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# Behavior Contracting with Dependent Runaway Youth

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Behavior Contracting with Dependent Runaway Youth

by

Jessica Colon

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Applied Behavior Analysis  
College of Graduate School  
University of South Florida

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Keywords: contingency management, foster care, missing, delinquent

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## Dedication

This thesis would be incomplete without mention of the many people who supported me through this process. For my classmates who helped me laugh at the things I cannot change, my professors for the education and inspiration they have instilled in me, and my practicum supervisor, to whom I owe my eternal gratitude to for the guidance and wisdom I would not have accomplished on my own. I will be indebted forever to the University of South Florida Behavior Analysis Program, for giving me a career I believe in and will strive to succeed in.

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Behavior Contracting with Dependent Youth  
Jessica Colon

ABSTRACT

The number of dependent youth reported as runaways to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement has become an increasing concern to the Department of Children and Families (Child Welfare League of America, 2005). Youth under state supervision, who are reported as runaways, most often leave from foster care settings, although some youth are also reported as runaways from the homes of relatives, non-relatives, and biological parents (CWLA, 2005). Community based care (CBC) agencies responsible for the supervision of dependent children in the State of Florida have struggled to develop an effective means of addressing the problem of running away and have subsequently been unable to decrease the number of dependent youth reported as runaways each year (CWLA, 2005). The current study evaluated a behavioral approach through a multiple baseline design to address the runaway behavior of dependent youth. Behavior contracts were used with three runaway youth placed in foster care which showed an initial increase in the number of days spent in an approved placement for all three participants. While the increase in the number of days spent in an approved placement did not maintain for one participant, a decrease in runaway behavior was demonstrated and maintained for the other two participants.



## Introduction

A child is considered missing from care if he or she is not in the physical custody of the child welfare agency or the person/institution with which the agency placed the child (CWLA, 2005). Youth under state supervision, who are reported as runaways, most often leave from foster care settings, although some youth are also reported as runaways from the homes of relatives, non-relatives, and biological parents (Clark et al., in press). According to the U.S. Newswire (2007) published on February 2, 2007, calls to the National Runaway Hotline increased 17 percent in 2006; between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth are reported as runaways each year. The National Runaway Hotline logged 113,916 calls in 2006.

Youth who runaway are at an increased risk of problems ranging from drug and alcohol abuse, emotional and conduct disorders, school failure, criminal behavior and victimization (Rotheram-Borus, 1993; Yoder, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 1998). These youth can become a threat not only to themselves, but to society as well. Some factors that have been found to increase the probability a youth will runaway are: female, abused, abandoned, neglected, poor school performance, experienced painful family conflict, and involvement with the criminal justice system or in a gang (Clark et al., in press; CWLA, 2005; Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2002; Thompson & Pollio, 2006). For youth in out of home care, these factors are very common, placing children in out of home care at greater risk for running away. For many youth, running away can be a way of coping with unhealthy families and has been repeatedly used as a problem solving behavior (Libertoff, 1980).

There has been a tendency to view running away as a delinquent act or mental health disorder despite the fact there is little agreement as to the cause of runaway behavior and its social significance (Libertoff, 1980). In considering the motivations for engaging in runaway behavior, youth that run away once may need to be treated different than youth who are repeat runners and therefore services to each group should be different. First time runners often engage in runaway behavior in the mist of a crisis and use running away as a solution (CWLA, 2005). Services to these youth are often less intensive than repeat runners and the behavior can be addressed with early intervention strategies (CWLA, 2005). However, youth can become chronic runaways when the behavior is not properly addressed immediately. They engage in the runaway behavior during a crisis and the behavior has most likely been reinforced by access to preferred items or activities, or escape from demands or aversive conditions (i.e. negative and coercive caregivers). Without proper intervention the youth may continue to engage in runaway behavior and the behavior may become harder to extinguish. This chronic behavior is what draws the attention of State agencies. In 1934 the social welfare field first examined the problem of runaway behavior in dependent youth and determined it to be an important concern needing action (Libertoff, 1980). More than seventy years later it continues to be a concern and researchers have failed to identify an appropriate intervention to address the behavior. Individuals who work with children in care must, “proactively work to prevent missing-from-care episodes, rather than merely reacting once a child is gone missing” (CWLA, 2005, p. 9).

In 1980, Olson, Liebow, Mannino, and Shore conducted a longitudinal study of runaway youth compared to their non-runaway siblings and their progress 12 years later.

Out of 14 runaway cases, 7 ran away more than once and 7 were first time runners; 8 of the 14 dropped out of high school, none went beyond high school. Runaways were reported to repeatedly disrupt class, have regular confrontations with school personnel, and were often suspended and/or expelled. Due to their consistent absence from school, it was hypothesized children who runaway may have viewed classrooms and teachers as aversive resulting in the desire to escape or avoid the school setting. Factors that may be related include a failure of being properly integrated into the school and a lack of social skills. Of the youth studied only six were regularly employed, nine attempted marriage and only four were still married at the time of follow up. It was found the personal relationships of youth were strained due to consistent conflict and arguments and 13 were arrested at some time. These outcomes might be expected to be magnified when considering children in foster care and other out of home placements due to the additional trauma in their lives.

Contingency contracting is a widespread intervention used within a variety of disciplines to address problematic behavior. Contingency contracting has been shown to increase desired behavior as well as to decrease undesired problem behavior. The term “contingency contract” first began with the work of L.P. Homme (1966), who used written contracts with adolescent students who were potential dropouts to spell out the reinforcers that followed completion of academic tasks. Since Homme’s use of such plans, many disciplines have been able to apply similar techniques to successfully increase positive behavior and to decrease negative behavior. Within the field of behavior analysis, behavior contracts have been used to address behaviors such as student studying behavior (Bristol & Sloane, 1974; Cantrell, Cantrell, Huddelston, & Wooldrige,

1969; Kelley & Stokes, 1982; Miller & Kelley, 1994; Welch & Holborn, 1988), weight control (Mann, 1972; Wysokci, Hall, Iwata, & Riordan, 1979), child aggressive behaviors (Wahler & Fox, 1980), and sports performance (Mellalieu, Hanton, & O'Brien, 2006). These contracts have been proven to work with a multitude of behaviors as well as different populations such as individuals with intellectual disabilities, typically functioning children and adults, and individuals with autism (Bristol & Sloane, 1974; Cantrell et al., 1969; Kelley & Stokes, 1982; Mann, 1972; Mellalieu et al., 2006; Miller & Kelley, 1994; Wahler & Fox, 1980; Welch & Holborn, 1988; Wysokci et al., 1979).

