

Evidence-based Behavior Contract System: Brokering a Deal with the Student to Get Better Behavior

*Clayton R. Cook
University of Washington*

Addressing the emotional and behavioral problems of some students can be as easy as brokering or negotiating a deal with the student. In this deal, the student has something the adults want in terms of good behavior and academic engagement. In turn, the adults have something the student wants in terms of getting his hands on a reward, preferred activity, or extra privilege. When a deal is effectively brokered between educators and the student, both parties stand to gain by it and thereby are invested in carrying out their end of the deal.

Evidence-based Behavior Contract System

A behavior contract system is an evidence-based intervention that provides a structured approach to brokering or negotiating a deal with a student who is experiencing emotional and behavioral problems. Many educators contend that they have already tried a behavior contract without success. This is why it is important to point out the distinctions between an evidence-based behavior contract system (one that is likely to produce desirable changes in the student emotional and behavioral functioning) and off-the-cuff contracts that are often developed in schools (see table for brief comparison).

First, an evidence-based behavior contract gives the student a say or voice in the development of the contract in order to increase his buy-in and investment. Hence, an evidence-based behavior contract is a negotiated agreement—not one in which the educators bring the student into a meeting to tell him the wrong in his behavior, disciplinary consequences that will follow suit if he keeps it up, and to sign on the dotted line. Second, an evidence-based behavior contract system specifies the precise positive behaviors or social skills we want the student to exhibit. Ineffective behavior contracts often describe the problem behaviors educators don't want to see. The issue with specifying problem behavior is that it doesn't teach the student the positive behaviors or social skills they need to perform to be more successful. Third, an evidence-based behavior contract always includes a reinforcement component so the student receives some sort of pay off when he satisfies his part of the contract by meeting the goal. Fourth, an evidence-based behavior contract consists of giving copies of the contract to all parties involved, including the teacher, parents, administrators, and students themselves. Last, an evidence-based behavior contract system requires that the teacher implement precorrection and prompting tactics to follow through with implementing the contract. When all of the above features are carried out, then you have implemented an evidence-based behavior contract system that is likely to produce desirable changes in a students' emotional and behavioral functioning in school.

Evidence-based Behavior Contract System	Ineffective Behavior Contract
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Negotiated</u> agreement • Describes what the student <u>should do</u> • Provides a <u>goal</u> statement • Outlines what the student will <u>earn as a reward</u> for meeting goal • Teacher uses contract to <u>precorrect and prompt</u> behavior as follow up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Non-negotiated</u> • Describes what the student is <u>doing wrong</u> • Provides <u>no goal</u> statement • Outlines how the student will be <u>punished</u> if problem behavior continues • <u>No other adult follow through</u> with the contract

For which students are evidence-based behavior contracts likely to be effective?

An evidence-based behavior contract system is perhaps most useful for students who respond well to incentives. Students who respond well to incentives are often highly motivated to earn things or gain access to desirable activities or privileges. For these students, when a carrot is put out in front of them, they are willing to work towards getting their hands on the carrot. This is a metaphor for the type of student for whom a behavior contract is likely to be effective.

Behavioral contracts can be effective for students with externalizing behavior problems (acting out, disruptive, aggressive) or internalizing behavior problems (internal distress that results in withdrawal, limited class participation, limited social interactions with peers, excessive complaints about health, etc.). A behavior contract can be effective for both types of students because it outlines the specific positive behaviors or social skills the student should be exhibiting to be more successful in school.

What are the teacher's responsibilities?

The main teacher responsibilities associated with implementing an evidence-based behavior contract are *precorrection* and *prompting*. The precorrection component consists of meeting with the target student each morning and reviewing the behavior contract with him and encouraging him to have a good day to earn the reinforcer or reward specified on the contract. This should take no more than a minute or two. The prompting component consists of the teacher responding to incidents of the target student's problem behavior by prompting them to engage in the positive behavior or social skill and reminding them of the reward to be earned as part of the contract. Together, these two components require very little time and allow teachers to maintain their focus on their main responsibility—teaching and managing the entire class.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTING AN EVIDENCE-BASED BEHAVIOR CONTRACT SYSTEM

