

# Managing Behavior

*using positive and negative consequences*

by Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D.

**A**re you having trouble getting your kids to do what you want them to do? The key is to “manage” their behavior. When managing behavior, you figure out what it is you would like to see happen and then make a plan for accomplishing the goal. On the other hand, reacting to behavior usually results in hard feelings for both the parents and the children.

One very useful tool is the contract. Parents and children sit down together and decide what behaviors need to be changed or maintained. They also consider the consequences—positive and negative. This is a negotiation, as in business contracting, and the process results in high levels of motivation for children as well as parents.

It is usually best for the parents and children to pick just one or two behaviors they want to change. They should be concerns or problems that happen frequently, even daily. In this way, the child is able to see that his behavior actually does bring about the consequence. Similarly the con-

sequence works best if it is something that can be earned on a daily basis also.

It is important to be specific about the behavior. Rather than wanting the child to be “respectful,” it is much better to ask that the child says “please” and “thank you.” Ask that tidying up the bedroom be done every night or every other night, rather than once a week.

Decreasing or eliminating certain behaviors can be accomplished by contract if they involve such things as teasing, cursing, or interrupting. Remember, however, that you can’t eliminate behaviors that occur normally, such as squabbling between siblings. However, if the kids are getting into loud arguments on an average of 10 times a day, the goal of the contract might be to decrease the arguments to five times a day.

Furthermore, the best way to engage the child in the contract is for the reward to be something that they really want. In a general way, consequences and rewards are often specific to the child’s age. Young children often want to have a special

15-minute period of undivided attention from a busy parent. Teenagers, on the other hand, may prefer time on the computer or with their friends.

It is important for parents, too, to be held accountable for certain behaviors. For example, parents can work on decreasing their yelling or making sure that they follow-through with their promises. This demonstrates to the children that everyone is working at improving themselves, and it also makes contracting a more enjoyable experience. Similarly, there can be a consequence for the parents if they do not follow through at enforcing the contract.

Every contract should be written down in a formal manner. The following is an example of a contract between John and his parents: John will do his homework every school night, and his parents will check it when he is done. If he has no homework, he will read for half an hour. John will be able to use electronics until bedtime each night after his homework or reading is done.

If his homework is finished before dinner, either his father or mother will also play a game with him for half an hour. If John’s parents fail to play with him after he has earned the time, they will owe him his choice of double the game time on the next evening or a trip to the dollar store. After all is written down, each person signs the paper, and it should be posted in a prominent spot in the home.

Contracting is a very simple parenting tool, but it accomplishes quite a bit. First of all, the expectation is made clear that John will do his homework each night, and the contract states what will happen if there is no homework. It also makes using electronics contingent on doing homework. John also gets a bonus if his homework is done before dinner. This encourages him not to put his homework off. The part about the parents’ role shows John that the contract is fun and that he will get something if his parents don’t keep up their end.

Managing behavior this way allows the family to spend the evening enjoying each other’s company, rather than spending time discussing what hasn’t been done. ●

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