While it has been shown that behavior contracting can have a positive effect on behavior and has the ability to change behavior there are still many limitations to the current research literature. In addition to the limitations the authors of this research have cited, such as the use of few subjects, a lack of experimental control, and difficulty of targeting unobservable behavior, none of the articles reviewed utilized a reinforcer that was the same reinforcer which served as the function for the behavior. One study reviewed did conduct functional assessments as part of the study but did not use a functionally equivalent reinforcer. Only one of the articles reviewed on behavior contracting evaluated the function of the behavior being targeted (Mruzek, Cohen, & Smith, 2007). Even though the author's determined the function of the behavior they did not use that function when considering the creation of the contract.

Within the field of behavior analysis, there is a fair amount of research which has employed a functional approach toward elopement of children and adults with developmental disabilities, autism, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Grow, & Northrup, 2004; Piazza, Hanley, Bowman, Ruyter, Lindauer, & Saiontz, 1997; Tarbox,

Wallace, & Williams, 2003). In the studies reviewed, researchers were able to conduct a functional analysis with the participants to determine the function of their elopement behavior. Once the function of the behavior was determined it was used as the reinforcer for the absence of elopement, resulting in a decrease in elopement behavior. Much of this research supports the approach of function based treatment. One limitation of this research is the population targeted in these studies engaged in elopement, which was defined as leaving the immediate area for a short period of time, not children who runaway for extended periods of time. Also, the participants were all diagnosed with developmental delays.

Clark et al. (in press) evaluated the runaway behavior of 13 youth and used a variety of intervention strategies in an attempt to decrease runaway behavior and increase placement stability. They found that behavioral interventions which specifically targeted individual youth motivation for running away decreased the percent of time the youth spent on the run and increased the stability of the youth's placement. In addition they concluded, "There continues to be a critical need and rich opportunity for future research to provide a stronger examination of the functional relationship between assessment/intervention and runaway behavior" (Clark et al., in press, p. 24).

There is a need within the child welfare field to develop a procedure which can be widely used by community based care agencies to decrease the number of runaway episodes each year. "The child welfare field needs consistent, quality practices to prevent, respond to, and resolve missing-from-care episodes" (CWLA, 2005, p.x). In addition, there is a need within the field of behavior analysis to evaluate the outcomes of a functional approach to behavior contracting. Therefore, the current study combines

current research on elopement, which employs a functional approach to treatment, with research on behavior contracts, which typically does not utilize a functional approach, to develop an intervention for runaway youth. This study employs a functional approach to behavior contracting with a population and a problem behavior (e.g. running away) for which there is limited research on effective intervention strategies.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants consisted of three teenagers, one male and two females, between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, who were classified as habitual runners, and who had engaged in at least three runaway episodes in the past six months. All three participants were legally in the custody of the State of Florida and were placed in foster care.

Fictitious names were utilized to protect the confidentiality of each subject.

Nineteen potential participants were considered for the current study, three of which met the inclusion criteria. Of the sixteen potential participants considered and denied for inclusion in the current study: six participants had not engaged in at least three runaway episodes in the past six months, three had not engaged in runaway behavior in the past 45 days, two were not in the required age range (one was 13 years old and one was 17 years old), three did not have a biological parent who could be contacted to obtain consent for participation, one was denied due to being on the run since December 2007, and one was placed in a non-relative placement shortly after the start of the study.

Rachelle was a fourteen year, three month old, Caucasian female, who had been in foster care for six and a half months. Rachelle entered foster care after a non-relative placement breakdown. Rachelle had not attended school on a consistent basis since

entering foster care. She had no history with the Department of Juvenile Justice. Rachelle was previously diagnosed consistently in all evaluations with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and had been inconsistently diagnosed with Adjustment Disorder with Anxiety and Depressed Mood and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Rachelle had previously been prescribed Lexapro and Trazadone, but had not taken these medications since 4/3/08 and was not taking any medications during the research study. She first began engaging in runaway behavior in March 2008 and had been in eleven placements since coming into foster care, five of which she was discharged from due to her runaway behavior.

Andy was a fourteen year, eleven month old, Caucasian male, who had been in foster care for thirty-six months. Andy entered foster care after being removed from his father due to alcohol exposure and homelessness. He had one previous battery charge with the Department of Juvenile Justice after he hit another foster child in July 2007 and was placed on juvenile court ordered supervision in August 2007 and remained on juvenile court order supervision throughout the duration of the study. Andy had been previously diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Adjustment Disorders with Mixed Disturbance of Emotions and Conduct in 2005. He was not taking medication during the duration of the research study. Andy engaged in his first runaway episode in December 2006 and he had been in thirteen placements since entering foster care, three of which he was discharged from due to his runaway behavior.

Hannah was a sixteen year, six month old, Caucasian female, who had been in foster care for three months. Hannah entered foster care after being removed from her home due to her mother's use and abuse of prescription drugs and marijuana. She had

one prior charge with the Department of Juvenile Justice for trespassing, which she incurred while on the run when she was on school grounds in the middle of the night. As a result, she was placed on juvenile court ordered supervision and remained on juvenile court order supervision throughout the duration of the study. Hannah had no previous mental health diagnosis and was not prescribed medication. Hannah engaged in her first runaway episode in April 2008 and had been in two placements, neither of which she was discharged from due to running away.

### *Setting*

Behavior contracts were developed in a private room at the youth's current placement. All three participants resided in separate, state licensed group homes for children in foster care. Rachelle resided in three different group homes throughout the course of the study. The first placement was an all female group home in an urban area which housed thirteen girls ages thirteen to seventeen who were in foster care. The second placement was an all female group home located in a suburban community which housed seven girls ages fourteen to seventeen who were in foster care. The third placement which Rachelle was placed in during the last week of the study was located in a rural area which housed eleven girls ages thirteen to seventeen who were in foster care. Andy resided in an all male group home in a suburban community. The group home was a campus setting which consisted of a number of housing units and housed sixty eight male residents ages four to eighteen. The group home consisted of both foster youth and youth from the community not under state supervision. Hannah resided in an all female group home in an urban city which housed fifty females ages thirteen to eighteen and the group home consisted of both foster youth and youth from the community not under state



supervision. All three of the group homes within which the participants resided operated based on a point system. All youth residing in these homes, including the participants in this research study, were able to earn and/or lose points which subsequently would increase/decrease their “level”. Youth were given different privileges depending which “level” they were on (i.e. when on level 1 youth were allowed to accompany staff on errands, but were not allowed to go on group outings, once they received enough points to achieve level 2 they were able to go on group outings).

