CONTINGENCY MANAGEMENT
INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice

DO YOU HEAR THINGS LIKE THIS FROM TEACHERS?

Sarah is not motivated to do her math assignments. She does well in her other subjects but seems to hate math.

Miguel doesn’t help other children clean up the classroom before it is time for recess, but he is the first to line up at the door.

I can’t get James to do his assignments. He just sits at his desk and draws.

DO YOU HEAR THINGS LIKE THIS FROM YOUR CHILD?

Mrs. Brooks is always nagging me to do my work. I just want her to leave me alone.

My teacher tells me that if I finish my reading then I can draw, but we always run out of time and I never get to draw.

Mom, you’re constantly telling me what to do — pick up my room, take out the garbage, do my homework. You never let me do what I want!

WHAT IS CONTINGENCY MANAGEMENT?

Most adults prefer doing things they enjoy than doing things they dislike or find difficult. Children function much the same way. Most kids would rather go to recess than clean up their toys, or draw rather than read. One strategy for getting adults and children to do required or requested activities is called contingency management.

In contingency management, access to a high-probability behavior (one that is likely to occur) is made contingent on a low-probability behavior (one that is unlikely to occur). In other words, participating in a desired activity depends on completing an undesirable activity. For example, parents frequently tell their children, “If you eat your vegetables you can have dessert.” This is an example of contingency management because having dessert, the desired activity, depends on completing the undesirable activity, eating vegetables. Because of this popular example, contingency management is also referred to as Grandma’s Law or the Premack Principle. If the contingency management plan is written down, it is frequently referred to as a contingency or behavior contract.

Contingency management works for very young children as well as for adolescents. It can also be used for students with all kinds of special learning and behavioral needs, like Sarah, Miguel, and James.

WHY DOES CONTINGENCY MANAGEMENT WORK?

Contingency management works because it is based on the systematic application of some generally accepted principles of human behavior:

• An undesirable activity or behavior is more likely to reoccur if it is followed by some kind of positive reinforcement or reward each time it occurs.

• Positive reinforcements or rewards are more effective than punishment in changing behavior.

• Contingency management can be used even when an individual’s behavior is out of control because it teaches self-control.

• Contingency management generalizes well, which means that it can be used in a variety of settings, such as home and school.

DOES CONTINGENCY MANAGEMENT HELP STUDENTS?

Yes. Researchers have studied the effects of contingency management on very young children, adolescents, and adults. In each
case, different types of contingency management approaches have been effective.

Contingency management can be used with students of all ages and in all subject areas to improve attendance, assignment completion, and time on task. It can be used in all grade levels from preschool to high school and in both regular and special education classes.

Using contingency management, however, is not limited to improving academics. Contingency management is also a very effective tool that can improve student behavior both at home and at school. Many studies have used contingency management to improve both academics and behavior for regular and special education students.

**WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO**

1. Clearly explain the basic principles of contingency management to students, including a description of what will happen if the activity or task is completed and what will happen if the activity or task is not completed. “Sarah, if you do 10 math problems, then you may read or do another activity that you like. If you do not do 10 math problems, then you may not read or do another activity.” The student should always know how much performance is expected and what the reward is.

2. Set up positive contingency management systems rather than negative contingency management systems. “If you pick up your toys, you may go to recess. If you do not pick up your toys, you may not go to recess” is more effective than “If you do not pick up your toys, you will get a time-out.”

3. Allow students to participate in setting up their own contingency management systems. For a contingency management system to work, the reward for performing the behavior must be something the student desires. If you do not know what would be reinforcing or rewarding to the student, ask him or her.

4. Make sure the reinforcement or reward is given immediately. It is important that the reward depend only on the performance of the activity or behavior, not on the passage of time.

5. Initially, reward small approximations of the activity or behavior. If the initial performance requested from the student is a small, simple-to-perform approximation of the activity or behavior, no difficulties will be encountered. However, if the performance requested is too precise or too difficult for the student, he or she may have problems performing the activity or behavior. For example, instead of requiring the student to remain on task for the entire 60-minute math period to get a sticker, have him or her initially remain on task for 20 minutes to get the reward, then gradually increase the amount of on-task time until the desired 60 minutes is reached.

6. Give frequent, small rewards. Giving small rewards more frequently is more effective than giving large rewards infrequently.

7. Reinforce or reward the performance only after it occurs. Remember the order of events: first the undesirable activity or behavior, then the desirable activity or behavior. Watch for students who try to manipulate the contingency management system by reversing the order: “Just one more game, then I will do my assignment.”

8. Make sure the contingency management system is fair. It is important that both sides of the performance agreement are equal. For example, an agreement that stated, “If you do all your assignments every day, you will get a sticker at the end of the year” would not be weighted fairly.

9. Make sure the contingency management system is honest. If you agree to do something as a reinforcement or reward for the student, you must do it. Reinforcements or rewards should be carried out immediately, according to the terms of the agreement.

10. Make sure you use the contingency management system systematically. Once a contingency management system is put into place, it should be maintained. Make sure desirable activities or behaviors are reinforced or rewarded immediately and undesirable activities or behaviors are not reinforced or rewarded.

**HOW FAMILIES CAN HELP**

1. If your child’s teachers do not use contingency management and you think it might be helpful for your child, you can share the idea with them through this information brief.

2. Speak with your child’s teacher about activities or behaviors for which a contingency
management system has been established and ask for help in continuing this system at home.

3. Encourage your child to tell you how his or her contingency management system is going at school. Ask questions: “Did you get your reinforcement or reward today?” If not, ask, “What happened?”

WHAT CAN I READ? WHERE DO I GET A COPY?


To order a copy contact:

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