

BEHAVIORAL CONTRACTING WITH ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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Abstract

Within the counsellor-as-teacher frame of reference, the concept of behavioral contracting is examined. Basic issues are developed and evaluated. An illustrative contract between an adolescent and his parents is presented.

Résumé

Assurer un certain comportement par un contrat, voilà le concept examiné dans le contexte du conseiller comme enseignant. On élabore et évalue des données de base. Enfin, on présente, à titre d'exemple, un contrat entre un adolescent et ses parents.

The concept of behavioral contracting is clearly relevant to the current emphasis on the *counsellor-as-teacher*. Serious shortages of psychological personnel are not likely to be overcome in the near or even distant future (Albee, 1960), hence, the conventional, long term, individual counselling relationship is rather limited except for isolated or special cases.

The *counsellor-as-teacher* is a far more realistic and practical model. This model implies that the counsellor not only will help clients to objectively define problem areas and to use a broad range of self-help strategies to reduce or alleviate presenting problems, but will also leave the client with new self-help skills that he/she might use in the future without further professional intervention. Examples of this new orientation to client self-help and self-directed behavior change are typified by the work of Watson and Tharp (1972), Goldfried & Merbaum (1973), Mahoney and Thoresen (1974), Lembo (1974), Liberman, King, DeRisi, and McCann (1975), and Schmidt (1976).

BEHAVIORAL CONTRACTING

One of many new self-help techniques is *behavioral contracting* which has been defined by DeRisi and Butz (1975) as "... a technique used to structure behavioral counselling by making each of the necessary elements of the process so clear and explicit that they may be written into an agreement for behavior change that is understandable and acceptable to everyone involved" (p. 1).

In general terms, a behavioral contract is a written agreement between two or more parties regarding expected behavioral changes and the consequences of specific, appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Patterson & Forgatch (1975) point out that the idea for the contract comes from

the business or commercial world in which agreements are very clearly specified and where there is a written reference to the terms that each party agrees to.

The concept of behavioral contracting, although new to the professional literature, has been used in some form for many years by professional helpers and parents who have followed a "common-sense" approach. Contracting was initially used in the classroom (Homme, 1970), and with delinquents (Stuart, 1971) but the procedure has become more broadly used and highly popular in recent years. Patterson & Forgatch (1975, 1976) have published two cassette tapes to illustrate contracting procedures, and DeRisi & Butz (1975) have developed a simulation practice manual for the technique. While research on the topic is still limited, early studies indicate that the technique is a valuable addition to the procedures of any helping professional. It has several specific advantages, especially for adolescents and their families.

Developmental Needs of the Adolescent

Because of the developmental stresses that are experienced by adolescents and their parents in today's world, standard interactional models of counselling are not always appropriate. Adolescents often believe that authority figures are unfair to them; they react negatively to this perceived unfairness, real or imagined; they have a strong feeling of being overly controlled by authority figures; they make considerable demands for total and unquestioned freedom, but at the same time have a strong need for structure and direction; and they often end up in a situation in which they have very little power of negotiation, and in which there is little or no objective monitoring.

All too frequently, the family identifies one of its members as its "problem", often an adolescent. Then, rather than dealing with the entire family unit and its interaction patterns, the target member is defined as "bad" or "disturbed" with all the ramifications of such labelling.

In many ways, behavioral contracting is ideally suited for problems and difficulties of this nature, and is very often the treatment of choice when dealing with young people and their families. The use of formal contracting tends to objectify the interaction between parents and adolescents:

1. a contract gives structure to a situation so that both parents and adolescents are able to see clearly what is expected of them;
2. a contract has a built-in monitoring system so that more objective data is collected on exactly what is happening within the family;
3. there is the added advantage to the adolescent of finally having flexibility to negotiate what will happen in his/her life;
4. the young person has some input in determining the consequences for his or her behavior and the behavior of the adults in his/her life;
5. a contract focuses on the entire family rather than singling out one person as the "behavior problem" in the home.