### *Baseline*

During the baseline condition business was conducted as usual. When youth ran away and returned they received negative attention from the staff members in the form of verbal reprimands and they experienced a decrease in their “level” within the current point system the placements utilized. Per their placement policies, both Rachelle and Hannah were required to sleep in a living room area the night they returned from runaway so they were visible to staff.

### *Functional Assessment*

A review of the youth’s placement and runaway history, the youth’s dependency legal and child file, and interviews with the child, case manager, and caregiver were conducted for all participants, with the exception of Rachelle, who did not have an identified caregiver at the time of assessment, therefore an interview was conducted with her biological father. See Appendix A for a list of documents reviewed for each participant for the purposes of the functional assessment. The principal investigator conducted all interviews. The interviews focused on the perceived cause of the youth’s runaway behavior, possible triggers for runaway behavior, possible consequences and

rewards of the youth's runaway behavior, and what activities the youth engaged in while on the run. Due to the nature of runaway behavior, direct observations could not be conducted when determining the function of the behavior. Therefore, existing incident reports and Missing Child De-briefing Forms were used to derive possible antecedents and consequences for each runaway episode. Incident Reports were forms completed by the case manager for each runaway incident which outlined when the child ran and any documented incident preceding the run. A Missing Child De-briefing Form was a written interview conducted by the case manager with the child, which asked similar questions as those in the interviews conducted by the principal investigator (i.e. why did you leave, did you tell anyone you were leaving, where did you go, where did you stay, why did you return). Information from the incident reports and de-briefing forms were recorded by the principal investigator on a separate antecedent, behavior, consequence (ABC) form for each runaway episode for each participant. A hypothesized function of the youth's runaway behavior was drawn from the review of the youth records and the interviews conducted.

### *Functional Contracting*

A functional assessment as described above was conducted and a hypothesized function of the youth's runaway behavior was established prior to the initial face to face contact with the participant. An interview with the youth was completed during the first face to face visit and the initial contract was developed. Once the youth met the contract for the predetermined number of days (as described in the data collection section) the youth received a reinforcer which matched the hypothesized function for the runaway behavior. For example, if it was determined the youth ran away to access a friend, once

the youth had met the predetermined number of days on the contract, by remaining in their placement, the youth was allowed to visit with a friend for a predetermined amount of time. The amount of face to face time spent with each participant was a minimum of two days per contract week. All participants had daily telephone contact with the principal investigator during which verbal praise and feedback were provided to the participant for remaining in their placement. When a participant engaged in runaway behavior the contract was renegotiated within twenty four hours of their return or the notification of their return. Once a participant met a contract a new contract was negotiated between the participant and the principal investigator.

#### *Dependent Variable*

Youth's runaway behavior was assessed via the youths placement history cross referenced with the completed computer entry for each episode into the Missing Child Tracking System. The Missing Child Tracking System is a statewide computer system through which the local community based care agency and law enforcement input all runaway episodes. As a secondary measure, the number of runaway episodes during baseline and treatment were recorded from the same data systems for all three participants. The duration of runaway episodes was evaluated for one of the participants.

#### *Materials*

Materials included a behavior contract and a variety of reinforcers that were used to match the function of the youth's runaway behavior. The same behavior contract format was used with all participants; however the reward for the contract differed for each participant. Each participant was required to remain in their placement for the night and through the next day until the contract could be assessed. While at their placement

they were required to follow the home rules. The only difference in the contract requirements was the number of days they were required to remain in their placement with no runaway episodes before receiving the reinforcer. The number of days required to meet the contract before receiving the reinforcer was calculated in the same format for all participants.

#### *Data Collection*

The average number of days in an approved foster care placement between runaway episodes was determined by adding the number of days in an approved foster care placement between runaway episodes during the baseline period divided by the number of runaway episodes. Once the average number of days spent in an approved foster care placement was determined two days were subtracted and the resulting number was used as the number of days required for the youth to meet the contract before receiving the reinforcer. A maximum number of days to meet a contract was set at seven days.

Baseline was initiated on the same date for all participants. Baseline data for runaway episodes for each participant was calculated forty-five days prior to intervention for the first participant. Consistent with a multiple baseline design, the baseline period for the other two participants was staggered. The youth's runaway record was pulled and printed from the child's placement history and cross referenced with the completed entry into the Missing Child Tracking System. Both systems may not match due to human data entry errors and error in reporting on the accurate missing date and time on behalf of the placement. Once a Missing Child episode is entered into the Missing Child Tracking System it cannot be edited, therefore, data entry errors which are discovered after the

submission into the Missing Child Tracking System cannot be corrected. Thus, an agreement between both systems, the Missing Child Tracking System and the child's placement history, were needed for a day to be scored as a verified run episode. If only one system recorded a runaway episode on that day it was not counted as a verified run and the youth was not considered to be on runaway that day. The data was calculated into percentage of safe days per week for each participant. Percentage of safe days was calculated by dividing the number of days spent in an approved, licensed placement each week by seven days and was then multiplied by 100.

### *Experimental Design*

Data was evaluated in a concurrent multiple baseline across participants design. This procedural design was chosen for runaway behavior because it allowed for experimental control to be observed without removing the treatment condition. It would have been unethical to return to baseline following any treatment which had a reductive effect on running. Prior to the initiation of the intervention parental consent and participant assent was obtained as per approved USF IRB #106228. For all participants the functional behavior contracting condition was implemented following baseline and was staggered as necessary for a multiple baseline format. All functional reinforcers were delivered by the principal investigator.

### *Interobserver Reliability*

A functional assessment was completed by the principal investigator and one trained Master's Level Behavior Analysis student to determine the function for all participants. 100% agreement was reached between the principal investigator and the reliability observer on the main function of the runaway behavior for all participants.

