

Using Behavior Contracts



This guide was produced by Project Support & Include at Vanderbilt University—one of seven projects across the state funded by the Tennessee Department of Education to provide training and technical assistance to schools as they address the academic, social, and behavioral needs of students. This brief was authored by Sarah Chandler, Brooke C. Shuster, Abbie Jenkins, & Erik W. Carter. 1/2015

Some students exhibit challenging behaviors that continue even though they are taking part in a school-wide intervention (Tier 1). These students may benefit from having a behavior contract—an individual agreement with a teacher that outlines specific behavioral expectations for a given setting or activity. Behavior contracts hold both students and teachers accountable, as well as increase self-responsibility skills. Behavior contracts are a creative and practical method typically implemented as a Tier 2 intervention.

WHAT IS A BEHAVIOR CONTRACT?

A behavior contract is a written agreement between a teacher and a student in which all parties agree to specific, desired behaviors.¹ The teacher explains to the student which behaviors he would like to see increased, which behaviors he would like to see decreased, and what will happen if the desired behaviors are increased. When the student meets the expectations outlined in the behavior contract, the student will earn meaningful reinforcement, as outlined in the contract.

► Examples of Reinforcers that Could Be Incorporated Into a Behavior Contract:

- Specific verbal praise
- Computer time
- Lunch with favorite teacher
- Sticker
- Listen to music while working
- High five
- Homework pass
- Smile at the student

Behaviors outlined in the behavior contract should be *observable* and *measurable*. A behavior that is observable can be seen by another person. For example, telling a student to have positive thoughts will not generate an observable behavior. The teacher cannot see the student's thoughts; therefore, the behavior cannot be measured. Instead, suggest to the student specific behaviors that can be observed, such as making positive verbal statements about herself.

► Behavior contracts typically include three components:

1. **Behavior:** What is the desired behavior? Is the behavior observable and measurable?
2. **Reward:** What reinforcement will the student receive for reaching the desired behavior goal? Is the reward something the student is willing to work for?
3. **Recording Sheet:** A recording sheet serves as a method for recording performance.

WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM BEHAVIOR CONTRACTS?

If a particular behavior becomes a frequent issue, a behavior contract can hold a student accountable for changing his or her behavior. A behavior contract is an individualized tool that is specifically designed for the student and the behavior.² The contract can be tailored for the student's specific behaviors and needs. To reinforce the behavior in all settings, you can also include in the contract parents who hold their children accountable for behavior outside of the school setting.

For more information about the technical assistance project funded to support schools in your region, please see page 5 of this guide.



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Behavior contracts are appropriate for elementary, middle, and high school students with and without disabilities.³ However, it is important that the behavior contract is age-appropriate for the student. For example, an elementary behavior contract may include various pictures and visual representations. A middle or high school behavior contract may include more detailed

explanations (see example). Behavior contracts also work across a range of undesired behaviors (e.g., failure to complete assignments, poor attendance, interrupting during instructional time, teasing classmates).

WHY ARE BEHAVIOR CONTRACTS EFFECTIVE?

When implemented correctly, behavior contracts hold students accountable for their actions. This intervention strategy may also increase student motivation, self-determination, responsibility, and effort.⁴ A behavior contract provides the teacher and the student with a concrete plan to work towards.

Studies have found that behavior contracts can decrease undesired behaviors in the classroom. In addition, challenging behaviors are replaced with desired behaviors. Behavior contracts have been successful with a variety of populations, such as students with emotional and behavior disorders and students who lack motivation. Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism have also benefited from behavior contracts.⁵ For example, in one study, behavior contracts were used to help students with autism develop appropriate hygiene routines and independent living skills. The contracts included a picture checklist of various hygiene procedures. The students were first required to complete half of the hygiene procedures. With the use of reinforcement, the students were eventually completing all of the hygiene procedures on checklist. Results showed that all of the students with disabilities increased their knowledge and completion of acceptable hygiene practices.⁶

EXAMPLE: MIDDLE OR HIGH SCHOOL BEHAVIOR CONTRACT

Student Name: John

Behavior: John consistently (4 out of 5 days) arrives to class after the class bell rings.

Desired Behavior: John will be seated in his assigned seat with the appropriate school supplies before the class bell rings.

Timeline: For the first week of implementation, John will be in his assigned seat before the bell rings 4 out of 5 days. Review the behavior contract every Friday.

