

***Negotiation Strategies to Support Misbehaving Children:
The “Deal” Strategy***

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Abstract

Purpose: To negotiate behavioural changes with children, while developing an attitude of personal accountability for progressing the kindergarten program.

Method: The child is asked about their favourite fruit, the name of which is then used as a code for a deal on a behavioural change. The child becomes excited to share what their favourite fruit is, e.g. banana. When this child misbehaves, a negotiation process commences that entails asking them to demonstrate an improved behaviour. The agreement will then be known as the “Deal Banana”. Henceforth, calling out “Deal Banana” prompts the child to modify the behaviour specified in the “Deal Banana” agreement. Each deal is linked to a specific behavioural change by a specific child, e.g. “Deal watermelon” equals “child X not to throw rocks at others”.

Results: Children were excited about the strategy and started negotiating their own deals with peers. Furthermore, they held each other accountable for their actions and behaviours, by reminding each other of the deals they negotiated.

Conclusion: This “deal” strategy proved to be successful in managing children’s behaviours, while involving them in a negotiating process. Children felt they were given the choice to decide, and they indeed would decide to honour their deal and adhere to the negotiated behavioural plan. Furthermore, the strategy fostered a sense of collaboration and teamwork among the children, as they became more autonomous in collectively honouring the deals they negotiated, thus facilitating their daily routine and curricular activities.

Keywords: Negotiation strategy; misbehaviour; deal; behaviour modification; collaboration; teamwork; accountability; daily routine

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Purpose

The purpose of this strategy was to support and develop children’s behaviour and negotiation skills. The main purpose is to reinforce the child’s right of choice, and to negotiate a behavioural action plan, while fostering a sense of ownership by the child. Another purpose of the strategy was to encourage children to progress the daily routine of the centre and to follow the educational program planned for them, through developing an attitude of doing the right thing while feeling this is their own choice.

Method

The strategy begins by asking the child to divulge what his favourite fruit is, and to use this fruit name as a code for a deal to do the right thing. The child becomes excited to share what his favourite fruit is, e.g. banana, and thus a deal with this particular child for a specific behaviour becomes known as the “Deal Banana”. When this child misbehaves, s/he is called and a negotiation process commences, that entails asking them to right the wrong they have done or demonstrate an improved behaviour. The agreement will be sealed by our “Deal Banana”, which he chose. Just like at an auction when the auctioneer calls out “sold” to conclude the sale, we call out “Deal Banana” to seal our agreement for certain behavioural changes. Henceforth, the “Deal Banana” becomes a prompt to remind the child to modify the behaviour specified in the “Deal Banana” agreement.

Similar “deals” were negotiated with other children. Two more children were engaged in similar deals, and this led to engaging a larger group of 20 children. Each child picked their favourite fruit to be the code used for negotiating a deal of behavioural modification. The deal is linked to a specific behavioural change, e.g. not throwing rocks at other children, for a specific child. Other examples of behavioural changes included: not deliberately breaking another child’s work, using words such as “please”/“thank you”, and not hitting other children.

Child	Deal Name	Behavioural Change
K	Kiwifruit	No throwing rocks
J	Apple	No hurting
H	Strawberries	No kicking
F	Orange	No crying but using words instead
A	Pear	No hurting
A	Alsa	No shouting
A	Plants	No hurting of plants
E	Strawberries	No snatching of anything
A	Pineapple	No running in indoor area
B	Grapes	No throwing cardboard
D	Coconut	No hitting peers with toys
M	Raspberries	No breaking of peers’ work
L	Peach	No breaking of peers’ work
J	JM	No throwing sand on anyone’s hair
P	Nectarine	No spitting
A	Mandarin	Listen to mum, dad and teachers

Results

This strategy was extremely successful, beyond what I anticipated. It was observed that children had a sharp memory of each of their peer's "Deals". Many (how many?) children were very excited about the strategy and started negotiating their own deals with peers. Thus, the strategy went beyond the educator's reach, and negotiations were observed everywhere among the children themselves. Furthermore, it was observed that children held each other accountable for their actions and behaviours by reminding them of the deal they negotiated. The first deal was negotiated by the author in April 2015, and by the end of 2016, deals were still being negotiated among children and behaviours modified accordingly.

An example of a successful deal involved a child who never wanted to eat at the childcare centre. This was serious, and went on for a couple of years since he commenced attending the centre. A negotiation process commenced with him where the author finally reached with the child "Deal nectarine", which translated into "listening to parents & teachers when it is meal time". Because the "deal" was his choice, he held himself accountable and started to eat at the centre slowly, until his eating habits became commendable, and comparable to other children at the centre. The deal made him proud of himself, and believed that the other party to the deal, i.e. the author, was one of his best friends, probably attributable to the experience of having some power in deciding on a deal and for friendly negotiations.