Two trained Master's Level Behavior Analysts conducted reliability for 100% of each participant's percentage of safe day's data during baseline and intervention by marking each calendar day as either an occurrence or non-occurrence of the child being on the run. An occurrence was scored if both systems, the child's placement history and the Missing Child Tracking System, had recorded a runaway on that calendar day. Interobserver reliability was calculated by dividing the number of agreements of an occurrence of a runaway episode by the total number of scored, verified days on the run and then multiplying the number by 100. The mean interobserver agreement across baseline and intervention was 100% for an occurrence of a runaway episode.

One trained Master's Level Behavior Analysis student and one Board Certified Behavior Analyst reviewed 100% of all physical contracts developed to ensure treatment fidelity in that all contracts were presented in the exact same format and the weekly reward matched the function of the runaway behavior. The use of a sample behavior contract was utilized, which outlined the necessary physical items for the behavior contract, in determining fidelity for the physical format of the contract. See Appendix B for the sample contract utilized and see Appendix C for the fidelity checklist on the physical format of the behavior contracts utilized by the research assistants. Fidelity was calculated by dividing the number of elements present in the contract by the number of possible elements multiplied by 100. Fidelity on the format of the behavior contracts was determined to be 100%. Additionally, one trained Master's Level Behavior Analysis student and one Board Certified Behavior Analyst reviewed 100% of the contracts developed with the participants to ensure treatment fidelity in that all items were completed on every contract and the reward for meeting the contract matched the

hypothesized function for that participant. See Appendix D for the fidelity checklist on the contents of the behavior contracts utilized by the research assistants. Fidelity was calculated by dividing the number of completed items in the contract by the number of possible items multiplied by 100. Fidelity on the contents of the behavior contracts was determined to be 100%. Agreement that the contract reward matched the hypothesized function for the youths runaway behavior was considered to be met when the research assistant and principal investigator scored the functions as matching. 100% agreement was reached that the reward for every contract matched the hypothesized function for the youths runaway behavior.

### *Social Validity*

All participants, their case managers, and their caregiver were offered the opportunity to complete a survey reflecting on their experiences while engaged in the research study. The survey consisted of eight Likert Scale questions for the participants and seven Likert Scale questions for the caregivers and case managers. Each survey had two narrative questions to gather additional information. For the participants, the first narrative question sought to determine if the participant was able to correctly identify the functional reward for their contract. The second narrative question sought to determine how the participant thought behavior contracting assisted them in not running away. For the caregivers and case managers, the first narrative question sought to identify any additional changes in behavior observed while the youth was a participant in the study. The second narrative question sought to determine how the caregiver/case manager thought behavior contracting assisted the youth in not running away. The survey's were given to each participant, the caregivers and case managers and they were allowed three

business days to complete the survey and return it to the principal investigator. Upon receipt of the survey the principal investigator thanked them for their input and did not read the responses until all surveys were received.

## Results

Table 1 lists how the hypothesized function was utilized to determine a functional reinforcer and how, in turn, the functional reinforcer was used in developing the contract for each participant. Figure 1 displays the duration of each runaway episode during baseline and intervention for participant one, Rachelle. Figure 2 displays the number of runaway episodes during baseline and intervention for each participant. The data is reported in a percentage of safe days per week for each participant. Figure 3 displays baseline and intervention data for each participant in a multiple baseline design. Table 2 outlines the results of the social validity survey completed by each participant. Table 3 outlines the results of the social validity survey completed by each caregiver. Table 4 outlines the results of the social validity survey completed by each case manager.

Table 1

<i>Hypothesized Function and Contract Reward</i>			
Participant	Function of Runaway Behavior	Days Required to Meet Contract	Contract Reward
Rachelle	Escape / attention	5	Outings off campus with a chosen peer/trips to strip mall
Andy	Escape	7	Outings off campus
Hannah	Attention	7	Unsupervised visits with mother and boyfriend

*Note.* Hypothesized function for the runaway behavior translated into a reward for meeting the behavior contract.



*Participant 1: Rachelle*

Rachelle's runaway behavior was determined to be multiply maintained. It was hypothesized that during weekdays Rachelle's runaway behavior was maintained by both access to peer attention and escape from aversive peer interactions. Rachelle would often runaway from her foster care placement with another peer from the group home. It was hypothesized that Rachelle lacked the ability to form appropriate peer relationships and would utilize running away as a means to gain peer attention. Additionally, when Rachelle would get into verbal arguments and disputes with other peers in the group home she would often runaway to escape these interactions. As reported by staff members and Rachelle, Rachelle would be teased by peers and she would tease them back. When the teasing became too aversive for Rachelle she would begin to yell back at the other peer and the verbal exchange would escalate until she left the facility and did not return. It was hypothesized on the weekends Rachelle's runaway behavior was maintained by access to her boyfriend and other friends who hung out at a local strip mall.

As seen in table 1, for the term of Rachelle's behavior contract she was required to remain in her placement for five days with no runaway episodes. For meeting the contract during the week Rachelle was able to earn outings and activities with a desired peer to places such as dinner and movies. For meeting the contract over the weekend Rachelle was able to earn a two hour trip to the strip mall, supervised by the principal investigator. Due to Rachelle's age, she was not allowed to leave her placement, even for a few minutes, when she was involved in an altercation with peers. Therefore, the basis of Rachelle's behavior contracts during the week were to grant her escape from the group

home contingent on remaining in her placement, rather than escape by engaging in runaway behavior.

As seen in figure 2, Rachelle engaged in 15 runaway episodes during the 45 days of baseline and engaged in 5 runaway episodes during the 35 days of intervention. As seen in figure 3, Rachelle's percent of safe days initially increased to 85% for the first two weeks of intervention. However, she ran away at the end of the third week and remained on runaway status for all of week four. Rachelle returned from the run three days after the start of week five and remained in her placement through the end of the study. As seen in figure 1, Rachelle's duration of being on runaway initially decreased to the lowest baseline levels, until her last runaway episode.