Reward Choices:

- Preferred parking for a day
- Lunch with teacher or any adult in the school
- Listen to appropriate music during study time

Teacher Signature: _____
 Student Signature: _____



TARGET BEHAVIOR	DESIRED BEHAVIOR
Sarah arrives 10 minutes late to class four of five days of the week.	Sarah will arrive to class on time with her materials four of five days of the week.
John makes fun of students when they answer a question incorrectly.	John will not make fun of or mock a student when a question is answered incorrectly.
Lisa interrupts the teacher during morning circle time. She fails to raise her hand and wait for the teacher to call on her.	When Lisa has a question during circle time, she will raise her hand and wait for the teacher to call on her.

HOW DO I CREATE A BEHAVIOR CONTRACT?

- 1. Identify the target behavior.** Make sure the behavior you plan to change is observable and measurable.⁷ “Staying off task” is too vague and cannot be measured. When is the student off task? What does the student do when he or she is off task? It is essential to be very specific when determining the target behavior so the student knows what is expected of him or her. It is also very important to focus on one behavior. The student may become overwhelmed when having to self-monitor multiple behaviors. If multiple behaviors are of concern, start with one and add another behavior as the student successfully demonstrates the desired behavior.⁸
- 2. Meet with everyone who will be involved.** Set up a meeting time with the participating student. If appropriate, include the parent or guardian in the contract process. A behavior contract can also include other teachers and school personnel.

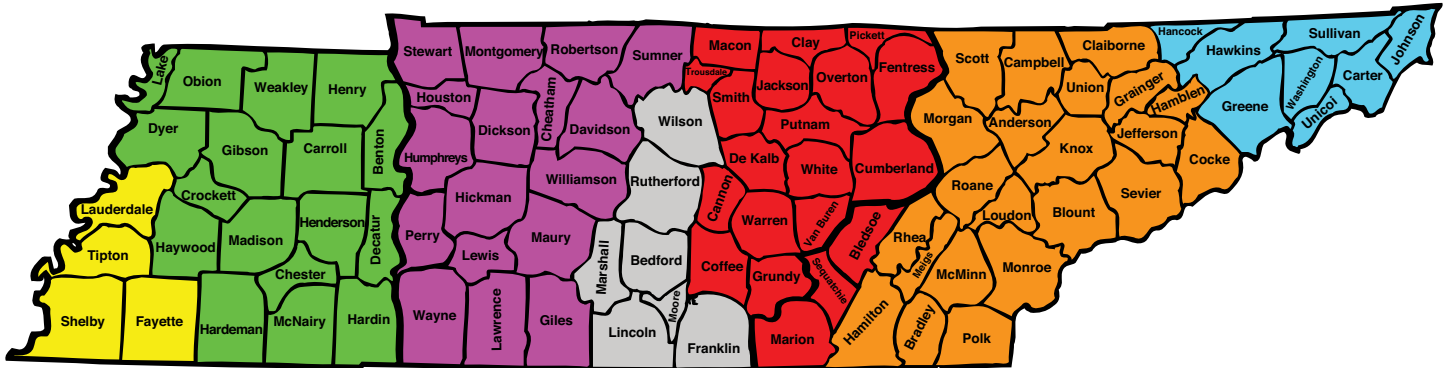
- ▶ **Examples of those who might be involved:**
- Classroom teacher
 - Paraprofessionals
 - Speech-Language Pathologist
 - Occupational Therapist
 - Bus driver
 - Librarian
 - Assistant principal
 - P.E. teacher

- 3. Discuss the student’s strengths and areas of concern.** Talk about the target behavior with the student. Discuss in detail the expected behavior, and provide the student with multiple examples of the desired alternative. In addition, be sure to discuss the student’s strengths in the classroom. It is vital not to focus solely on the student’s negative behavior in the classroom.
- 4. Identify appropriate rewards and consequences.** Discuss with the student rewards he or she would enjoy. In the planning process, it is essential to choose reinforcements for which the student is willing to work. Also, determine when reinforcement will be provided. How many days does the student need to meet the goal before reinforcement is provided?

- ▶ **Reinforcement Ideas:**
- Lunch with teacher
 - Preferred parking for a week
 - 10 minutes of extra recess
 - Homework pass
 - Favorite piece of candy
 - Coloring page
 - Preferred cafeteria seating for a day
 - Wear hat to school
 - Extra time at the computer
 - Line leader for the day

CI3T TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECTS BY REGION: 2012-2015

The Tennessee Department of Education has provided funding to seven projects to provide training and technical assistance to schools as they address the academic, social, and behavioral needs of students within comprehensive, integrated, three-tiered (CI3T) models of prevention. To locate the project assigned to your region, see below.



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