Another example involved a new kinder child who was always unsettled when his parents dropped her off in the morning. Using this strategy with her led to negotiating "Deal Apple", which meant "No crying in the morning and to have a happy face". The strategy worked well; when "Deal Apple" was called to her, she would smile and say her good byes to her mum in the morning. The parents confirmed the success of the strategy and emailed to thank the author.

Discussion

This "deal" strategy proved to be a practical and successful method to manage children's behaviours, while involving them in a negotiating process they feel is their own. Calling upon the "deal" and reminding the child of it was effective, as the child felt they were given the choice to make a decision, and they indeed would decide to honour their deal and adhere to the behavioural plan negotiated.

A pedagogical aspect of this strategy involved children negotiating deals with each other, and becoming aware of the deals negotiated by their peers. This leads children to encourage each other, in a friendly and often funny manner, to honour their deals and to follow the rules and the educational program. This instils in them a sense of ownership of the curriculum, as they contribute their ideas and make decisions, involving deals that negotiate behavioural changes and effective implementation of curricular activities.

The "Deal" strategy seems to boost children's self-esteem and build their friendship with others, by sharing stories about their deals and their favourite fruits. Moreover, the strategy fosters a sense of collaboration and teamwork among the children, as they become more autonomous in collectively honouring the deals they negotiate, thus

facilitating the daily routine and learning experiences planned for them. As the strategy advances, children end up proposing their own behavioural plans, so they can strike the relevant deals and make them part of their daily experience.

This strategy could be a modified example of Pavlov's classical conditioning. The link becomes strong between the "deal" code, e.g. "Deal Apple" and the specific behaviour agreed on, e.g. "not crying when mummy leaves". However, the learning process here involves some cognitive component and social negotiation where the child is given some power and the ability to choose. First, they choose their code, then choose to enter the behavioural modification agreement, and then decide to honour that agreement when prompted by the deal call out. The process involves an elaborate set up, where several points of exit are available to the child to end the agreement. Yet, it has been observed that most children decide to honour the "deal" and continue to demonstrate the modified behaviour agreed on. They quickly develop a sense of ownership of the decision, and become accountable for the deal they formed.

The social context in which "deals" are formed may have contributed to the success of the strategy. This is because children start to become aware of each other's deals, share stories about how they negotiated their behavioural changes, and their favourite fruits. They then start encouraging each other to adhere to their behavioural changes, mostly in a funny manner. They seem to have fun holding each other accountable by calling out the deals they formed.

The Deal Strategy seems to acquire inherent strength by the mere empowerment that is granted to children. They develop that sense of ownership making them the focus of the strategy and indeed the entire process. A previous study by Boules (2016) demonstrated that discussing the historical background of a child's name, in the presence of their peers during group time at kindergarten, improved self-esteem and contributed to more social interactions among children. Similarly, the focus of the Deal Strategy is the individual child, and again the same trend was apparent. Social interactions were generated, and each child developed a strong sense of self-esteem and their ability to drive their own behaviours in an interesting and amusing way. Children's participation became embedded in the process rather than be presented as a one-off opportunity (Sinclair, 2004). Behaviour modifications were negotiated and deals reached once, but children had ongoing control over implementing them.

On the other hand, engaging each child in planning their own behaviour modification plan aligns with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In each Deal that was formed, the child had an effective and meaningful role in making the decision. Moreover, because of the multiple exit points available to the child, they had continued choice to quit the deal and not to honour it. This is an essential aspect of voluntary participation (Lansdown, 2001), which respects the child's right of participation throughout the entire process. However, having been given the responsibility of honouring a deal children themselves established and progressed, this study shows that they were more likely to honour their deals and to follow through with their behaviour modification plan.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), which gave rise to the current Australian Curriculum stipulated that children should be educated to become active participants in society, being

confident learners and responsible citizens. Even though this Declaration aims mainly at school children, pre-schoolers can develop deep-rooted principles that support the stated goals of the Declaration. Their ability to negotiate outcomes, be accountable for their behaviours and forming collective responsibility for holding each other accountable is a significant step in becoming the citizens described by that Declaration.

In summary, the Deal Strategy described in the current study is an effective method of engaging children to modify their behaviour. It fosters a sense of ownership in the decision-making process, and promotes accountability in children. The social aspect seems to be an integral component of the success of the strategy, as children learn to collectively be accountable for the behavioural plans that have been devised for them as a group, and encourage the individual to assume responsibility in fulfilling their part of the deal. Children learn to negotiate and to reach mutual understanding with their educators and with other children. This further enhances their social skills and dispute resolution abilities that facilitate their participation in many other aspects of their learning and development.

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