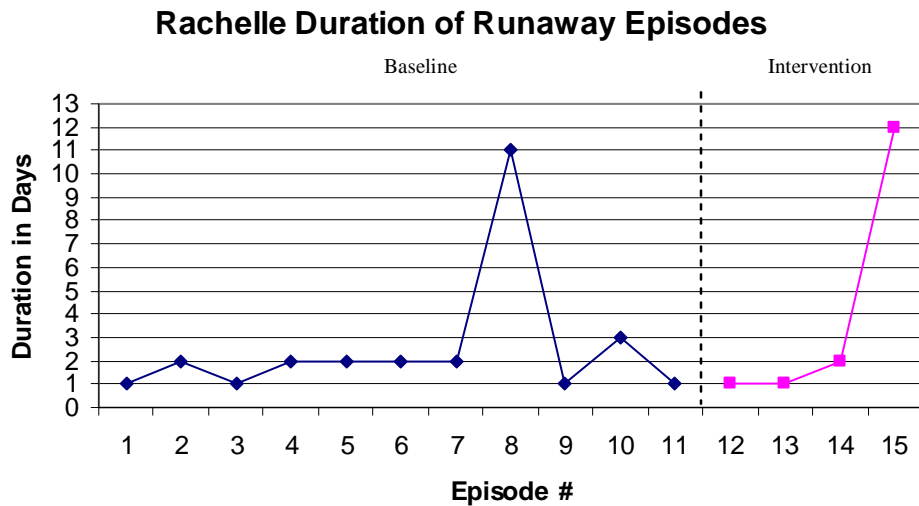


Figure 1. Rachelle's Duration of Runaway Episodes, data displayed as the number of days on runaway for each episode.

*Participant 2: Andy*

Andy's runaway behavior was hypothesized to be maintained by escape from peer and/or staff confrontations. When Andy engaged in a verbal altercation with a staff

member or peer he would become angry and would swear and hit the wall. Staff would attempt to redirect Andy and offer him the opportunity to calm down. When redirection was unsuccessful and Andy continued to be upset he would leave the facility. After leaving the facility Andy often went to the homes of friends from school and would stay there for the night. During Andy's last runaway episode, prior to the start of intervention, Andy ran away to his father's home.

As seen in table 1, for the term of Andy's behavior contract he was required to remain in his foster care placement for seven days with no runaway episodes. Andy would earn an outing off campus with the principal investigator to ice cream shops, McDonalds, or other fast food restaurants. During the outings Andy would talk about his interactions with peers and staff members for the week. Due to Andy's age he was not allowed to leave the campus unsupervised, even for a few minutes, when he engaged in confrontations with staff or peers. Therefore, the basis of Andy's behavior contracts were to grant him escape from the group home contingent on remaining in his placement, rather than escape by engaging in runaway behavior. Andy was able to earn extended family visits with his father, step-mother, grandmother, and little brother, as supervised by the principal investigator.

As seen in figure 2, Andy engaged in 2 runaway episodes during the 62 days of baseline and engaged in no runaway episodes during the 22 days of intervention. As seen in figure 3, Andy's percent of safe days quickly increased to 100% of safe days per week after implementation of behavior contracting and maintained throughout the conclusion of the study. Andy was able to maintain at 100% for three weeks in a row, which he had not accomplished in the thirty days prior to intervention. Additionally, as a result of

Andy's improvement in his behavior and stability in his foster care placement, he was able to be placed with his step-grandmother on his birthday during the last week of intervention.

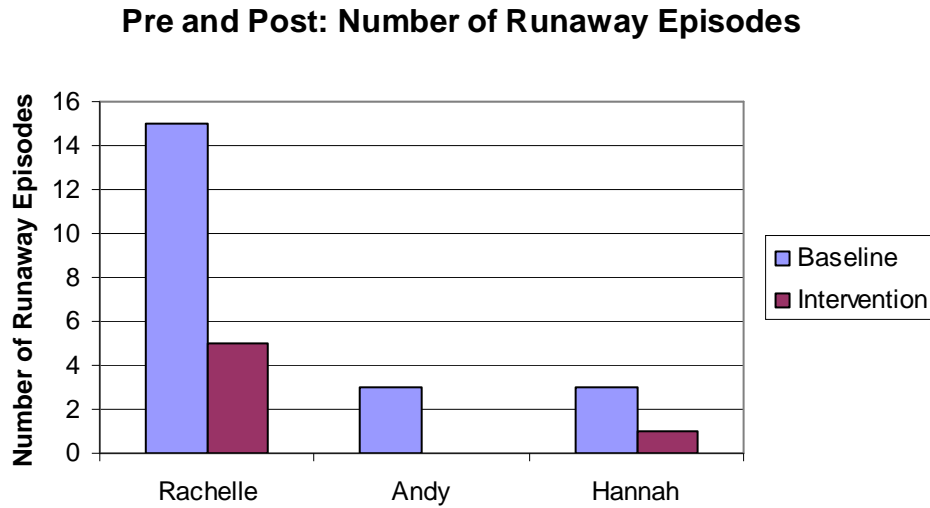


Figure 2. Number of runaway episodes for each participant pre and post intervention

*Participant 3: Hannah*

Hannah's runaway behavior was hypothesized to be maintained by access to unsupervised visit with her boyfriend and her mother. Hannah had two hour, weekly supervised contact with her mother and boyfriend at her placement as supervised by the group home staff. However, due to being unable to obtain unsupervised contact with her boyfriend and mother, she would runaway and would take a bus to her mother's home, which was approximately a two hour bus ride from her placement, where she could have unsupervised contact with both her mother and boyfriend, who also lived in the area.

As seen in table 1, for the term of Hannah's behavior contract she was required to remain in her foster care placement for seven days with no runaway episodes. Hannah

would earn an unsupervised visitation with her boyfriend and an extended supervised visitation with her mother off campus grounds, as supervised by the principal investigator. The principal investigator was able to work with the youth's foster care placement and case manager to get her approved to have unsupervised contact with her boyfriend as a reward for remaining in her placement.

As seen in figure 3, Hannah engaged in 3 runaway episodes in the 69 days of baseline and engaged in one runaway episode during the 14 days of intervention. As seen in figure 3, Hannah's percent of safe days quickly increased to 100% after implementation of behavior contracting. Heather ran away for a 24 hour period during the end of week 2. This runaway incident was a result of the youth not returning after an unsupervised visit with her boyfriend. Due to the relationship developed between the youth and the principal investigator, the youth was quickly recovered. The youth had disclosed information over the first two weeks of intervention in regard to where she went while on the run; when the youth failed to return from her unsupervised visit the principal investigator was able to provide this information to law enforcement to facilitated a quick recovery.

