Parent-Child Contracts

One of our greatest challenges as parents is to teach our children how to be responsible individuals. Whether we are trying to teach younger children to put their toys away; encourage older children to participate in household chores; or ensure that teens get home safely and on time—the way we communicate our expectations can have a direct impact on the results.

Creating a parent-child contract can be one way we can encourage positive behaviour and discourage bad habits.

A contract that is mutually developed and agreed on by parents and their children provides a way of outlining expectations as well as consequences or rewards. This process can be very satisfying for both the children and the parents. Here are some basic contract guidelines you can follow:

- Be sure to involve your child in the contract development/writing process and have both parties agree to the conditions and, if possible, sign the contract.
- Clearly outline obligations, timeframes and consequences if tasks are ignored.
- Post the contract where everyone can see it (e.g., on the fridge or family bulletin board).
- Be consistent, reasonable and fair in giving rewards and enforcing consequences.
- Renegotiate agreements as other skills and abilities develop.
- Make the contract appropriate to your child's age and abilities.

Tips on Teaching Your Children Responsibility at all Ages

Children Under Five

Verbal/Visual Contracts: You can demonstrate to younger children verbally and visually that you have limits and expectations for their behaviour.

- Tell your child what you'd like them to do, e.g., put his/her toys away every evening after dinner.
- Ask your child to suggest an appropriate reward for positive behaviour and a consequence for negative behaviour.
- Use a calendar with stickers posted on the days your child completes his/her responsibilities.
- Reward your child when his/her calendar has five stickers in a row.
- Remind your child of his/her responsibilities and the rewards/consequences using simple examples/ illustrations.

School-Age Children (6-12) and Early Teens (13-16)

Written contracts:

- With an older child you can create a written contract that spells out the rules, rewards and consequences for certain behaviours.
- Outline your child's commitments, e.g., taking out the garbage, cleaning their room, mowing the lawn, completing their project/assignment or rules to follow with internet use.
- Specify the times your child is to do the chores or activities, e.g., once a week or nightly.
- Define the rewards and consequences and make goals specific and measurable, e.g., privileges might include: flexibility in curfew time, having friends over, time on the computer/TV, activities without supervision, private space or time.
- Write out the contract on the computer or print it clearly and have both parent and child sign it and post it on the refrigerator or a family bulletin board, etc.

Young Adults and Teens (17-20)

Although the contract development process would be similar, the type of issues for agreement would obviously differ for teens and young adults. Contracts can be useful to establish and maintain curfews; to ensure that teens never accept a ride from anyone who has been drinking; to develop and stick with study/ homework routines, etc.

What to remember when developing parent-child contracts with teens or young adults:

- Expect your teen or young adult to assume more responsibility for their behaviour and household routines.
- Ask your teen or young adult child to set up the rewards and consequences and draft the contract.
- Not all contracts need to be written, verbal agreements help teens develop important negotiating skills that they will need in the future.

As you know, life is not always simple between parents and children. Though behaviour contracting takes time and commitment, it can yield great rewards in terms of stronger relationships and family harmony.