

Consequences

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Rewards and Punishments

Everyone uses rewards and punishments in raising children. However, these can sometimes appear arbitrary to the child and more about the parent's power (or emotions) than about the child's behaviour. Punishments can discourage children from taking responsibility if they are simply obeying orders rather than making choices. Rewards can also discourage taking responsibility if the child feels they are being paid, or bribed, to behave. But having said that, it is true that most children **need** rewards and punishments and difficult children may need them most of all. Although it is true that many "consequences" are really a form of reward and punishment it is still useful to use this term as it can help us change our focus to a more cooperative and logical way of influencing children's behaviour.

Natural Consequences

The classic example of a "natural consequence" is the child who wants to go out in the rain without a coat. The **natural** consequence of this is that they get wet. Assuming they don't die of pneumonia, children learn efficiently by being allowed to make such mistakes and suffer the consequences. People learn best from such natural consequences rather than from more arbitrary punishments (or rewards) for the following reasons:



1. It is much easier to understand and easier to remember the connection between a natural consequence and the behaviour that led to it.
2. When a punishment is imposed by someone else there are emotional complications which can greatly impair learning. If a child focuses more on your unfairness, or gets angry, or feels unloved, these emotions can overshadow the lesson they were meant to learn. This seldom happens with natural consequences.
3. By imposing a punishment (or giving a reward) we are taking some of the responsibility on ourselves and hence giving the child less responsibility.

However, there is a major problem with natural consequences, especially with younger children, which is often played down. Children tend to have very short time frames and a consequence that is not immediate, or at least following pretty quickly after the behaviour, may never produce learning. Immediate gratification will tend to outweigh long-term consequences. Actually, many adults are exactly the same and the horrible hangover that follows a night on the grog may **never** produce learning in some adults.

Very long-term consequences, such as future educational and career failure, are unlikely to motivate many children. In counselling children who steal I have often been struck by their belief that they will end up in prison or in a children's home in a few years time. Their estimations of negative long-term consequences are greatly exaggerated but this has not had any effect on their behaviour. Generally punishments that are more than a week away are likely to be ineffectual in changing the behaviour of most pre-teen children and many adolescents.

Obviously children's mental time frame sets severe limits on the effectiveness of many natural consequences. Few pre-teen children will brush their teeth because of the long-term benefits (they may brush their teeth because it tastes good, it keeps parents happy, because they are proud of their skill). So letting such behaviours be *solely* determined by natural consequences may not be practical. Most children will eat unhealthy diets if

we don't exercise some control and some children would go for months without washing unless some kind of pressure is applied.

What we feel we can leave to natural consequences will be guided by our own values, by our assessment of risk factors and, very importantly, by what we know about our own child. Like most things to do with parenting there are no hard and fast rules and ultimately there are value judgements to be made by the parent.

Another reason why "natural" consequences sometimes don't work within families is that family members are often stuck with each other. A natural consequence of being obnoxious to others is that others withdraw. If a child at school hits other children they may find themselves socially isolated but within a family we often cannot escape from each other.

Logical consequences

Since we cannot rely solely on "natural" consequences we can go for the next best thing: creating consequences that are *logical* but not actually *natural*. For example, leaving things lying around can lead to the natural consequence of them getting lost or broken. However, this does not happen often enough or consistently enough for most children (and some adults) to learn from this. If we as a parent adopt a policy of removing toys that are left lying around for a period of time we are applying a consequence that is logical though not actually natural. Similarly, parents may announce that they will only buy biscuits if the child brushes his teeth as otherwise there is too great a risk of tooth decay.



If we create consequences that are similar to natural consequences, or at least appear to make sense to a child's logic, we gain some of the benefits of natural consequences along with other important benefits.

1. As with natural consequences, logical consequences are easier to understand and remember than unconnected punishments or rewards.
2. As with natural consequences, but to a slightly lesser extent, the child is more likely to focus on his own behaviour rather than be distracted by considerations of injustice or anger at the adult.
3. In addition, with logical consequences we as adults have much more control over the situation and can ensure that the consequence follows the behaviour more quickly and more consistently than with many natural consequences.

Sometimes allowing ourselves to act naturally creates a very logical consequence. E.g., instead of saying, "I'm not giving you a lift as a punishment for your behaviour," you might say, "I'm not taking you anywhere in the car because your tantrums could make it unsafe," or even, "I don't chose to be with you while you are behaving so badly."