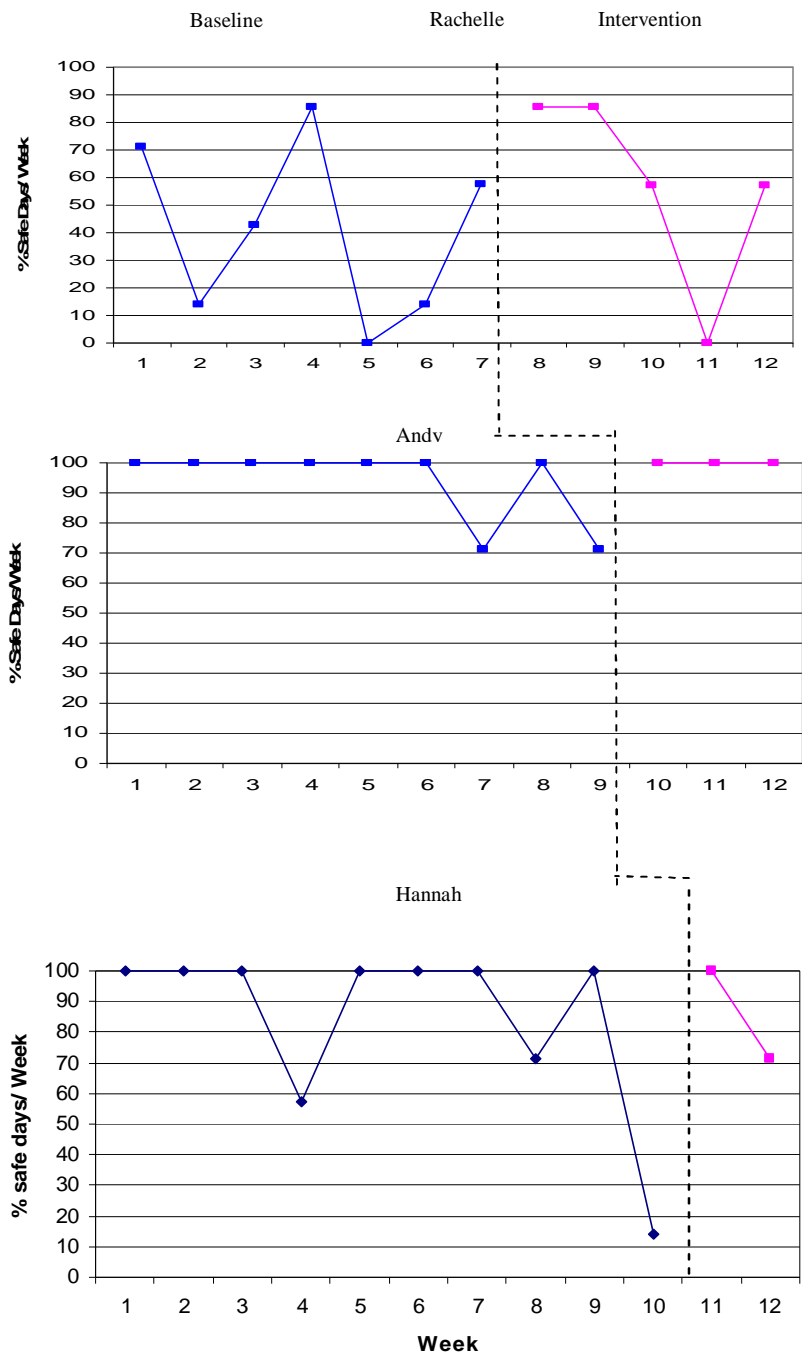


Figure 3. Baseline and intervention data for all three participants displayed in a multiple baseline design. Data presented as percentage of safe days per week.

### *Social Validity*

All three participants, their case managers, and caregivers were offered the opportunity to complete a survey in regard to their experiences while the youth was a participant in the research study.

As seen in Table 2, most participants felt behavior contracting was helpful and would like to continue with behavior contracting. Only one of the participants, Hannah, indicated she felt she was in need of services due to her runaway behavior. Follow up questions were not asked of participant one, Rachelle, in regard to her responses to questions seven and eight as the participants were told their responses should be honest and they were free to provide any input they would like without further questioning. A review of the narrative responses provided by each participant revealed each participant was able to correctly identify the reinforcer provided for meeting the contract, and the response given matched the hypothesized function of their runaway behavior. Participant one, Rachelle, indicated behavior contracting assisted her in being more conscious of her runaway behavior and the impact it has. Participant two, Andy, indicated behavior contracting assisted in placement with his grandmother and he was able to earn things for good behavior. Participant three, Hannah, stated she would no longer engage in runaway behavior as a result of behavior contracting.

As seen in table 3, the two caregivers who completed the survey for Andy and Hannah indicated they felt behavior contracting was needed with the participant and was useful. Additionally, both caregivers indicated they felt other youth in foster care would benefit from behavior contracting. A review of the narrative responses provided by each caregiver revealed an improvement in the youth's behavior within the group home.

Andy's caregiver reported the youth was less irritable, more helpful around the group home, he complied with requests from staff with less resistance, and he engaged in less verbal altercations. The caregiver felt behavior contracting with Andy was helpful because it gave the youth something to look forward to and showed good behavior is rewarded. Hannah's caregiver reported she appeared more focused and had an overall improvement in her attitude. The caregiver felt behavior contracting with Hannah was helpful because it gave the youth structure and motivation toward a goal. A survey was not completed by Rachelle's caregiver as no one caregiver at her three placements had interacted with the participant and her involvement in the study long enough to provide feedback on the behavior contracting intervention. Rachelle's parents were unable to be contacted to complete the survey due to no return call.

As seen in Table 4, the case managers who complete the survey for Rachelle and Hannah indicated they felt behavior contracting was needed with the participant, was useful, and was something they would continue to use with the participant as well as with other clients. Additionally, both case managers indicated they felt other youth in foster care would benefit from behavior contracting. A review of the narrative response provided by Rachelle's case manager revealed Rachelle did not demonstrate much change in her behavior; however, behavior contracting offered a reward to the youth for not running as opposed to just telling her not to run. A review of the narrative response provided by Hannah's case manager revealed Hannah appeared happy and complained less about her placement. Additionally, Hannah's case manager felt behavior contracting assisted the youth in understanding people around her don't want her to engage in



runaway behavior and want to help her and give her more options. Andy’s case manager declined to complete the survey stating he had no input to provide.

