



## Let's Disseminate Effectively: Review of Dardig and Heward's *Let's Make a Contract: A Positive Way to Change Your Child's Behavior*

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Pity the poor prune, which has a marketing problem (Johnson, 1965). Prunes offer lots of healthy fiber but to a lot of people they just don't seem like something that should be inserted into the mouth (e.g., Deshpande & Peterson, 2020; hk47isme, 2018; Johnson, 1965). According to a large database of word associations, some of the words people most often associate with “prune” include “shriveled,” “ugly,” “nasty,” “disgusting,” and “yuck” (De Deyne et al., 2019).

Also wrestling with a marketing problem is applied behavior analysis (ABA; e.g., Bailey, 1991). Like the prune, ABA has a lot to offer: Behavior analysts tell anyone who will listen that their science is precise, rigorous, and unequivocally effective (coincidentally, the acronym for this is PRUNE). Yet this line of argument is as likely to win converts as extolling the fibrous virtues of prunes (e.g., Detrich, 2018; Foxx, 1996). To a lot of people, ABA just doesn't seem like something that ought to be inserted into their homes and families. Recall, for instance, Catherine Maurice's (1994) first impression of ABA during her search for therapy for a family member: She found the treatment “harsh” (p. 102) and the therapist a veritable “Atilla the Hun” (p. 283).

Now, in contrast to the prune, consider the apple, which also contains fiber. When people see an apple, they do not think, “That is good source of fiber, which will help to regulate my digestion and put me on a reliable schedule of bowel movements.” They think, “I would like to eat that.” An apple that is merely a source of fiber may as well be a prune.

If anyone understands the difference between prunes and apples it is Dardig and Heward (2022), whose *Let's Make a Contract: A Positive Way to Change Your Child's Behavior* checks all of the boxes for transforming the PRUNE technology of behavior contracting into an appealing apple. The

book is a visually attractive resource for parents and children that explains the value and process of behavior contracting via easy-to-follow language, engaging stories, and vibrant artwork. Parents will look at this book and think, “I would like to read that.”

*Let's Make a Contract* is an update of Dardig and Heward's (1976) *Sign Here: A Contracting Book for Children and their Parents*, which was published in the early days of behavior contracting but is now out of print in English. That book served as an early prototype for how to make behavior technology appealing and accessible. There have been other attempts to do this, but none better. Homme's (1970) *How to Use Contingency Contracting in the Classroom*, for instance, used a programmed instruction approach that made contracting easy to learn about if you were motivated enough to wade through its straightforward, but seriously dry, modules. As graduate students we found the book professionally useful, but there is no ignoring its PRUNE credentials that would scare off parents and other everyday people. A different approach was taken by Malott (1971), whose graphic-novel-style *Contingency Management* described contracting using an irreverent tone and psychedelic artwork. This book, certainly no PRUNE, was more like a magic mushroom that appealed to a certain demographic (e.g., 1970s college students) but probably never had much reach into the mainstream community of parents. In contrast to these books, *Let's Make a Contract* knows its audience and is perfectly pitched to it.

### What Makes *Let's Make a Contract* Work

*A behavior contract . . . focuses on changing behavior—yours as well as your child's—in a positive, non-punitive way. The core parts of a behavior contract are a task your child promises to complete and a reward they will receive for completing that task. . . . An effective contract serves as a short-term motivational device*

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to get family members moving toward more positive and cooperative relationships and interactions. (Dardig & Heward, 2022, pp. 16–17)

We are fans of *Let's Make a Contract's* general expository style, content, narrative structure, and level of inclusiveness, each of which receives a brief description below.

## Style

Apples outcompete prunes partly because people perceive them to be pleasant (De Deyne et al., 2019), and where dissemination is concerned pleasantness looms large (e.g., Critchfield et al., 2017). We expect *Let's Make a Contract* to have wide appeal partly for its uniform pleasantness. First and foremost, the language is upbeat—not a small matter when the topic is “contract,” a word that people may viscerally associate with such delightful concepts as “lawyer,” “serious,” “paperwork,” “mafia,” and “killer” (De Deyne et al., 2019). The book avoids unnecessary jargon; focuses on building good relationships as a substitute for the “blame game” of vilifying child misbehavior (e.g., Friman, 2021); and introduces some of the more PRUNE-ish complexities of contracting (in behavior technology, there are always complexities) in common-sense ways.

