

NATURAL CONSEQUENCES AS A DISCIPLINE TOOL

By Judy Arnall



Consequences are the natural outcome from our behaviours. Every action that we humans do has a consequence. For our children, consequences are a powerful learning tool that tells them if their decision was a responsible one or a careless one. Experiencing the consequence from their action helps them to modify their future behaviour to enjoy better outcomes. **Natural consequences** are those outcomes that happen without the intervention of parents. Sometimes, letting children experience the natural consequence is too dangerous, such as letting a two-year-old experience the traffic in the street, because traffic may hit them. **Logical consequences** are arranged by the parents to teach a child the probable outcome of their behaviour and how to solve the ensuing problem. For example, a two-year-old is confined to the back yard because he runs out on the road when he's in the front yard. This solves the safety problem for the parent and the child.

There are several guidelines when using consequences as a respectful and effective discipline tool.

Consequences must be related to the behaviour. For example, a messy room might mean that the floor is too cluttered for Mom to put away the child's laundry so the child must do it himself. An unrelated consequence would be Nintendo confiscated for a week until the room is cleaned up.

Consequences must be reasonable. If a parent makes the child pay 10 times the cost of an item that he has broken, it could be seen as unfair by the child. Realistically, the child should only pay for the replacement cost. Often, we issue consequences in anger and they are often unreasonable. To ensure that consequences stay reasonable, calm down first, and then ask yourself if the consequence is something that you would expect from a spouse or friend. If it is, then it probably is reasonable. If a friend breaks your item, an apology and a replacement is something that you would expect. Teach your child the same solution.

Consequences must be realistic and you must be comfortable doing it. Mom telling the child that the play date will end if the child acts up one more time, may not be enforceable, if Mom is enjoying chatting with the other mom on the play date, and unwilling to cut the time short.

Consequences must be consistent. Leaving the store in the middle of grocery shopping because of bad behaviour is very inconvenient, but if done consistently, the child soon learns that if they act up, the shopping trip is over.

Consequences must not be used as a punishment. How to tell? If you threaten a certain outcome to get compliance, then the consequence is probably being used as a punishment, which could invite a power struggle, resentment, rebellion, shutdown of communication, etc. The consequence of parents imposing a consequence on children is that children decide to stop talking to parents. Children know that the consequence arises from the parents imposing it, not from the fact that they may have "chose" the outcome. For this reason, avoid threats. Just impose the consequence matter-of-factly. If you get push back from the child, then go to problem-solving to remedy the situation. The best consequences focus on teaching restitution, solving problems and making amends. If a child spills a drink because she was careless pouring, she wipes up the mess. A child who hits another child needs to be separated, calmed down, and told the rule. The restitution part might be to offer the other child a toy, hug or an apology after the emotions have been dealt with.

Consequences won't work when the underlying feeling/need of the child is not addressed. In those cases, a consequence is the wrong discipline tool to choose. For example, a child who consistently refuses

to wear a bike helmet even after having the bike locked away several times may have a good reason for not wearing it. Perhaps he is being teased because it looks babyish. Locking away a child's bike for a week for not wearing his helmet might be too severe and the child could perceive it as unfair. A sit down problem solving talk to find out why the child is not wearing his helmet, can help to get buy-in from him to find a solution to the problem. He must wear a helmet, but there are many alternatives available when child and parent get together to brainstorm. Does he find the helmet too nerdy? Does he wish to pay half on a new one? Can he borrow his siblings? Can he buy a cool second hand one? Either solution will mean that the bike still doesn't get used without a helmet, but brainstorming provides other options.

Listening and mutual parent-child problem-solving are better tools used to uncover and address the underlying need. When used properly, consequences teach children appropriate behaviour in a positive way and should be in every parent's discipline toolbox.

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