



Using Consequences to Help Children Learn

The trouble with punishing children is that its main purpose is to make them suffer. Suffering by itself is not a very good teacher. In fact, suffering is useless unless we learn from it. The object of discipline for children should be to teach. We want our children to become wiser and better. One of the best ways to teach children about the importance of obedience is the use of consequences. Consequences are intended to teach children rather than to punish them.

The best consequences are those that are a natural or logical result of a child's choices. For example, if a child fails to put away clothes, the natural result may be for the clothes to become wrinkled and not get laundered. If the clothes are left in a place that bothers others, the logical consequence may be for the offending clothes to be placed on the child's bed. If a child does not come home at the agreed-upon time for dinner, a natural consequence would be for the child to get a cold dinner. If a child has not completed chores or homework, a logical consequence would be that those things must be completed before the child can go play or watch television.

Consequences, to be effective, must be administered in a helpful way. If harsh consequences are delivered in an angry way, they really are punishment. The real test of consequences is whether they express the natural, reasonable result of the child's choices.

We can set children up for success. When, for example, a child is expected to pick up toys before going outside to play, we can help the child get started. If we do the job without the child's help, the child is not being responsible. If we coldly demand the behavior without support and encouragement, we are launching a power struggle. The best way to work with children is to use a combination of charm and encouragement that helps them get started.

There are times when consequences are not appropriate. Good sense must set limits on consequences. For example, we do not allow a child to wander out into traffic in order to learn about safety. Compassion also sets bounds for consequences. On those rare occasions when a child is overwhelmed by many demands, a parent might volunteer to wash the dishes in the child's place. If a child has had an unusually bad day, that child may need comfort more than consequences for failing to do a household chore.

Proper use of consequences is a vital skill for parents. Each parent probably has a tendency to shield and protect children too much or to demand and punish children too much. Some parents go back and forth. You may benefit from noticing your tendency. If you tend to overprotect your children, you may need to sharpen your skills at consequences. Be prepared to be friendly but firm. If your tendency is to be tough with children, you may benefit from using consequences as an expression of the lawfulness of the world without getting angry or giving unhelpful lectures. Learn to use consequences in a supportive way as a useful tool for teaching your children about the advantages of acting in the desired ways.

Applications:

It is not easy to use consequences effectively. Prepare to be more effective by thinking about problems you often have with your children.

Can you think of appropriate consequences for them that teach them the importance of behaving in the desired way?

Are the consequences you have chosen a natural and reasonable result of their choices?

Are the consequences likely to help the child understand the rule and want to obey it?

Do the consequences allow you to avoid nagging and punishing?

It is common to want to find the right consequence for a child's behavior. But there are many consequences that might work. The choice of a best consequence depends on many factors in the family. For example, if there is a child who always gets up late for school, what are some possible consequences?

One possibility is to have the child go to bed earlier. This is probably the best consequence if the child is not getting enough sleep.

One possibility is to have the child plan out the morning so that getting ready for school and eating breakfast can happen more efficiently. For example, a child might lay out clothes the night before.

One possibility is to have the child be able to do something fun if he or she gets ready on time. Maybe he could play with a favorite toy. This is the best action if the child needs something to look forward to in order to get going.

One possibility is to have the child who is slow getting ready for school have to walk to school rather than take the bus. (This is only a good idea if it is safe for the child to walk to school.)

One possibility is to buy the child an alarm clock and make the child responsible for getting ready.

The best choice is the one that helps your child get ready on time while preserving the child's dignity. As a parent you know pretty well what works for your child. Start with the choice that makes sense to you. Be willing to experiment. Ask the child for ideas. Be patient. Some things simply get better with time.