DeRisi & Butz (1975) also point out that contracts tend to focus on problem solving and thus provide a positive action-orientated approach rather than continued reliance on name-calling and fault-finding. The process of sitting down with a family and doing the intense work of setting up a contract is in-and-of-itself growth facilitating. The procedure forces people to look at what they are really doing in the situation, and leaves little room for scapegoating or emotional outbursts. Blaming becomes difficult, embarrassing, and of limited personal reward under these circumstances.

Basic Aspects of Contracting

Behavioral contracting is a stepwise procedure which follows a definite and logical sequence. The parties involved, in this case adolescents and their parents, must sit down with an outside mediator and decide exactly what behaviors each would like to see changed. These behaviors are then explicitly described in behavioral terms and baseline information is collected to discern the magnitude of the behaviors to be changed. It is extremely important, at this point, that all parties mutually agree to the concept of contracting and specifically that adolescents do not feel that contracts are being imposed upon them.

Target behaviors for change are then selected, and these should include behaviors both of the adolescent and of the parent. A written contract is then drawn up in a very clear and precise form, focusing on no more than two or three behaviors.

Arrangements are made for careful monitoring and record keeping, procedures are worked out to review the contract at regular points, and a system of consequences both positive and negative are negotiated. Finally, both parties agree to a system for assessing the effects of the contract after a reasonable length of time.

At least initially, it is extremely important that there be a neutral, outside mediator to help the family select relevant behaviors for change and to draw up the appropriate contract. The ultimate goal is to teach families contracting skills so that future change programs can be internally initiated. Typically, most families experience considerable difficulty collecting baseline data of their own. They often fail to record obvious behaviors and they often overreact by overcounting behavior which they see, or think they see.

Families initially require outside consultation on the selection of target behaviors because of their tendency to deal with extremely vague or highly comprehensive problem areas which are not amenable to standard behavioral contracting. The family also must be shown that only a few target behaviors are to be chosen at any one time, that contracts must provide for a fairly short duration of time and, that all parties must be willing to abandon or renegotiate the contract if it proves to be unrealistic. The first contract should cover only a few days, but eventually should be worked up to about a week or two in duration.

Writing the Contract

The actual writing of the contract should be approached in much the same way as a person should draft any legal document. The family should regard the contract as a serious matter, with all parties in approval and willing to sign in good faith. While addressing itself only to a few points, the contract should clearly set out the rewards that people are going to receive for adequately behaving in the stated manner, the bonuses one can expect if more progress is made than specified, the distinct responsibilities of each person, and the penalties or loss of privileges which will result from breaches of contract.

Our own preference has been to follow the format of Ney and Ney (1972) in which the contract is set up on the basis of an "If . . . then . . ." format. A sample contract is presented below. This contract is simply an agreement that if the signatories agree to do a certain thing, then certain rewards will be given, and if they do not live up to these expectations, then loss of privileges or something negative will follow.

It is beneficial to include both behavioral outcomes for both the adolescent and the adults who are involved. In other words, if an adolescent does extremely well at a projected task, this might

imply that the adult will have to give up something such as a certain amount of smoking, television watching or a favorite food. In this way, adolescents feel that they have at least some control over the troubled family situation and adults also realize their commitment to make some effort for positive change.

SAMPLE CONTRACT

Clients: Frank, age 13 and his parents, in conflict about curfew times and household rules and duties. The parents are rigid and complaining while Frank deliberately irritates them. The initial contract focusses only on concerns about curfew and parental nagging.

Goals: Frank is to maintain a curfew of 9 p.m. on weeknights and 11 p.m. on weekends. His parents are not to nag and will provide an allowance of 40¢ daily for several mutually agreed upon household duties.

Terms:

1. *IF* Frank returns home weeknights by 9 p.m.

THEN: his parents will not complain about his friends and will agree to 11 p.m. weekend curfew.

Bonus: If Frank is home on time and his parents question or criticize him about his friends, his allowance is doubled for that day.

