

Using Consequences

Most people agree that children and teens need guidance and discipline to grow into responsible, caring adults. Yet, parents often are unsure how best to guide their children—whether it is better to punish, ignore, beg, or give up. On the other hand, respectful and kind discipline that has firm limits can teach young people responsibility and help them learn from their mistakes. Parents can use discipline to guide their children if they use natural and logical consequences.

Natural consequences

Natural consequences provide a method for children or teens to learn from their own experiences. The parent who uses natural consequences does not threaten, argue with, or give in to the child. Rather, the parent allows the child to discover, without outside insistence, the advantages of respect for order and following rules. The child who experiences natural consequences develops self-discipline and internal motivation. This child learns to respect order not because of fear of punishment, but because the child has learned that following rules is necessary for effective living.

An example of a natural consequence is allowing a child to miss a meal when he or she stays out until after the family has finished the meal. In contrast, a parent may “rescue” the child and fix another meal, worrying that the child will be too hungry. However, this teaches the child that it doesn’t matter if you come home late for a meal—Mom or Dad will take care of things.

On the other hand, punishment for misbehavior can result in rebellion against parents, especially by teens. For example, a child who is scolded by parents or loses a privilege (such as watching television) for coming home late at mealtime may feel angry and want to get even. Other children may not become rebellious, but internalize the message and see themselves as a “bad” person, which may result in low self-esteem.

To learn skills that will help in their adult life, children need to discover that something uncomfortable happens when they don’t follow rules. Natural consequences allow the discomfort to occur naturally, rather than being created by the



parent to “teach a lesson.” As one mother explains, “When our son does something wrong, we don’t hit or scold him, we do nothing. We let the situation get worse until he becomes uncomfortable and sees the situation has become ridiculous. Finally he decides to change his own behavior.”

In using natural consequences, parents find that nature helps. For example, a child who doesn’t eat gets hungry; one who cheats at games soon has no one to play

with; one who forgets homework has to face the teacher. The teen who leaves clothes on the floor finds that they don’t get washed.

When consequences don’t work

Parents should not use this method when the consequence:

■ **is dangerous or harmful.** The natural consequence of a three-year-old playing in the street is too severe to ignore. It is not appropriate to let a pet become sick or die because a youngster who has agreed to care for it forgets.

■ **doesn’t immediately follow misbehavior.** The natural consequence of always failing to do homework may not take place for years, when the young person is unable to get a good job. Therefore, it may not be appropriate for parents to allow a consequence to occur.

■ **is not uncomfortable or disagreeable to the child.** For example, a child may not hear from a neighbor whose window was broken when the child recklessly played with a baseball. Failing to finish household chores may not bother the young person as much as it bothers parents.

Logical consequences

When natural consequences don’t work, the parent can devise a logical consequence. Logical consequences are arranged by an adult but must be experienced by the child as a reasonable outcome for the specific misbehavior. In other words, the consequences must fit behavior in a logical way.

Here are examples of logical consequences:

- The three-year-old who continues to go into the street must stay indoors for the day.
- The teen who comes in past curfew must come in earlier for a few nights or may lose the privilege of using the family car.
- The youngster who ignores homework must complete assignments before watching television.
- The youth who plays carelessly and breaks a neighbor's window must use allowances to pay for repairs.

As with natural consequences, logical consequences must fit the misbehavior. Punishment that does not fit may only arouse a child's anger or cause retaliation, such as a child's ignoring future requests by the parent or doing something else to anger the parent.

Often there's a thin line between logical consequences and punishment. A logical consequence delivered out of anger or with a harsh voice probably will be interpreted as punishment by the child. Anger can overwhelm even a parent's most logical actions.

When a parent punishes a child, the message often conveyed is: "You better do what I say or else." With logical consequences, the parent realizes that the child or teen has the right to decide actions and knows that breaking the rule carries a negative consequence. The result is good behavior when the child sees that things will go better when he or she decides to follow the rules. Punishment, on the other hand, often leads to proper behavior only when the child is afraid of getting caught. There's little reason

to follow rules when parents are absent or the misbehavior can be hidden. Parents do not like sneaky behavior, yet punishment often encourages deception.

Timing

It's difficult for parents to remain pleasant and calm when a child's behavior is irritating or upsets them. Therefore, timing is essential for natural and logical consequences. Always wait until you and the child are calm before you discuss the misbehavior and give the consequence. A consequence given in anger usually will sound disrespectful, unkind, or like a punishment. When the misbehavior occurs, you may want to say, "I'm pretty upset right now. We'll talk later about the consequence."

Most misbehavior that bothers parents occurs over time, so there is an opportunity for the parent to think about logical consequences that might curb the bothersome behavior. Discuss concerns with your child and possible consequences for the misbehavior. Most children can discuss rules and consequences by age 6 or 7. Once you've decided a consequence, follow through.

For example, if a child breaks a family rule about being home for supper and comes home late, the parent can say, "I guess you have decided you don't want supper tonight." At that point it is important to follow through with the consequence and not allow snacks.

A warning for parents

The most important job for teens is to become gradually more independent from parents. While it can be challenging for parents, a teen must gradually assume autonomy to be able to eventually leave home and live responsibly.

Young adults whose parents have continually controlled their actions often exhibit one of two kinds of behavior. Once out of their parents' control, some young people whose parents have not taught them responsibility will become "wild" and engage in dangerous behavior. In other words, Mom and Dad are no longer around to make sure they behave! In contrast, other young people may remain emotionally dependent upon their parents and find it difficult to develop satisfactory personal and work relationships with other people.

As young people become more independent, they should be given more choices. An appropriate and logical consequence for a 10-year-old may be interpreted as punishment by a teen. It is appropriate for parents and preteens or teens to work together to solve problems. Then a parent can make sure agreements are kept.

Natural and logical consequences are not the only effective ways to discipline children. In fact, they are not always possible nor appropriate. If the behavior has no uncomfortable consequence, or if you cannot think of a reasonable consequence, you may need to find another solution to the problem. Parental guidance and discipline always should be based on firm limits used with kindness and respect for children.

When you use natural and logical consequences, remember the three R's: related, reasonable, and respectful. The consequence should be related to the misbehavior, not too harsh, and respectful of the child's feelings and right to ultimately choose how to behave. If you follow these guidelines, you can help your child learn to make responsible decisions and become a capable, caring adult.

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