

## Effective Reward Plans

Contingency plans can effectively shape behaviors by creating a systematic, predictable, timely way of reinforcing desired behaviors and discouraging undesired behaviors. However, it can be very challenging to construct an effective plan so it is important to follow the suggestions below.

### Constructing the Plan

- Talk with your parent trainer about the behaviors that you want to influence and decide whether your child needs a “light,” “medium” or “severe” behavior plan. Light plans generally include only a few key behaviors and a fairly simple method for earning extra rewards and privileges (these are “bribes” like giving \$10 for each day of full school attendance), whereas severe plans provide many desired things (money, items, privileges) only when many important behaviors are improved in a given week, even though many of those desired things use to be given regardless of behaviors (like access to a smart phone, which could be “taken away” following non-compliance).
- Parents can use Worksheet “Things our Child Wants” (on page 124 of your parent training packet) to identify reinforcers that can be integrated into the plan. Bring this handout to each of your parent training sessions until you have a draft of the reward plan. You can ask your child directly what things they would like to earn as rewards.
- Get a sample written behavior plan from: [www.dbtsandiego.com/parents](http://www.dbtsandiego.com/parents) and edit it according to your discussion with your parent trainer. Set it up as a Google Doc and give access permission to the email address of the primary therapist, parent trainer, and Dr. Brown (the Google Doc method ensures that all of us always have access to the latest version of the plan any time changes are made). If a Google Doc is not possible, email it to us all and bring a printed copy to every session (as soon as you can), and that you give the completed plan to all the therapists.
- Many parents feel that they have exhausted the tangible rewards for their child or feel stuck when their child is not responsive to tangible rewards. An often overlooked set of reinforcers that can make a big difference are the basic favors that parents do for their children that have become expected ways that the household will run. Some examples of this include providing transportation on demand, preparing special or desired meals, parents doing their child’s laundry, or cleaning up after them.
- Keep punishments to a minimum. Change punishments to reward opportunities. For example, instead of punishing incompleteness of chores, reward the completion of chores. Instead of punishing getting to school late or absences, reward the arriving on time and school attendance. Instead of punishing returning after curfew, reward for each day returning home on time.
- Specificity. Focus on describing the specific, observable behaviors. For example, instead of “disrespectful language” use “cursing or name-calling.” Instead of “keep room tidy” say “bed made, clothes picked up off the floor by 8am.”

- Proximal behaviors: reward homework initiation, turning in homework, and removing distractions, rather than grades for homework/tests, or grades at the end of semesters.
- Self-injury. Unless you receive a strong recommendation from one of the DBT therapists, we recommend against using tangible punishments to respond to self-harm, but you can offer tangible rewards for periods of abstinence from self-injury can be effective. For example, taking your teen to an amusement park or getting them a new smart phone after they have abstained for 6 months. Also, follow the advice from the *Responding to Self-Harm and Suicidality* handout.
- Have a different plan for times when no school is held, if the reward plan involves rewards for school attendance and homework.
- If you want to motivate your child by giving them cash, it can be more effective to choose dollar currency over points. However, if you have concerns about your child having cash (worry about them buying drugs, etc.) then it is more effective to choose points as the currency.
- If you anticipate your teen will view the written plan as “overly controlling” or otherwise have a negative response, a good way to get buy in can be to include a few “parent behaviors” that the teen feels are ineffective for the relationship, and integrate these into the plan such that your teen will benefit when they occur. For example, the teen may earn points or money when parents yell at them, do not adhere to the reward plan, etc. The parents can guess about these and put them on in advance or ask the teen and complete this during the reward plan discussion with the teen.

### Revealing the Plan to your teen

- We suggest that reward plans be first presented to the teen in a therapy session with both the parent training therapist and individual therapist present.
  - If there are difficulties coordinating schedules, the default is for the teen and parents to attend a parent training session, and the primary therapist can call into the parent training session or follow up with them later.
- When presenting the reward plan, tell your child that “this is a draft” and ask for their feedback.
- Avoid calling the plan a “contract” or using other language that implies it will not go into effect if the child refuses to “agree” to it. Use firm but gentle language that your child is free to choose to do or not do any of the behaviors on the plan, but you will respond to their choices according to what is written. Do express openness to hear their feedback, willingness to entertain negotiation of the specific behaviors or contingencies when your child uses their skills (DEAR MAN GIVE) to request specific changes.
- If your child has a negative reaction to the behavior plan, validate their emotions rather than try to convince them of the positives, why they “should” comply, or why they “shouldn’t” be angry or upset. If their reaction is extreme, promptly end the conversation and invite them to discuss it further when they can talk gently.
- While explaining the behavior plan, we recommend that parents highlight their child’s choice to act in ways that will earn them rewards and avoid language that seems punitive, coercive, or may be perceived as controlling.

Example: Instead of “You have to be home by 10, otherwise your phone gets taken away” say “it’s up to you to decide what to do, this plan just shows how we will respond to your choices.”

Instead of “these are the rules and you need to follow them” say “we are going to reward the things we value and we understand you may not value the same things.”

- Avoid stating or implying that your child refusing to participate in therapy or DBT will “make the plan go away.” State clearly that parents will follow the plan regardless of the teens participation in therapy. For example: “It’s up to you if you attend your DBT sessions but we will continue with DBT and follow the plan regardless.”
- State a specific time frame and behavioral criteria for evaluating the success of the current plan (e.g., three months), and explain that sustained success with the current plan will lead to graduating to more lenient plans (e.g., switching to a “light” plan if there are no days of missing school and no curfew violations for the last 8 weeks), and eventually no plan at all (if your child does not want the plan). In contrast, explain that failure of the starting plan will require a more “severe” plan (e.g., switching to a “severe” plan if there are any days of missing school or curfew violations in the last 4 weeks),

#### Implementing the Behavior Plan

- Plan to meet with your parent trainer weekly for at least the first few weeks that the behavior plan is in effect for monitoring and troubleshooting the implementation.
- Bring to these sessions a completed written record of the daily occurrence (or absence) of your child’s target behaviors and points/dollars earned (you can use the parent training diary card for this), and also give a copy to the primary therapist immediately prior to each individual session (you can send an image of the ratings to the therapist in a text or an email if it is not feasible to give the therapist a paper copy before your child’s session).
- Your plan will not cover everything, so you can come up with extra consequences on the spot as needed as long as they do not contradict the written contingency plan. Most of these should be natural consequences.

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