be a cooperative exercise, with all parties who are involved being in agreement. These will be the student, the classroom teacher, along with the teacher's supervisor (where practical), the parent(s), and any other significant person. All involved with the formulation of the contract should have a responsibility to see that it is successfully implemented. These responsibilities must be included in the contract.

In some cases, the participants involved in the contract fail to agree on the terms. This doesn't mean a contract should not be implemented. In these cases, the person responsible for the situation in which the student's dysfunctional behaviour is a problem (i.e., the classroom teacher) takes responsibility for the contract. The minimum condition for a contract to be effective is that the student and his/her guardians accept

that the contract exists and the conditions outlined will be applied. Of course, no part of any contract should violate any one's rights.

Limitations of Behaviour Contracts

Behaviour contracts must have a strong degree of certainty about them if they are to be effective. The classroom teacher must be sure he or she can deliver on the conditions of the contract. In many cases the classroom teacher is denied access to significant reinforcements. The school may not have the resources to provide rewards for acceptable behaviours. Contrarily, the teachers may not have the backing of their supervisor in the implementation of negative consequences. The teacher must know the availability of these consequences before any negotiations of a contract begin.

The use of rewards to engage the student in the process of behavioural change may be acceptable in the first instance; however, the goal of all behaviour contracts should be to have the student develop acceptable modes of behaviour.

Further, if rewards are used, they will work best if they are delivered along with social praise. However, both the rewards and the social praise should be phased out over time as the desired behaviour becomes integrated into the natural repertoire of the student's behaviour.

Finally, behaviour contracts require a certain level of sophistication on the part of the student if they are to be effective. Immature students, or those with deep emotional disturbance, may have problems being the only ones on the contract.

Guidelines for Behaviour Contracts

The following outlines the process to be followed when creating an individualized behaviour program.

1. *Identification of the Behaviour*

There must be a precise definition of the behaviour that is causing the problem. This should include the detrimental effects the behaviour has on the learning environment. There should be a clear understanding of the behaviour that meets the student's needs and is acceptable to the rest of the class. It's no good saying, 'Just behaviour yourself.' Many students with severe behaviours do not really know how to behave in an appropriate manner.

2. *The Contract*

The formal contract must be precise in its definition of the behaviours and the consequences. The contract must have a systematic approach to the identification of the behaviour and the delivery of the consequences. These may be in a hierarchical fashion, such as, for the first offence, consequence one applies; for the second offence, consequence two, etc. Finally, the contract must be specific, outlining dates, people present, criteria of behaviour, and consequences.

The contract should be a formal document that spells out all the outcomes for behaviours discussed at the time of negotiation. The contract should be written in positive terms. The contract should be signed and witnessed by all involved before it is put into place.

3. *Students' Rights*

The contract must be fair to all concerned. The student, the teacher, or any other member of the team should not be placed in a position in which their rights are denied. This fairness should be addressed at the time of negotiation.

4. *Consequences*

For consequences to have the best chance of success, there should be an immediacy; that is, the more closely the consequence is delivered to the action the more powerful the connection that is made. For example, the reward of a trip at the end of term will have little effect in week 2.

In the negotiation, make sure that all consequences can be delivered.

5. *Contract Exit*

There must be an avenue for the student to exit the behaviour contract. The student must be able to work his or her way off the contract when behaviour is normalized. The path to this outcome must be systematic and understood by all involved.

Conclusion

Behaviour contracts can provide an effective tool for the teacher to deal with students whose behaviour presents more than normal challenges. With a clear plan and a commitment to its implementation, progress can be made in the most difficult of cases.