

After you've cut all the "deals" you need in your family, committed the fine points to writing, and spelled out consequences for contract violations, you may notice something that you might not be fully prepared for: Peace.

Enjoy it. Make it last.

Occasional conferences to fine-tune differences may be necessary from time to time, and that's fine—contract renegotiation is now as American as baseball strikes and management lock-outs.



Just make sure that the basic elements of the new deal get put down in black and white for everyone to see, so all family members can support each other in keeping their end of the bargain.

If you've gotten this far, you've done a good job.

Reward yourselves. When you're ready to ink the deal, make copies for everyone and take yourselves out to dinner or a weekend brunch to celebrate the signing.

That way no one has to do the dishes. ■



This is one in a series of publications on drugs, behavior, and health published by Do It Now Foundation. Please call or write for a list of current titles, or visit our web site at www.doitnow.org.

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LET'S MAKE A DEAL



Family Communication & Negotiation in Recovery

A D.I.N. Publication by Sandra Inskeep-Fox

IMPROVING ON NATURE ■

Families squabble. That's a given throughout nature. Orangutan families, human families—even bunny families, for that matter—wherever there's a choice to be made and a family involved, you'll find a test of wills, if you look long enough.

Families that contain a recovering person are no different. They have the same stresses and strains and emotional bumps and bruises as families everywhere.

Still, there *is* a big difference, because there's an issue on the line more important than who gets to watch which TV show at 8 o'clock. When a recovering person is in the mix, recovery itself can be at stake.

Because relapse is often linked to stress, reducing conflict at home can be critical to long-term recovery. And the best—and simplest—place to start is with family communication.

Responsible communication doesn't just happen. People have to work at it. And when it's missing in a family, it's often missing for a good reason: Family members never learned how.

That's the purpose of this pamphlet: to help you transform a key area of family communications—clearly expressing expectations and commitments with other family members.

Because while it's true that all families squabble, most don't have to do it as much as they do.

And increasing the peace pays dividends that can last a lifetime—lots of them, in fact.

EXPECTING EXPLOSIONS ■

Most family conflicts start when expectations aren't communicated and aren't fulfilled.

Then, we feel angry or resentful, and often don't deal with it honestly.

Such frustrations can build up inside family members until the volcano explodes—often all over the dinner table.

A main source of conflict is expected behaviors: what mom and dad think the kids should be doing, or what the kids complain that the parents don't do.



Non-martial art. Being explicit about our expectations can help kids avoid the stress of not living up to unspoken ones.

Verbal "deals" can lead to game-playing by family members who pretend they didn't understand, hear, or mean what was agreed to.



The real issue underlying expectation-based conflict is simple: "How do we behave in this family?"

But the issue itself often gets buried in an endless game of blame and accusation. Just listen:

- ▶ "Sara, you forgot to clean the iguana cage, again."
- ▶ "Whose turn is it to empty the dishwasher?"
- ▶ "But you *said* I could have the car tonight."

Verbal "understandings" of who is supposed to do what, when (and who *gets* to do what, when) can easily become unworkable, especially in busy families. And what family isn't, these days?

Verbal "deals" are usually too vague to promote responsible behavior, and can lead to game-playing by family members who pretend that they didn't understand, hear, or mean what was agreed to. It makes family teamwork almost impossible and family conflict a virtual certainty.

Want an alternative? Put expectations and commitments in writing.

Call it a contract, if you want, but don't call a lawyer to help you draw it up.

It works better if everyone involved—kids *and* adults—actively participate in specifying commitments they're willing to make and keep.

It also enables everyone to understand their role in the "business" of making the family work for everyone.

And it will work for everyone—if everyone makes it work for each other.

THE ART OF THE DEAL ■

How do you do that? It's a good idea to start by going all the way back to basics, including a discussion of the following principles:

- ▶ Each member of the family is necessary to the family's well-being and survival.
- ▶ All family members have something to contribute to and gain from a smoothly running system.
- ▶ Parents are chief executive officers of the family. (*Sorry, kids. Your day will come.*)
- ▶ Once a family contract is agreed to, written, and signed, it's family law.

Hammering out a contract may take a couple of sessions around the dining room table before everyone is comfortable with it. Set up a time when the family isn't likely to be disturbed for an hour or so, when everyone can be present. Figure on two or three sessions to complete the contract.

Things will go smoother in the negotiating process if you agree to practice good communication skills. Using "I" statements—starting sentences with the word "I" rather than "you"—puts the responsibility for the communication with the speaker.

Example: "I think we should take rotating turns loading the dishwasher," may invite discussion, but "Jim never helps with the dishes at all" may invite conflict.

