

TEN BASIC RULES OF CONTINGENCY CONTRACTING



1. The contract payoff (reward) should be immediate. This is especially important when the student is first learning about contracting. It is important that the presentation of the reinforcer be contingent only on the adequate performance of the behavior and not, for example, on the passage of time.
2. Initial contracts should call for and reward small approximations. If the initial performance requested from the student is a small simple-to-perform approximation to the final performance desired, no difficulties will be encountered. If the performance requested is too precise and too difficult for the student to perform, no amount of reward will help.
3. Reward frequently with small amounts. Research indicates that it is far more effective to give frequent reinforcements than a few large ones.
4. The contract should call for and reward accomplishment rather than obedience. The contract should state, "If you accomplish such and such, you will be rewarded with such and such." not, "If you do what I tell you to do, I will reward you with such and such." Reward for accomplishment leads to independence. Reward for obedience leads only to continued dependence on the person to whom the student learns to be obedient.
5. Reward the performance after it occurs. This is the most self-evident of all the rules, "first work, then play." However, the difference in contingency management is that this sequence will occur dozens of times each day.
6. The contract must be fair. The terms of the contract, on both sides of the agreement ("If you will do x. I will do e"), must be of relatively equal weight. The teacher should try to relate the amount of reward to the amount of performance. Teachers and parents sometimes feel uncomfortable with rewarding the students "for what they should be doing anyway." But the fact is that children learn better, and more willingly, if reinforcers follow difficult activities.
7. The terms of the contract must be clear. The terms on both sides of the contract must be explicit. For example, an unclear contract would say, "Do a few arithmetic problems and then we will do something more interesting." A more clearly stated contract would say, "do 10 ten arithmetic problems correctly and then we will watch the first four minutes of this Popeye cartoon." The student must always know how much performance is expected of him or her and what he or she can expect as a payoff.

8. The contract must be honest. An honest contract is
 - a. Carried out immediately
 - b. Carried out according to the terms specified in the contract

9. The contract must be positive. An appropriate contract should not say, "I will not do x, if you will do y." The outstanding characteristic of negative contracting is that it involves a threat of punishment. The terms of the contract should contribute something to the student's experience, rather than take something away from or her.

10. Contracting as a method must be used systematically. Once contracting has been established as a motivation management procedure, it should be maintained, and care should be taken not to reward undesirable acts. The best way to eliminate unwanted behaviors is to make certain that they are never reinforced in anyway; instead, see to it that in the same situation some other behavior is reinforced, which is itself incompatible with the undesirable behavior.

STEPS IN DEVELOPING A CONTINGENCY CONTRACT

1. Select one or two target behaviors; describe
2. Identify rewards
3. Write contract with student (and others, as appropriate)
4. Implement
5. Evaluate
6. Re-write (re-negotiate, if necessary)
7. Select another target behavior