Penalty: For every 1/2 hour Frank is late during a weeknight, he forfeits 20¢ of his allowance. If his entire allowance is used up during a single week, he then will forfeit 1/2 hour of weekend time for every 1/2 hour late.

2. *IF* Frank has maintained his weeknight curfew and has followed and completed the previously agreed-upon posted duties and has specifically stated where he will be.

THEN: he may stay out until 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday nights with no questions or nagging from his parents.

Bonus: If Frank is home on time and is nagged, the nagging parent has to miss one hour of a favorite television show the next night.

Penalty: For every 1/2 hour he is late, he loses an hour off next weekend's curfew. If he is not at the place he indicated, he is grounded for the next weekend.

CONTRACT TO BE MONITORED BY:

_____ (Frank's older sister)

CONTRACT DURATION

_____ Nov. 1st to Nov. 30th, 1977.

SIGNED BY:

_____ (Frank)

_____ (Mother)

_____ (Father)

_____ (Counsellor)

It is important to find useful and unusual reinforcers for both parties. The only way that this may be accomplished is to sit down with the adolescent and his/her parents and look at all the things which are really rewarding to them. Often, as behavioral scientists, we make false assumptions about what is rewarding for a person and often a simple thing like time alone, the parent not being allowed to nag, the child not being allowed to "lip off", a special trip, freedom from doing chores, freedom from delineating precise whereabouts and/or activities, and so forth have considerable power. The central idea is to encourage the parties to be as experimental, flexible and free as possible in determining things that are really important to them.

One of the most effective negative consequences seems to be a time-out period. This means that if either the adults or the adolescent break some aspect of the contract, they are required to go to a designated area and have limited contact with other people for a specified short length of time. Surprisingly, both children and adolescents relate well to this particular negative outcome, but adults have a difficult time with it. Another negative consequence which might be written into the contract is some type of extra work, and this again is a very non-damaging type of consequence and is usually accepted by both the adults and the adolescent.

Long Term Contracts

When contracts are set up for more than a few days or a week, it is often productive to use a point system and award or take away points for appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. The adopted point system might be graphically illustrated with a chart placed in a conspicuous location in the house (e.g., a kitchen wall). It also is helpful to have parents work on some personal behavior change such as weight loss or decreased smoking at the same time that they negotiate with their adolescent children for changes in their behavior. Such evidence of good faith makes it clear that both parties are trying hard at working together to have a better home situation, and that both parties are committed to testing the method.

CONCLUSIONS AND REACTIONS

Contracting can be an extremely helpful technique for parents in particular, but also for school teachers and social workers who wish to use a reasonable and objective approach to changing behavior in adolescents. A primary reference source on the topic would certainly be the work by DeRisi and Butz (1975). Contracting is a powerful technique for adolescents because it

gives them many of the options, rights, and clear structure that they are looking for. It also puts some pressure on the adults to look at their behavior and perhaps change as well. For a learning point of view, possibly one of the most powerful aspects of contracting is that once a family has been trained in this procedure, they are then willing to use the methodology with future problems so that they do not require a high degree of outside help; the family in fact become their own change agents.

Contracting is not a panacea and there are potential problems. It is vital that initial contracting experiences in a family be monitored by an outside professional to ensure that the experience does not become a power-based imposition of adult will upon the adolescent. It is possible for parents to use contracting as a somewhat sadistic and manipulative tool. There is also a need for professional monitoring so that the family does not become discouraged when the first contract or part thereof fails to work. Human nature is such that people often expect immediate change with little effort or input on their part. They quickly become discouraged and often do not see the need for long-term programs.

Adolescents sometimes reject contracting and use contracting interventions as an excuse to blame their parents for yet "another" useless and manipulatory activity, especially if initial monitoring is weak. Some young people try to barter for unrealistic freedoms or for sanctions on the parents which are vindictive and punitive.

Contracting, despite the fact that it may bring forth unrealistic demands on the part of adolescents and/or vindictive and punitive measures from parents, has proved to be a useful

tool in the recent past and indications are that it can and will continue to be an effective procedure for families desirous of change.

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