Table 2

*Participant: Social Validity Results*

Question	Rachelle	Andy	Hannah
1. I felt I was in need of the services provided by the principal investigator	Neutral	Neutral	Agree
2. I felt I was treated fairly by the principal investigator	Agree	Agree	Agree
3. I felt behavior contracting was conducted fairly	Agree	Agree	Agree
4. I felt the behavior contract was useful	Agree	Agree	Agree
5. The behavior contract was something I would like to continue	Agree	Agree	Agree
6. I felt the behavior contract assisted me in not running away	Neutral	Agree	Agree
7. I feel other youth in foster care who runaway would benefit from behavior contracting	Disagree	Agree	Agree
8. I no longer feel I have to runaway	Disagree	Agree	Agree

*Note.* Results from the social validity survey completed by each participant. Answers provided for each question are listed in the column below the participant’s name.

Table 3

*Caregiver: Social Validity Results*

Question	Rachelle	Andy	Hannah
1. I felt my child/client was in need of the services offered by the principal investigator	-	Agree	Agree
2. I felt my child/client was treated fairly by the principal investigator	-	Agree	Agree
3. I felt the behavior contract was useful for my child/client	-	Agree	Agree
4. Behavior contracting is something I will continue to use with this child/client	-	N/A	Agree
5. Behavior contracting is something I would like to use with my other children/clients	-	N/A	Neutral
6. I felt the behavior contract assisted my child/client in not running away	-	Agree	Agree
7. I feel other youth in foster care who runaway would benefit from behavior contracting	-	Agree	Agree

*Note.* Results from the social validity survey completed by the caregiver of each participant. Answers provided for each question are listed in the column below the participant’s name. A survey was not completed for Rachelle as indicated by the dash in each box within her column.

Table 4

*Case Manager: Social Validity Results*

Question	Rachelle	Andy	Hannah
1. I felt my child/client was in need of the services offered by the principal investigator	Agree	-	Agree
2. I felt my child/client was treated fairly by the principal investigator	Agree	-	Agree
3. I felt the behavior contract was useful for my child/client	Agree	-	Agree
4. Behavior contracting is something I will continue to use with this child/client	Agree	-	Agree
5. Behavior contracting is something I would like to use with my other children/clients	Agree	-	Agree
6. I felt the behavior contract assisted my child/client in not running away	Neutral	-	Neutral
7. I feel other youth in foster care who runaway would benefit from behavior contracting	Agree	-	Agree

*Note.* Results from the social validity survey completed by the case manager of each participant. Answers provided for each question are listed in the column below the participant’s name. A survey was not completed for Andy as indicated by the dash in each box within his column.

## Discussion

The current study evaluated the use of behavior contracts to address the runaway behavior of dependent youth. Results showed an initial increase in the number of days spent in an approved placement for all three participants. The current study contributes to the current literature on behavior contracts as well as runaway youth in foster care. The procedure used in the current study utilized a functional approach to behavior contracting, in that the hypothesized function of the youth’s runaway behavior was used as the reward for remaining in their placement and not engaging in runaway behavior.

This functional approach to behavior contracting had not previously been evaluated in the literature reviewed (Bristol & Sloane, 1974; Cantrell et al., 1969; Kelley & Stokes, 1982; Mellalieu, Hanton, & O'Brien, 2006; Miller & Kelley, 1994; Mann, 1972; Wahler & Fox, 1980; Welch & Holborn, 1988; Wysokci et al., 1979). Additionally, the current study evaluated an intervention with runaway youth in foster care via a multiple baseline design, which is a reputable design to demonstrate experimental control. Previous research with youth in foster care who engage in runaway behavior typically employed an evaluation of interventions via case studies and has failed to evaluate interventions through rigorous experimental design (CWLA, 2005; Courtney et al., 2005; Witherup et al., 2005).

Results in the current study are similar to those found in other studies where behavior contracting was employed to address a targeted behavior and was found to be an effective intervention (Bristol & Sloane, 1974; Cantrell et al., 1969; Kelley & Stokes, 1982; Mellalieu et al., 2006; Miller & Kelley, 1994; Mann, 1972; Wahler et al., 1988; Wysokci et al., 1979). For all three participants in the current study, behavior contracting was found to be initially effective in increasing the percent of safe days per week, although the increase in percent of safe days did not maintain for participant one, Rachelle.

A review of feedback provided on surveys completed by the participants, caregivers, and case managers revealed the participants chosen for the current study were in need of an effective intervention to assist in controlling the youth's runaway behavior. Participants, caregivers, and case managers found behavior contracting to be a useful intervention and something that would benefit other youth in foster care who engage in runaway behavior. Feedback provided by the caregivers illustrated additional positive

behavior changes witnessed with the participants in addition to remaining in their placement. Behavior contracting was demonstrated to be an intervention which was viewed as positive and effective in addressing runaway behavior.

The lack of maintenance for participant one, Rachelle, may have been due to a longer history of runaway behavior than the other two participants. As seen in figure 3, Rachelle engaged in fifteen runaway episodes during baseline, whereas participant two had only engaged in two runaway episodes during baseline and participant three had only engaged in three runaway episodes during baseline. A higher number of runaway episodes during the baseline period may have contributed to a stronger history of reinforcement; therefore, a more intensive intervention may have been warranted to address Rachelle's runaway behavior. Rachelle's runaway behavior was also determined to be multiply maintained by escape from aversive peer interactions and access to peer attention. Since these two maintaining variables are seemingly opposite, it proved to be difficult to match the function in a behavior contract. Additionally, participant two and three's runaway behavior was not determined to be multiply maintained and therefore contract development was less complex.

Working within an applied setting may have provided additional barriers to effective behavior contracting with Rachelle. Within a group home of peers her age, it was difficult to control the contingencies and access to reinforcement with her peers. Since Rachelle's runaway behavior was specifically hypothesized to be maintained by access to her peers in general, whereas Hannah's runaway behavior was access to her boyfriend and mother, Rachelle was able to access attention from her peers regardless of meeting the contract. It is thought this lack of ability to control the other contingencies in

Rachelle's natural environment may have hindered the effectiveness of Rachelle's contract; whereas with Andy and Hannah, the researcher was able to control access to the reinforcers outside of the behavior contract.