## Substance

Behavior contracting is one of the greatest hits of behavior technology. It is robustly effective across a wide range of individuals and situations (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2015; Janz et al., 1984). Although contracting involving children has been studied most often at school (e.g., Alwahbi, 2020), it is readily learned and implemented by parents (e.g., Barth, 1979). We will not say much about the nuts and bolts of contracting because we assume these are known to most readers. Suffice it to say that *Let's Make a Contract* hits all of the high points, including:

- **Relationship building:** Contracts bring families together. By laying out clear rules for what happens when, contracts take the stress out of parent–child interactions. Thus, both parent and child benefit.
- **Positivity:** Contracts focus on what a child *should* do, not what *not* to do. Positive reinforcement is the engine that makes contracts work.
- **Practicality:** Contracts address one behavior at a time. Reinforcers are personalized to be motivating but neither too expensive nor too time consuming.
- **Shaping:** Contracts start with easily changed behaviors and, following success, can evolve to take on more difficult issues.

- **Collaboration:** Contracts are created and evolve through family meetings that should be unhurried, inclusive (the child gets to talk!), and constructive, focusing on specific behaviors rather than on personal characteristics (e.g., “laziness,” “disrespect”) that supposedly create behavior issues.
- **Objective progress monitoring:** Simple-to-record data say how well a contract is working and when it has succeeded.

Four features of the book bear particular mention. First, a chapter is devoted to the special challenges of devising contracts for very young children or children with disabilities who don't read. In our experience, parents often doubt that contracts can be effective with such individuals. Second, earlier we mentioned contending with complexities. A section on troubleshooting and a chapter on “If Your Child Won't Try Contracting” address most of the pitfalls we have encountered when introducing families to contracting, and do so without making the whole enterprise sound daunting. Third, the book provides guidelines for how to write contracts as well as contract templates that may be adaptable, with little modification, to many families' needs. There is also a handy checklist for verifying that a new contract has all of its required features prior to implementing. Finally, a “more information” section, incorporating a glossary of terms and resources for further reading, provides enough information to be helpful without being overwhelming.

## Narrative

Part 1 of *Let's Make a Contract* presents a series of short stories (each a few pages long) in which parents and children create and implement contracts. These cover a pretty big range of scenarios, including initial creation of a contract, loopholes in contract wording, self-contracting, contracts between two children, contracts focusing on parent behavior, and contracts promoting child behaviors (like social skills) that produce natural reinforcers. The stories serve at least three specific purposes: (1) They show a wide range of situations to which contracting applies (including, presumably, situations that readers will recognize as similar to their own); (2) they offer a kind of vicarious reinforcer sampling by illustrating the positive outcomes contracts can create; and (3) they provide concrete examples of contracts (one reproduced in each story) that virtually any typically developing adult can follow. In general, the function of these stories is to harness motivating operations (e.g., see Critchfield, 2018; Himeline, 2018): Before entangling the reader in too much of the *how* of contracts, they make abundantly clear the *why*.

Part 2 of *Let's Make a Contract* addresses nuts and bolts of contract implementation. In talking to everyday people about behavior technology, the test is to explain simply without being boring, losing precision (the technology only

works when it's done right), and sounding patronizing. *Let's Make a Contract* passes this test with flying colors. What we like best about Part 2, however, is how it frequently refers back to the stories of Part 1. This seamless integration hammers home that the nuts and bolts of contracting are not an afterthought or a bothersome detail; they are a main character in the human stories of Part 1.

**Inclusiveness**

In recent years much has been written about the importance of adapting ABA to the needs of a broader range of people than have been served historically (e.g., Beaulieu et al., 2019; Fong et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2020; Kauffman et al., 2008; Wright, 2019). With this concern in mind, here's what may

be the most exciting thing about *Let's Make a Contract*: its potential audience extends far beyond the English-speaking world. When the predecessor volume, *Sign Here*, slipped out of print in English, Dardig and Heward granted publishing rights to governmental and nonprofit agencies outside of the United States whose goal was to educate rather than to turn a profit (W. Heward, personal communication, January 26, 2022). This practice was employed proactively with *Let's Make a Contract*. The resulting non-English editions (e.g., Fig. 1) are typically available at little consumer cost. Table 1 lists the current non-English editions of *Let's Make a Contract* and, for the convenience of individuals speaking five other languages, editions of *Sign Here* for which no parallel version of *Let's Make a Contract* is currently available. In granting publication rights, Dardig and Heward allowed



