



Put it in Writing:

Parents and Children Can Negotiate Through Conflict

By Jeffrey S. Katz., Ph.D.

Every day I hear from parents who can't get their children to respond to their requests. As a father, I know how difficult it can be to get the chores done, rooms cleaned, and homework completed. But the problem isn't always with the children. Too often, parents react to their children, rather than plan ahead with their children to resolve some of these issues.

There is a distinct advantage to "managing" behavior rather than "reacting" to it. When parents manage behavior, they specify what their goals are and then they make plans for accomplishing the goals. When they react to behavior, both the parents and the children can end up feeling bad about the situation.

Families can accomplish their goals through a process called behavioral contracting. Behavioral contracting allows parents and children to sit down together and decide what behaviors are most important, what behaviors need to be changed or maintained, and what consequences can be earned. Behavioral

contracting, which is also practiced in the business world, is accomplished through a process of negotiation. The result is high levels of motivation for both the children and parents as each person sees that they have much to gain by working things out together.

To begin, parents choose one or two behaviors that they want the child to change and the child chooses one or two behaviors for the parents to work on. It is important that the behaviors you address be described as specifically as possible. In other words, "do your chores" is not as specific as, "the trash needs to be out front by Thursday night at 9 p.m." By being specific, there is no question as to what is expected.

Contracting can be used to encourage good behaviors and discourage negative behaviors. For example, a parent might want to encourage strong study habits, chore participation and daily hygiene routines. On the flip side, parents typically want to discourage negative behaviors such



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as teasing, cursing, or interrupting. Remember, however, that you can't eliminate behaviors that occur normally. For example, it is not realistic to eliminate conflict between siblings. But it may be possible to reduce the fighting to a more manageable level.

It's important for children to choose the consequences of their behavior. Allowing children to participate in this manner gives them a sense of control and it assures them that the consequence is one that the child really wants.

Charts can help you and your family track your collective progress. The chart should be a daily recording of when a positive behavior occurs as well as when the reward or consequence is earned. Writing these things down daily helps to avoid any misunderstandings. Once a behavior is chosen to be changed, the chart can be used to obtain a "baseline" for a week. A baseline is a record of how often the behavior occurs (or does not occur) before the contract is instituted. Essentially, this lets everyone know what the starting point is. In the example of conflict between siblings, the chart might show that the kids get into loud arguments on an average of 10 times a day. The goal of the contract might be to decrease arguing to five times a day. The

contract should be discussed during a family meeting, and it should be written down in a formal manner. The following is an example of a contract between Johnny and his parents.

"Johnny 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. Johnny will be able to watch TV until bedtime each night only 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. Johnny's parents will not nag him about his homework. If they do, they will pay him 24 cents." At the end of the contract, Johnny and each of his parents sign the paper and the paper is posted in a place where it can be easily seen.

This contract may appear quite simple, but it accomplishes quite a bit. First of all, the expectation is made clear that Johnny will do his homework each night, and what is expected of him if there is no homework. If Johnny says that he likes to watch TV, then it is probable that he will make sure he gets his homework done. Johnny also gets a bonus if his homework is done before dinner, encouraging him not to put off his scholastic duties. He also gets the



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guarantee that he will not be nagged, and if his parents do nag, at least he's compensated in some way.

For this fictional family, the contract eliminates any arguments or threats about finishing homework. Everyone has agreed to the plan, and each person stands to get something positive out of the agreement. In fact, it's a win-win situation. If the contract doesn't work, then the family should go back to the drawing board to figure out what's wrong. Maybe TV is not really important to Johnny, or maybe the homework is too hard for him and he needs help.

At least now, there is a mechanism for working through the problems. And best of all, the time that had been spent arguing about homework can now be spent doing something fun together.



About the Author

Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D., is a child, adolescent, and adult psychologist and leading expert in the field of ADHD, learning disabilities and behavioral problems. He is also a foremost consultant and sought after speaker for numerous medical, academic, business and legal professionals and organizations. Throughout his career, Dr. Katz has been interviewed by many print, radio and TV outlets and served as a regular columnist for *Tidewater Parent* magazine. He is also co-author of the recently released book *365 +1 Ways to Succeed with ADHD*. A graduate of the California School of Professional Psychology, Dr. Katz has been in private practice in the Hampton Roads, Virginia area for more than 25 years.

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