



Family Contracts

for older grade school and teenage children

Family contracts provide an opportunity for families to discuss and agree on family expectations, privileges for successfully maintaining expectations, and consequences for not maintaining the appropriate behavior outlined in the contract. These contracts vary from family-to-family depending on the child's age and behavior and family goals. Family contracts delineate clear expectations and can be useful tools to help improve breakdowns in communications between parents and older children.

Guidelines for Completing Family Contracts

All parties engage in contract negotiations. Everyone (parents and children) must agree on each point of the contract and each consequence for when the contract has been broken.

Family Contract Guidelines for Parents

Consistency, consistency, consistency. Remember, many parental over-reactions are the result of parents not taking action when they should have. Thus, you can help prevent yourself from over-reacting, and damaging your relationship with your children, by remaining consistent with the small issues. If it's in the contract, try not to deviate from it even when enforcing it is inconvenient and/or costly. In families with blurred boundaries, maintaining consistency can help correct behavioral problems caused by well-meaning, but inconsistent, parenting. Deviating from the contract undermines what you're trying to instill in your child as well as your overall position.

It's wise to include children in defining consequences for broken contracts. Parents sometimes fear that children will be too easy on themselves. However, when discussing consequences beforehand, many children recognize and accept that breaking the contract naturally results in negative consequences. So, ask children for their input and then work together to come up with consequences that are appropriate, doable, and simple. Do not agree to consequences that can't be followed-through with.

From time-to-time family contracts have to be renewed, just like contracts in real life. Build a re-evaluation period into your family contract (2 weeks, 2 months, 6 months, etc.). It may also be advantageous to have a clause stating contracts may

be reviewed when it's not working (caution: too many of these and you'll lose credibility - make it simple the first time).

Do not repeatedly remind children of their agreement and threaten them with consequences. Children need to experience the consequences of breaking the contract because consequences serve as better and more long-term reminders. Children won't learn to be responsible for themselves and self-regulate their emotions and behaviors unless they're expected to.

Children know what a consequence will be because it was discussed with them beforehand. They need to learn that agreements and appropriate behavior are important and that you're willing to honor their choice to break their agreement. When they do, maintain an emotionally neutral position and calmly implement the consequence. Don't react harshly or be surprised when your child acts immature. Just remember they've never been an adult before and helping them mature is your job. Parental consistency, and your demeanor as you implement the agreed upon consequences, will influence the type of character your child develops and the quality of relationship you have with them when they become adults.

What if Kids Don't Listen

One of the worst things a parent can do is engage their child in a power struggle. By natural design parents are responsible for and have authority over their children. Engaging in power struggles is the first step to relinquishing that responsibility and authority. Using the "broken-record" technique can be useful when dealing with tantrums. You'll have to think about this before using it otherwise you may unwittingly get sucked into a power struggle.

To use the "broken-record" technique simply repeat what the consequence is using as few words as possible. When children yell and scream in response (inviting a power struggle), maintain a calm composure and repeat the same message as many times as you need, just like a broken record. This may take time and you may feel frustrated. However, this experiential aspect is sometimes what it takes for kids to learn that you won't give in to their demands.

Positive Family Time

Families encountering difficulties frequently lack fun family time. Unfortunately, this alone can bankrupt a child's emotional bank account. Make sure to schedule fun family times and have a plan for doing this even more so when your contract is implemented.

Fun time and parental love/affection are not dependent upon a child's adherence to the family contract, they are always given freely. Your child needs to be reminded that they are a loved and valued member of the family – even when they've been battling you all day. So, parents, make sure your own emotional bank account is filled because some children's behavior can bankrupt (or overdraw) you quickly and it's your responsibility to maintain your own emotional bank account.

What Just Happened?

Sometimes parents get used to children acting-out because that acting-out allows parents to avoid dealing with unresolved conflict in their personal/family lives. In other words, the acting-out serves a purpose. Don't be surprised when your child starts obeying and you find there's other conflict in your family (self, marriage, or other issues). When things begin to improve, other issues sometimes surface. This is now your opportunity to address some of the issues at the root of the problem. Remember, we are all a work in progress and acknowledging to your family what you need to adjust in yourself, and then taking steps to make those adjustments, can go a long way in establishing credibility and rapport with aging children. Don't pretend you're perfect, your children already know better.

A Helpful Note

Children aren't likely to show much understanding and appreciation for your sacrifice until they're adults with children of their own. So, don't look to your children for validation. Remember that you aren't a robot and it's important for parents to get away and recharge their batteries from time-to-time, even if it's just a couple hours. Parenting is difficult but keep up the good work and seek help and support when you need it.

Joshua Ascherman, MFT 98889
3 Governors Lane, Suite A
Chico, CA 95926
(530) 413-0032
chicocounselor.com