

Setting Consequences

Many parents choose to teach their children by allowing them to experience the consequences of their acts. In this way, children learn that their decisions and their behaviour have an impact on themselves and the people around them. Because it involves taking responsibility for choices made, discipline through consequences empowers children and promotes self-discipline.

Natural consequences

Life does the teaching with natural consequences: if you don't wear your hat, you'll get cold; if you've spent all your savings, you won't be able to buy the game you want. All the parent has to do is point out the likely consequences, then keep quiet ... and avoid saying, "I told you so!"

Sometimes risking natural consequences is too dangerous: if you play with matches, you could burn down the house, for example. Other times, the outcome happens too far in the future to make the connection obvious: if you don't brush your teeth, you'll get cavities.

Logical consequences

Logical consequences are imposed by the parent to link the behaviour of the child with consequences that make sense. The consequences feel fair and reasonable instead of like arbitrary control by the parent. For instance, as the parent you could set the rule: "Lights out at 8:30. If you are ready for bed at 8:15, we will have time to read a story. If not, we won't." If the child takes too much time, your calm response would be, "I see you've chosen no story tonight. Maybe tomorrow you'll be ready earlier."

For a teen who comes in past curfew, the parent could say, "It's 30 minutes past the time we agreed on and I have been worried. To win back my confidence, next time you go out, you will come in 30 minutes earlier than our previously agreed time."

Consequences that repair

Children readily understand and often appreciate consequences that give them an opportunity to repair their mistakes: they spill milk, they clean it up (or at least help); they tear a book, they patch it up; they dent a fender, they pay for it. The parent can apply these consequences with genuine regret combined with admiration — "too bad this happened to you, you're doing a great job of fixing it up" — rather than in a punishing spirit.

Consequences that teach

Children need to know how they *are* supposed to act. And sometimes they need to practise it with coaching. For instance, a child who has thrown a tantrum when leaving a friend's house might not be allowed to play with that friend for a week. The consequence will be more effective and feel fairer if the parent spends time with the child during the week looking for and practising better ways to leave a friend's. The message changes from, "You're a bad kid." to "I'm confident that you can master this."

Creative consequences

Sometimes it takes a good imagination to figure out appropriate consequences that teach rather than punish. Take the case of a child who forgets his jacket at a friend's. **Natural consequences:** He's cold next time he goes outdoors...but in fact it's too cold for that to be safe. **Consequences that repair:** He bundles up in sweaters and goes back to get the jacket...but the friend lives 20 minutes' drive away. **Creative consequences:** Parent drives the child to the friend's house to pick up the jacket (child's responsibility) and the child chooses which of the parent's responsibilities he will help with or take on in return.

Setting consequences

In the heat of the moment, a punishment may come to mind more easily than an appropriate consequence. You can give yourself some breathing room by saying, "That behaviour is not allowed. If you repeat it, there will be consequences." Later, describe to the child what behaviour you expect and what the consequences for unacceptable behaviour will be in the future. Consider the following points:

- What expectations and consequences are appropriate to the child's age?
- Is the child old enough to understand the link between his actions and their results?
- Does the child clearly understand the rule or the expected acceptable behaviour?
- Does the child need more practice and coaching in the desired behaviour?
- Will you be able to apply the consequences with the consistency necessary to teach the lesson that one's choices have an impact, *every* time?

Lessons for life

By disciplining through consequences, you will help your child learn to think before making decisions and to take responsibility for choices made.

by Betsy Mann