1. Arrange a meeting between the student and adults

a. Who should attend the meeting:

i. Parent(s), teacher, behavioral specialist, counselor, administrator

2. Holding the meeting to negotiate and develop the behavior contract

a. *Introductions and description of the meaning and purpose of a contract so the student has concept and understanding of what a contract entails.*

i. The introductions should not involve emphasizing what the student has done wrong, but rather that the current situation is not working for anyone and there is a need to work out a deal. The adults are willing to have the student have some say in what does on instead of telling the student what to do.

ii. It is important to make it a big deal. Describe how a contract is essentially a legally binding deal

1. Make sure to describe the contract in kid-friendly language so they are able to comprehend.

b. *Describe the alternative appropriate behaviors or social skills you would like to see and gather the student's input to get him to commit to engage in those behaviors.*

i. Make sure the student is actually capable of exhibiting the appropriate behaviors; therefore, the positive behavior or social skill is within the student's repertoire and all that is needed is a motivational component that encourages the student to display the behaviors he already knows how to exhibit.

- ii. If the student can't exhibit the appropriate behaviors or social skills because he has not learned them, then time will need to be devoted to teaching the student how to exhibit them using a tell-show-do instructional approach.
 - c. *Help the student identify rewards, activities, or privileges to be earned if he is able to hold up his end of the bargain by meeting the goal*
 - i. This should be student-driven in that the student selects preferred items, activities or rewards that he will earn based on good behavior.
 - 1. Some students may have a difficult time generating ideas and it will be important to have a preference survey for the student to complete or list of reinforcers to select from.
 - 2. There is no reason why the contract can't include both school- and home-based reinforcers that the student can earn
 - ii. An important consideration is how frequently should the reinforcer or reward be earned?
 - 1. A good rule of thumb is to gauge how long the student can actually delay gratification. This entails considering how far the student can look into the future and wait. If the student can only think a day at a time, then he should be able to earn the reinforcer or reward on a daily basis. Some students require breaking it down two or more times per day, while other students can wait until the end of the week to earn a more potent reinforcer or reward. Generally, the younger the student, the more frequent they will need to be able to earn the reinforcer or reward.
- 3. Making copies of the behavior contract for all parties involved**
- a. Everyone including the student should have a copy of the behavior contract .
 - b. Make extra copies of the behavior contract just in case the student loses his copy. If the student loses the behavior contract, there is no need to lecture the student and/or discipline him. Instead, simply provide him with another one and continue implementing the steps.
- 4. Teacher implementation of precorrection and prompting**
- a. Precorrection involves the teacher reminding the student of the expectations outlined in the behavior contract prior to class beginning or transitioning to other activities under which the student has a history of exhibiting emotional and/or behavior problems. These precorrection gestures or statements are best delivered immediately preceding the context in which the behavior is expected and provide students with a reminder to increase the probability of success.
 - b. The prompting tactic consists of responding to incidents of the student's problem behavior by cueing them to engage in the appropriate behavior or social skill outlined on the contract and reminding them of the reward to be earned.
 - i. If the behavior problem continues despite providing a few prompts, then the teacher should carry out the typical progressive discipline plan (for example, removal of privileges, reprimands, in-class time-out, office referral).
- 5. Follow-up to ensure fidelity of implementation and troubleshoot any problems**

Empirical Support:

Miller, D.L., & Kelley, M.L. (1994). The use of goal setting and contingency contracting for improving children's homework performance. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 27, 73-84.

Allen, L.J., Howard, V.F., Sweeney, W.J., & McLaughlin, T.F. (1993). Use of contingency contracting to increase on-task behavior with primary students. *Psychological Reports*, 72, 905-906.

Mruzek, D.W., Cohen, C., & Smith, T. (2007) Contingency contracting with students with autism spectrum disorders in a public school setting. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 19, 103-114.

De Martini-Scully, D., Bray, M.A., & Kehle, T.J. (2000). A packaged intervention to reduce disruptive behavior in general education students. *Psychology in the Schools*, 37, 149-156.

Beidel, D.C., Turner, S.M., Taylor-Ferreira, J.C. (1999). Teaching study skills and test-taking strategies to elementary school students: The Testbusters program. *Behavior Modification*, 23, 630-646.