

Goals

The purpose of our weekly youth goals is to have youth focus on improving a particular problematic behavior that leads to negative consequences for them and others. Goals are reviewed at the end of each RBT Group Meeting. As with all parts of the program, goals seek to help youth make positive change. They do this by promoting specific positive behaviors and diminishing negative behaviors.

Goal Writing

Weekly goals are written for youth during the goal setting meeting on Thursdays. When writing youth goals it is important to seek input from the youth and his peers, but ultimately it is up to the staff writing the goals to decide what is appropriate for a particular youth. The purpose of a goal is to help the youth address a particular problematic behavior that interferes with his overall functioning. We are seeking to make positive *behavior* change. Also when developing goals, it is important to keep three criteria in mind:

1. The goal should be specific.

It is important to be specific in order to ensure that the youth understands what exactly he needs to work on and how exactly he can go about doing it. It also minimizes the chances of there being miscommunications amongst staff and youth over what exactly needs to be done for the goal to be met. To write, "Youth will show respect to staff and peers," is not specific enough because it does not include what the youth needs to do. In order to be as helpful and fair as possible to the youth, it would be better to write, "Youth will show respect to staff and peers by maintaining eye contact, keeping a pleasant voice tone when speaking, and refraining from swearing or threatening." In this case we judge the youth on his respectfulness by judging them on the very observable behaviors of eye contact, voice tone, swearing, and threatening. It is also important to stay away from words like appropriate, inappropriate, positive, good, etc., as they are very subjective and non-specific. When used, these words should be accompanied with qualifiers that explain them, as in, "Youth will demonstrate appropriate gestures by keeping his pants at his waist, sitting upright in his chair, and refraining from using gang signs."

2. The goal should be measurable.

If we are going to grade the youth on whether or not they are meeting their goals, then it is important for the goals to be measurable. It is important that the goals address behaviors, not feelings. It is not appropriate to give a youth a goal such as, "Youth will refrain from getting angry during situations." We cannot try to dictate youth's feelings, but we can address how they go about expressing them. It is appropriate to write, "Youth will utilize coping skills such as taking deep breaths and self-timeouts when angry instead of yelling at staff, throwing chairs, or becoming aggressive."

In addition to goals being measurable, it is important that goals are also gradable. We grade the youth twice per day, so the goal, "Youth will shower in five minutes or less" is inappropriate. Since youth shower once a day at the most, they could only be graded once per day.

3. The goal should be attainable.

When writing a goal for a youth, it should be tailored to the individual. Newer youth and youth that struggle in the behavior program should not be asked to be perfect in regards to a target behavior. A youth who seems to swear every other sentence should not be given the goal, "Youth will show appropriate talk by not swearing." This goal is good because it addresses an important target behavior for the youth, but it is not appropriate for the youth because its expectations are too far removed from the exhibited baseline behavior of the youth. It is simply too hard for him. It would be more appropriate to write a goal like, "Youth will show appropriate talk by not swearing more than five times per grading period." This goal still addresses the target behavior, but, while still challenging, it is much more attainable for the youth. If the youth successfully meets his goal for the week, it would also be appropriate to make his next week's goal something like, "Youth will show appropriate talk by not swearing more than four times per grading period." Keeping with this pattern could eventually extinguish the behavior in a manner the youth is capable of doing. Remember, small changes lead to big change, and many of our youth need to start with baby steps.

Another alternative to goal writing is to focus on encouraging the desired positive behavior. A youth demonstrating the expected appropriate behavior is not demonstrating negative behavior. Extinguishing negative behavior by reinforcing positive behavior can be extremely effective.

Goal Reviewing

Youth goals should be reviewed and graded at each RBT Group Meeting. Youth are graded on their behavior from the time they were last graded through the current Group Meeting. At this time, youth should be asked to share their goal, state whether or not they think they made their goal, and provide a rationale for why or why not. It is sometimes easy for staff to slip into a pattern of simply grading the goals alone or to sip through the review without having the youth provide rationales. This takes away from the learning that youth go through during the goal review. Reviewing the goals with the youth helps them do a self-analysis of their behavior and receive feedback from staff and peers. This is a time for staff to reinforce youth who are demonstrating positive behaviors that are helping them reach their goals, provide feedback to those who are not by pointing out what they could have done differently, and recognize those youth who are making improvements. This is an important learning time for the youth and should not be glossed over.

Sometimes we will be put into a situation in which a youth states he has made his goal but others in the group do not agree. In these cases, it is important to allow youth to give feedback to one another, as people can learn a lot from their peers. In order to make a decision regarding the goal, staff must have witnessed the interaction discussed in the rationale. If some or all of a youth's peers insist a situation occurred in which the youth demonstrated a behavior that should cause him to miss the goal, a minus should not be issued unless a staff member witnessed something to earn a minus.