

---

# Contingency Contracting...

## *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 contingency contract is an agreement between a student and teacher which states behavioral or academic goals for the student and reinforcers or rewards that the student will receive contingent upon achievement of these goals.

---

### ***What kind of goals can be included in a contract?***

Behavioral or academic improvement goals can be part of a contract. A contract should have only one stated goal. They are not appropriate for behaviors that are dangerous to the student or others, such as physical aggression or self-injurious behavior.

### ***How do I define the contract goal?***

You must first assess the present level of performance. If your goal is that the student learn and practice raising his hand instead of interrupting, you must first establish to what degree this behavior is exhibited. Does the student raise his hand 10 times an hour or 10 times a day? If the goal is for the student to complete more math work, you must establish his or her present level of productivity. Does he or she complete two worksheets a day or a week? This is the baseline level of performance and should be assessed over a one-week period.

### ***How do I proceed after establishing the baseline performance?***

At this point, you turn the goal into a specific objective by defining and clarifying it. The student now becomes involved in drawing up the contract. Negotiate with the student in defining the objective in measurable and observable language. The objectives for the examples above might be “raises hand and waits to be called on five times each hour” (if the student is, for example, raising his hand three times and interrupting five times) or “completes 60% of math worksheets.”

### ***Besides the goal, what should be included in the contract?***

While the target behavior is the bulk of the contract, there are several other components which are vital:

**Contract Conditions:** With the student, decide under what conditions the contract will be in effect (the times, classes, and activities), for example, in math class or on the playground.

**Contract Completion Criteria:** The criteria describe the level of performance for completion. Does the behavior need only be achieved once or will it need to be maintained for a period of time (i.e., “Student will complete 60% of math homework for eight days in a 10 consecutive day period”)?

**Reinforcers:** The contract should include a reinforcer or reward that the student will earn upon contract completion. This should be something the student chooses, within reason. Edibles, small toys, free time, and “no homework” passes are examples of reinforcers which could be effective. Positive consequences (i.e., rewards) should be delivered immediately upon contract completion.

**Review and Renegotiation:** Include dates on which progress will be reviewed with the student. You may choose to review the contract weekly with the student to help keep him or her on track and to evaluate progress. If you see no progress after a couple of reviews, it may be necessary to renegotiate the contract. Goals may be unreasonable and reinforcers may be inappropriate. It is also appropriate to state a goal date for contract completion.

**Language and Signatures:** The contract should be written in simple, clear language that the student can understand. For example, “reward” should be used instead of “reinforcer.” This will make the contract more relevant to the student.

Both you and the student should sign and date the contract and, if working in collaboration with parents, they should also sign it.

When it will not infringe upon the privacy of the student, it can also be appropriate to have an outside party or witness sign the contract, such as a friend of the student or another adult that the student trusts.

### ***When should I implement the contract?***

In order to support the student’s success, it is advisable to begin implementation with a mini-contract. This is a modified easy-to-complete version of the official contract. The mini-contract gives the student an opportunity to practice and learn how the contract operates. Choose an objective for the mini-contract which the student will easily achieve in two to five days. After completion of the mini-contract, sit down and discuss the experience, review the official contract, clarify it, and make sure there is no need for refinement before implementation.

### ***What are other considerations for contingency contracts?***

- Deliver positive consequences (i.e., rewards) immediately upon contract completion.
- Contract goals are best stated in positive ways, for example, “[Student] will raise hand and wait for assistance when frustrated with classwork” rather than “[Student] will not crumple up work and throw it on the floor.”
- If progress toward completion is not being made, the contract needs to be modified or rewritten without placing blame on the student. Include parents in contingency contracts whenever possible.
- Students may wish to have reinforcers which are available at home, such as television viewing or staying up later on weekends. These can be great reinforcers if parents agree and are willing to work with you in delivering them.
- Contracts can have either short- or long-term objectives. These can be stated to be achieved in two or three days, after which a new contract will be written. Also, short-term contracts can be devised as steps leading to achievement of the long-term contract goals.

---

#### References

- Curwin, R.L., & Mendler, A.M. (1988). *Discipline with dignity*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum.
- Eyde, D.R. (1982). *Positive approaches to behavior management: Monograph 5*. Drake University, Des Moines: Midwest Regional Resource Center. ED231-114.
- Kerr, M.M., & Nelson, C.M. (1989). *Strategies for managing behavior problems in the classroom (2nd ed.)*. New York: MacMillan.
- Salend, S.J. (1987). Contingency management systems. *Academic Therapy*, 22, 245-253.
- Strivers, M. (1977). *The contract classroom. Waukegan behavior analysis follow through program*. Waukegan Community Unit School District 60, IL: Office of Education, Washington, D.C. ED 212584.
- Walden, E.L., & Thompson, S.A. (1981). A review of some alternative approaches to drug management of hyperactivity in children. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 14, 213-217.

---

This publication was supported by Grant #H029K20171, *Special Project to Provide Technical Assistance, Inservice Training and Site Development for Positive Behavioral Support Strategies for Students with Disabilities* from the U.S. Department of Education. The University of Minnesota is an equal opportunity employer and educator.