Fig. 1 Top: English, Azerbaijani, and Italian editions of *Let's Make a Contract*. Bottom: Examples of culturally-adapted artwork from the predecessor volume, *Sign Here*. See text for additional explanation. Reprinted by permission of Dardig and Heward

**Table 1** Available and Forthcoming Translations

Language	Date	Publisher
<i>Let's Make a Contract</i>		
Azerbaijani	2022	Together and Healthy Public Union (Baku) <a href="https://birgesaglam.az/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Gelin-Anlasag.pdf">https://birgesaglam.az/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Gelin-Anlasag.pdf</a>
French	in press	ABA Online (Nice)
Italian	in development	Edizioni Anicia (Rome)
Korean	in development	ABA Korea (Seoul)
Norwegian	in press	Tell Forlag (Oslo)
Polish	in development	Fundacja Scholaris (Warsaw)
Portuguese	2022	Editor GMetodo (Sao Paulo)
Romanian	in press	Autism Voice (Bucharest)
Spanish	2022	ABA Espana (Madrid)
Turkish	in development	Tohum Autism Foundation (Istanbul)
<i>Sign Here</i>		
Chinese (Mandarin)	2021	Sun Yat-sen University Press ( <a href="http://www.zsup.com.cn">http://www.zsup.com.cn</a> )
Czech	2018	Masaryk University Press ( <a href="https://www.muni.cz/pro-media/tiskove-zpravy/pedagogove-vydali-knihu-o-smlouvani-mezi-rodici-a-detmi">https://www.muni.cz/pro-media/tiskove-zpravy/pedagogove-vydali-knihu-o-smlouvani-mezi-rodici-a-detmi</a> )
Filipino	2022	2022, ABA Training Solutions ( <a href="https://abatsph.com/">https://abatsph.com/</a> )
Japanese	in press	Akashi-Shoten Publishing (Tokyo)
Russian	2016	Practica Publishing ( <a href="http://www.practica.ru/catalogue/davai-dogovorimsia_272/">http://www.practica.ru/catalogue/davai-dogovorimsia_272/</a> )

text and artwork to be modified to reflect local norms. At press time we did not have access to translated editions of *Let's Make a Contract*, but two cases from *Sign Here* illustrate our point: the manga-style visual ethic of the Japanese edition (Fig. 1, bottom left panel) and the two very different depictions of collaborative contracting in the Romanian and Chinese editions (bottom center and right panels). Such cultural tailoring matters because people are most likely to adopt innovations that mesh comfortably with the existing milieu (Rogers, 2003). It helps, therefore, when readers see individuals who look like them benefitting from behavior technology in situations they find familiar.

## Conclusion: The Apple of Our Eye

*Let's Make a Contract* resurrects the classic content of *Sign Here* while offering an expanded account—for instance, the chapters on nonreaders and children who don't want to make contracts are mostly new material. This is wrapped in a more visually inviting package, with the original's somewhat cluttered black-and-white presentation replaced by color illustrations, a calming font, and lots of comforting white space. In our experience, these are not trivial features when the goal is to recruit buy-in from harried parents. At the time of this writing, the English edition of *Let's Make a Contract* was priced online at around US\$20, which makes it affordable to

many. That is more than enough praise for one volume, but in addition we value this book as an example of how to communicate constructively with everyday people about behavior technology. Honestly, it would be good for ABA if there were an entire series of inexpensive guides on various topics in behavior technology, written for interested consumers using the deft touch of this one. Overall, if we had to "prune" our own libraries down to just a few resources for guiding parents, *Let's Make a Contract* would be among them, and we recommend it to anyone whose work includes advising parents about the family struggles that surround child behavior issues.

## Rating

5 stars out of 5, for solid content, presented clearly and engagingly, with added cultural sensitivity in the translated editions.

## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** No research data are presented so this work was not subject to ethics board review or oversight.

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interest, financial or otherwise, related to this article.



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