
Social Contracts...

a proactive intervention for the classroom

This Intervention Tip Sheet has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. This Tip Sheet was published by the Institute on Community Integration, College of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis and was authored by Kareen Smith of the Institute.

Introduction

A social contract is an agreement negotiated between students and teacher which states classroom principles, rules, and consequences for classroom behavior. Contracts are different from traditional classroom rules in that students are involved in designing them, they ensure clarity of rules, include consequences and not punishments, allow for change with class needs, have safeguards to protect the dignity of students, and increase communication (Curwin & Mendler, 1988).

What components should I consider including in a social contract?

There is no one way to construct a contract, but the following are components you should consider including (Curwin & Mendler, 1988):

Classroom Principles: Principles provide a value system and guidelines for behavior. They are general and not intended to be enforced but provide a context for classroom rules. Examples are:

- * Everyone has the right to share his/her opinion.
- * Be courteous and respectful.
- * Everyone is welcome.

Effective Rules: Rules clearly define which behaviors are and are not acceptable within the context of classroom principles. It is best when they describe a specific behavior but are not so specific that they are cumbersome. Curwin and Mendler (1988) give examples of rules which are too vague, too specific, and just right:

Too Vague: Each student must not interfere with another student's learning. (This makes a fine principle but not a rule.)

Too Specific: Do not poke your fingers in another student's eye.

Just Right: Respect each other's space—keep your hands to yourself.

Be Positive When Possible: This gives students a clearer idea of how they should behave, which is more constructive than only telling them how they should not behave. There are, however, some rules which may be difficult to express in positive terms. For example, "say only nice things about each other" is a rather awkward and unclear way of expressing "no put-downs of others are allowed."

Logical Consequences: Consequences are essential to a social contract but can be hard to develop. Curwin and Mendler (1988) give the following criteria for consequences:

- * Clear and specific.
- * Have a range of alternatives.

- * Not punishments.
- * Natural and/or logical.
- * Related to the rule.

Consequences should also:

- * Preserve the student's dignity.
- * Increase student motivation.

Four generic consequences which work for any rule are: reminders, warnings, practice following the rule, and a written plan. Contingency contracts, conferences, or meetings and practice sessions are examples of non-punitive consequences (*see "Contingency Contracts," "Shaping," and "Self-Monitoring"*).

Threats are effective only in creating combative environments. Furthermore, many traditional consequences result only in making the student dislike school or aspects of it. Writing "I will not throw paper" 100 times only makes the student's hand sore, makes him or her hate writing, is an illogical consequence, and teaches nothing.

How do I draw up a social contract?

Foremost, the contract should be drawn up with the students. Student involvement makes the contract more immediate and it is ultimately more likely that students will follow a plan which they help draw up.

Students can develop rules for each other, making sure that they are not too vague or specific, as stated previously. They can be involved in developing consequences as well. However, do not accept any rules or consequences which you would not feel comfortable enforcing.

Students can be allowed to vote on negotiable rules. Do not put rules which you deem absolutely necessary up to a vote. It is advisable that a vast majority (75%) of the students pass the rule.

Furthermore, **students can include rules for the teacher.** While you should not accept a rule you cannot live with, such rules can be quite useful. If you are caught breaking a rule, the opportunity is provided to model an appropriate response. Examples of rules imposed on teachers are:

- * If students cannot eat in class, the teacher cannot drink coffee during class.
- * Do not call a student's home without first telling him or her of your intent.
- * Tests will be corrected and handed back within three days.

What if a student pleads ignorance to a rule or principle in the contract?

You can prevent this from happening by requiring each student to take a test on the social contract. This can include short answer, true and false, and/or multiple choice questions concerning acceptable behavior for the classroom and permitted consequences for unallowable behavior. Students must score 100%, although nothing happens if they do not pass. Go over their incorrect answers with them and have them repeat the test.

How long should I plan on devoting to the formulation of a social contract?

The greater portion of two or three class period leaves plenty of time for discussion, dissent and reaching consensus and gives students time to think about what they want rather than pressuring them to sign on directly after being introduced to the idea.

A contract should be drawn up by each class in which you intend to use one. Even if there are only two different students in second period, do not use the same contract from first period. Every student should be included in the process.

What are other considerations in utilizing social contracts?

Effectiveness: If behavior standards are not being met, it is necessary for the class to discuss the contract, possible changes, or a completely new contract. If the contract is working for most students but not specific individuals, individual contingency contracts may be helpful.

Accessibility: It is advisable that each student be given a copy of the contract and that it be posted somewhere in the room so that it is clearly visible.

Collaboration: It is valuable to share the contract with parents and administrators. Sharing it with parents before there are behavior problems can aid in eliciting their cooperation. Sharing your contract with administrators can help decrease feelings of isolation when forced to take disciplinary measures. Administrators should have copies of the contract available to give to substitute teachers. The more people who are aware of your contract, the more likely it is that it will be effective.

References

Curwin, R.L., & Mendler, A.N. (1988). *Discipline with dignity*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum.

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