You may want to choose someone outside the family—maybe a counselor, friend, or grandparent—to mediate when an issue seems impossible to resolve. Or you may decide to work all issues out within the family.

Whatever you decide, it's useful to work out ground rules that specify how you'll arrive at final decisions.

PACKAGE DEAL ■

Every contract should be a complete package, spelling out each of the following areas: Responsibilities, privileges, and consequences for each person in the family; a statement of agreement to the terms of the contract; signatures, date of signing, and a date on which the contract will be renegotiated.

Consequences should be simple cause and effect, courses of action that go into effect automatically when a person chooses not to behave responsibly.



Now let's take a closer look at the individual parts of the package.

■ **Responsibilities.** This includes three types of tasks that individual family members need to be responsible for in their daily lives:

1. Chores or household tasks. These are usually repetitive, but necessary to maintain order in the home. Examples: running errands, walking the dog, preparing meals, doing yard work.

2. School work or job-related activities. This category should include homework and special projects that may come up for both parents and kids.

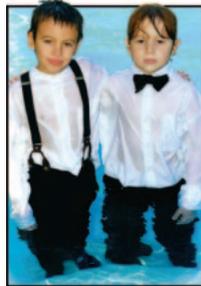
3. Goal-oriented activities. These are tasks that need to be performed to meet personal goals. Examples can include everything from practicing piano to practicing meditation, even perfecting a jump shot in the driveway after school.

It's usually a good idea to include all three types of responsibilities when developing a contract.

Why? Because when we're each aware of other family member's commitments and responsibilities, we're less likely to see our own as a special burden (or Private Hell) and act accordingly.

Interestingly, some items here may also turn up later in the contract as "privileges," where their value can help determine priorities for assigning responsibilities.

When you sit down to negotiate, make a list below the headings "Daily," "Weekly," "Monthly," and "Occasionally" of all the activities that fall under points #1 and #2 above—tasks necessary to maintain order at home and function successfully at work and school.



Wet set. You can dress it up as some great debate about Truth, but if your family life revolves around conflict, you're all wet.

Beside each task, note the person responsible for completing it.

When the list is as complete as you can make it, note who's currently performing each task. Then discuss how this pattern came about and how responsibilities were assigned or assumed to belong to this or that person.

Is someone doing more than his or her share in any category? Who has the most—and the least—available time? How could tasks be assigned more fairly?

After everyone has looked at all the tasks that go into family life, and has a clear idea of how different jobs are getting done, consider which of your existing arrangements are worth keeping in the new contract.

Between the first negotiating session and the next, each family member should spend time with this question: "What do I need to do in each of the three categories to be a responsible member of this family?"

■ **Perks & Privileges.** This area of the contract package, while often the most important to the kids, is sometimes the most threatening to the parents.

Still, keep two things in mind here:

- ▶ Everyone in the family will have privileges as a result of the contract (including mom and dad); and
- ▶ Disputes over privileges usually aren't the real issue in family conflicts.

Example: I may be uneasy about J.J. driving the family car if I feel that I can't trust him. The issue isn't the car; it's trust.

If you find similar issues undermining your contract talks, define what trust is in your family, then decide if the person has earned the trust that goes with certain privileges. If not, go back to responsibilities and note areas that he or she needs to work on to earn that trust.

All kinds of perks and privileges can be addressed at this time, including:

- ▶ **Monetary privileges.** Allowance or money for specific purposes, e.g. college tuition or expenses.
- ▶ **Time sharing.** Mom and Dad may ask for time alone, or time with each of the kids alone.
- ▶ **Activities.** A trip to the movies, dinner out, an overnight at a friend's house.
- ▶ **Other.** Fill in the blanks.

■ **Consequences.** Spell out the specifics of what will happen as a result of promises being broken.

This is important, because it lets family members see consequences as something other than punishment.

For purposes of a family contract, it's usually a good idea for family members to link consequences with tasks assigned and privileges granted.

Example: Threatening to ground my son for the rest of his life may help *me* let off steam, but it's not as helpful to *him* as a contract that spells out what his options are when it comes to cleaning (or not cleaning) his room. If he doesn't keep it clean, then he *chooses* the boom that gets lowered.

Consequences should be simple cause and effect, courses of action that go into effect automatically when a person chooses not to behave responsibly. That's why they need to be clearly connected to both a task and a privilege, and be specific and time limited.

SIGN ON THE LINE ■

When all the wrinkles above have been ironed out through negotiations, it's time to put the contract into writing.

You may want to assign one or two members of the family to the task of dotting all the I's and crossing all the T's.

But when the contract is written, meet again as a group to finalize it and agree on a date when it can be reviewed and reaffirmed or renegotiated.

That way, you'll be able to accommodate any of the possible changes in people, places, and things that can influence family life.

