

# SOCIAL CONTRACTS: A PROACTIVE INTERVENTION FOR THE CLASSROOM

A social contract is an agreement negotiated between students and teacher that states classroom principles, rules, and consequences rather than punishments for classroom behavior. Unlike traditional classroom rules, students are involved in designing contracts.

## What Components Should I Consider Including in a Social Contract?

*Classroom Principles* provide a value system, context, and guidelines for behavior.

- Everyone has the right to share his/her opinion.
- Be courteous and respectful.
- Everyone is welcome.

*Effective Rules* are specific without being cumbersome and clearly define which behaviors are not acceptable.

- Too vague: No student should interfere with another student's learning.
- Too specific: Do not poke your fingers in another student's eye.
- Just right: Respect each other's space—keep your hands to yourself.

*Be Positive When Possible* to constructively show students how to behave, prohibiting only when necessary: "No put-downs of others are allowed."

*Logical Consequences* are essential but can be hard to develop. They should:

- Be clear and specific
- Have a range of alternatives
- Not be punishments
- Be natural and/or logical
- Be related to the rule
- Preserve students' dignity
- Increase student motivation

Four generic consequences that work for any rule are: reminders, warnings, practice following the rule, and a written plan. Avoid threats, which only create combative environments, make the student dislike school, and teach nothing.

## How Do I Draw Up a Social Contract?

Involved students are more likely to follow the contract. Do not accept any rules or consequences you would not feel comfortable enforcing. Allow students to vote on negotiable rules, passing only those with a vast majority (75 percent). Do not put rules that you deem absolutely necessary up to a vote.



Furthermore, for the chance to model an appropriate response to rule-breaking, students can include rules for the teacher, such as:

- If students cannot eat in class, the teacher cannot drink coffee during class.
- Do not call a student's home without first telling him or her of your intent.
- Tests will be corrected and handed back within three days.

### **How Long Should I Plan on Devoting to the Formulation of a Social Contract?**

Allow two class periods for discussion, dissent, time to think, and to reach a consensus. Include every student and have a different social contract for each class.

A contract should be drawn up by each class in which you intend to use one. Even if there are only two different students in the second period, do not use the same contract from the first period. Every student should be included in the process.

### **What Are Other Considerations in Using a Social Contract?**

- Effectiveness: If needed, discuss possible changes as a class, including the possibility of individual contingency contracts.
- Accessibility: Give each student a copy and post it prominently in the classroom.
- Collaboration: Share the contract with parents before behavior problems arise and with administrators and substitute teachers to decrease feelings of isolation when disciplinary measures are necessary and enhance the contract's effectiveness.

#### *References*

Curwin, R. L., & Mendler, A. N. (1988). *Discipline with dignity*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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