

Frequently Asked Questions

What if youth exhibits desirable and undesirable behavior in the same time period?

- Recognize the youth's progress and accomplishments AND respond to the infraction. Weigh the significance of all the behaviors. Whether you focus more on the infraction or on the achievement should depend on two factors: where the youth is in the program, and the significance of the behavior.

Why is effect sometimes different from what we expected?

- Researchers tell us our intentions don't matter – the youth's perception is the key. Make sure expectations are clear, that you are building trust, and that the responses are developmentally and culturally appropriate. For example, detention – for some youth, it might be a chance to be with friends who are there, to escape from responsibility, to sleep, even to eat.

Should we tell possible Incentives and Sanctions from the beginning?

- Clarifying expectations from the beginning lays the foundation for certainty and consistency. If youth experience the responses as “coming out of the blue”, they lose the sense of connection between their own actions and your responses, which can lead to feelings of victimization and helplessness. One way to do this is with a behavioral contract. Clear expectations foster a sense of responsibility. Some courts develop a list of compliant and non-compliant behaviors, along with a range of incentives and sanctions and explain clearly to the youth that these are examples of possible responses to their behavior. They use this chart or grid as a framework, not a formula.

Is it okay to give a “second chance” by withholding a sanction?

- Overlooking a non-compliant behavior is choosing not to respond and can be seen as the team's condoning the behavior. Actually intermittent responses increase the chance that the behavior will be repeated since these responses are shown to be the strongest reinforcers! Withholding sanctions can be perceived as unfair – both by the recipient (you didn't sanction me last time) and by others in the program. Also, there may be a disconnect between the behavior and the consequence.

How can we be consistent and fair AND tailor incentives and sanctions?

- Same treatment does not equal fairness. When youth cry “unfair,” what they most want is the chance to have someone hear their side - not to agree with them, just to listen. This in itself helps build trust and opens the lines of communication. Perception of fairness depends on HOW responses are delivered, clarity of expectations, certainty of responses, and level of trust with the team.

How can we afford incentives?

- Reaching goals actually saves money in the long run – fewer drug tests, lower rate of supervision, reduction in crime, payment of restitution. There are low-cost incentives - in

fact social, sanction reduction and natural consequences cost nothing at all AND are the most powerful reinforcers as well.

What happens if treatment and JJ disagree?

- First of all, your team needs work with the youth to develop behavioral goals so all are clear and in agreement. Expectations need to be clear – with youth, with family, with the team. Remember that everyone is not necessarily observing the same behavior – discuss this in staffings. Responses from court and treatment need to support each other and support goal attainment.

How does the new behavior “stick” after graduation?

- From research, we know that when rewards and punishments are removed, behavior returns to baseline, so if the youth is relying solely on drug court to impose incentives and sanctions, it is likely that their behavior will backslide or revert to what it was prior to the program. To maintain the “new” behaviors, there needs to be a gradual transition from regular to intermittent reinforcement, then another transition from imposed to natural consequences (good grades, comments from others, calmer environment at home, etc.). Work with the youth and family to develop a natural support system to develop responses that will last over time. Consider the progression through the phases – behavioral expectations and the incentives and sanctions should progress according to the milestones of each phase.