Limitations working within the applied setting of child welfare also posed a number of barriers to Rachelle's behavior contracts. Rachelle consistently ran away to a local strip mall on Friday nights. Due to Rachelle's young age of fourteen she was not permitted, within the rules of the group home, to engage in unsupervised outings off campus. Therefore, the closest reinforcer the principal investigator could offer Rachelle, which matched this function, was a supervised outing with the principal investigator to the strip mall on a Friday night. While Rachelle never achieved the reward of an outing to the strip mall it is possible that the principal investigators mandatory presence during that outing may have altered the power of the outing as a reinforcer.

Participant three, Hannah, was sixteen years old and was permitted to engage in unsupervised outings off campus provided she maintained on the necessary "level" within the group home's point system. Therefore, the principal investigator was able to offer her unsupervised outings with her boyfriend. However, unsupervised outings were a new activity for Hannah. After the first unsupervised outing she was permitted to go on she returned on time. However, for the second unsupervised outing she was permitted to go on Hannah did not return on time and failed to return to her placement by her 9 p.m. curfew. She was reported as a runaway and did not return until the following day at 4:30 p.m. There is a possibility the requirements and expectations for the unsupervised outing were not clearly outlined. Additionally, the consequences for not returning from the outing on time were not explained to Hannah prior to starting unsupervised outings.

These factors may have contributed to the reported runaway incident at the end of week two of behavior contracting.

When working with youth who runaway from foster care settings careful attention must be attributed to the hypothesized function of the youth's runaway behavior, due to the constant changing of the youth's environment. The youth's placement may change, new residents may be admitted to their current placement, and youth may engage in different behavior depending on which staff is on duty. These consistent changes in environment may contribute to a change in the function of youth's runaway behavior. In a study by Hanley, Iwata., and Roscoe (2006), a change in preferences over time was evaluated. They found that for 80% of their participants, preference was relatively stable over a six month period. However, they also concluded that naturally occurring changes in establishing operations and conditioned histories could contribute to a change in preference of individuals over time.

The current study may be limited in generalization to the greater population of runaway youth in foster care due to the restrictiveness in the participants chosen and the limited sample size. The current study evaluated only youth between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. This age range was chosen as these youth typically do not receive the services needed to address their runaway behavior. Youth under 14 are a higher risk population due to their young age and the risks posed to them are greater than older youth who runaway. When these youth runaway and return they typically receive a wider range of services which include more one-on-one time and intensive counseling. Older youth within the age range of 17 to 18 are often viewed as adults and pose a lesser safety risk to

themselves due to their age. Future studies should assess the effectiveness of behavior contracting on youth younger than 14 and older than 16.

Participants in the current study were selected based on the inclusion criteria and by chance all participants in the current study were Caucasian and were placed in group homes. Participants in the current study were comprised only of youth who were in foster care. These youth were targeted as community based care providers are responsible with providing and caring for children while in foster care, while ensuring their safety. No prior research existed surrounding effective interventions for youth in foster care who runaway, thus the current study only focused on youth in foster care. Future research should evaluate the effectiveness of behavior contracting with youth outside the current age population and race, as well as expand to behavior contracting with youth who are not in foster care.

Maintenance and generalization were not addressed in the current study as the current study was the first research conducted to evaluate the effects of behavior contracting on the runaway behavior of dependent youth in an experimental fashion. Generalization and maintenance should be addressed in future research.

To conclude, the results of the current study suggests that behavior contracting based on function determination may be an effective treatment for reducing runaway behavior of youth in foster care. As demonstrated in the current study, when the function of youth's runaway behavior can be determined it can be utilized in the intervention with the youth to address their runaway behavior. As evidenced by the effectiveness of the intervention with participants two and three, who had a shorter history of runaway behavior than participant one, the current intervention could be used as a preventative

measure for youth with shorter histories of runaway behavior. By using the current intervention as a preventative measure with first time runaways case managers and other social service agencies may be able to stop the youths runaway behavior before a strong history of reinforcement is established.



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## Appendices

Appendix A: Function Assessment

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Document	Reviewed	Not Applicable
Comprehensive Behavior Health Assessment		
Psychiatric Evaluation		
Treatment Plans		
Placement Progress Notes		
Placement History		
Missing Child Tracking System Entries		
Incident Reports		
Missing Child Reporting Forms		
Interview- Case Manager		
Interview- Caregiver/Parent		
Child Interview		
De-Briefing Form		

Hypothesized Function: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B: Sample Contract

**BEHAVIOR CONTRACT**

1

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WED	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
<b>Expectation:</b> 2							
<b>Expectation:</b> 3							

4 **Daily time to review:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Daily Criteria:** 5

6 **Daily Reward:**  
( 7 days)- (additional reinforcer)

**Weekly time to review:** 8 **Weekly Criteria:** 9

**Weekly reward:** 10

**Signatures:** 11  
Participant

**Signatures:** 12  
Principal Investigator

Appendix C: Fidelity Check Sheet- Format

Behavior Contract- Fidelity Data Sheet, Format

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Hypothesized Function: \_\_\_\_\_

**Contents**- place an “x” in the box if the “item” is Present or Not Present

**Contract Number:**

Item #	Description	Present	Not Present
1	Contract begin and end date		
2	Expectation #1 for the week		
3	Expectation # 2 for the week		
4	Daily Time to Review the Contract		
5	Daily Criteria to meet the contract for the day		
6	Daily Reward		
7	Number of Days to achieve intermittent reinforcer, and additional reinforcer		
8	Weekly Time to Review the Contract		
9	Weekly Criteria to Meet the Contract		
10	Weekly Reward		
11	Participants Signature		
12	Principal Investigator's Signature		

**Does the weekly Reinforcer Match the Identified Function:**      yes      no



Appendix D: Fidelity Check Sheet- Contents

Behavior Contract- Fidelity Data Sheet, Contents

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Hypothesized Function: \_\_\_\_\_

**Contents**- place an “x” in the box if the “item” is completed or not completed

**Contract Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

Item #	Description	Completed on Contract	Not Completed on Contract
1	Contract begin and end date		
2	Expectation #1 for the week- Remain in Placement		
3	Expectation # 2 for the week- Follow placement rules		
4	Daily Time to Review the Contract		
5	Daily Criteria to meet the contract for the day		
6	Daily Reward		
7	Number of Days to achieve intermittent reinforcer, and additional reinforcer		
8	Weekly Time to Review the Contract		
9	Weekly Criteria to Meet the Contract		
10	Weekly Reward		
11	Participants Signature		
12	Principal Investigator's Signature		

**Does the weekly Reinforcer Match the Identified Function:**      yes      no