Illogical consequences

It is not always possible to find a logical consequence that you can apply. This is particularly true for uncooperative teenagers who don't care about very much. A consequence has to be something you can control and something that they care about at least a little. For some serious misbehaviour (e.g. abusive or destructive behaviour or

defiance that puts them or others at risk) it is better to have any consequence than none. The problem with having no consequence for truly unacceptable behaviour (especially any form of abuse) is that the young person may lose more and more respect for their powerless parent. In some cases a punishment or reward (or combination of the two), even if it is not at all logically connected to the behaviour, may be better than doing nothing. Sometimes such illogical consequences can be very effective; a common one is to apply a small fine for swearing. Try to find a way of making these consequences appear logically connected if you possibly can.

When to apply consequences

Any technique can be abused. If we try to control every aspect of a child's behaviour using consequences we create a stressful, artificial environment in which children are likely to rebel. It is very important that we are clear about **what** we are trying to influence and **why**. We should not be making rules in order to show who is boss but only when necessary. Some behaviours (dangerous or abusive) are clearly unacceptable and some kind of consequence should be applied by responsible parents. Some things are clearly the kid's business and we should not interfere. In between are a lot of behaviours that are undesirable, annoying, inconvenient, inefficient or just stupid but whether or not a consequence should be applied may be arguable. If a child is behaving really badly we may choose to ignore some of the undesirable behaviour and concentrate on the serious stuff. In two parent families it is crucially important that both parents are working together and it is often a good idea to write down what are the rules and what behaviours are to be discouraged or encouraged. Children can be involved in this process but listening to them and respecting them does not mean that they have an equal say to the adults.



If a child is showing a lot of behaviour problems or openly rebelling it is very important not to try to change too much all at once. Decide on your priorities and focus on behaviour that can be clearly defined and is clearly unacceptable. Since having **no** consequences for serious misbehaviour can mean they escalate over time, some consequence should be applied, even if it seems not to be working in the short term. Applying consequences can also be important in the message it gives other children in the home. If they see an older brother or sister swearing at Mum (for example) and there is no consequence they are likely to lose respect and later copy the behaviour.

If the consequences are all negative, i.e. punishments, then try very hard to find positives and use rewards for improvement or for trying. Even bribes (money or other payment for desired behaviour) can have their place if used sensibly as a **short-term** solution to a problem, such as breaking a bad habit. If bribes are used as an on-going part of family life they discourage responsibility. Thus children should not be paid for brushing their teeth or making their own beds, or they continue to see this as their parents' responsibility, not theirs. They can be paid for doing jobs that are clearly not their responsibility (such as washing cars or mowing the lawn).

Being clear about the child's behaviour is often very important. If you decide to give a consequence for a child being "cheeky" you will find that adults seldom agree on what exactly is "cheeky" (one person's "cheeky" may be another's "funny" or "cute") and the child will hardly ever agree. Thus the child may spend a lot of time feeling *got at* and angry, or may learn to avoid talking to adults. Children's "bad attitude" is often shown by their intensely annoying (to adults) tone of voice. However, they are often

quite unaware of their tone of voice and would find being punished for this totally unfair, probably making them more angry (and hence even more annoying). However, pointing out that they sound angry and stating how it affects you may be reasonable natural consequence.

Be Firm, not Strict

Being firm means being clear and consistent. You can be firm even if you are easy-going with few rules.

Strict parents, who have lots of rules or harsh punishments, are often inconsistent. It is actually easier to be firm with fewer rules. Harsh punishments often lead to parents disagreeing with each other or to one or both parents ignoring misbehaviour for an easy life. Parents using harsh punishments, such as spanking, are especially likely to go from passive to aggressive. They passively ignore misbehaviour although it is stressing them, or escalating, until they explode. And since anger breeds anger their children are more likely to be difficult and aggressive.

Clear consequences make it easier to be assertive: **calm, clear and firm.**

Although it is **always** a good idea to be clear and consistent, parents are not perfect and most kids cope with a certain amount of inconsistency. However, with some difficult children – because of their personality, problems or past experiences – it is crucially important that we are clear and consistent. Even if you follow through and are consistent 90% of the time some kids will gamble on the other 10% and for them such normal inconsistency may mean that they will pretty much ignore you! This does not mean that you are being a bad parent, but for such children you need to be better than average.

Don't make threats

Many parents make threats that they are not at all likely to follow through with. These lies teach children to ignore you and your words lose their impact. If you always follow through your words become an **immediate** consequence. It is very important that you don't let yourself blurt out punishments when you are angry. Either you will have to go back on your word (occasionally the sensible thing to do, e.g. if you threatened to cancel Christmas) or your partner may be forced to undermine you. A good habit for any serious consequence is to not give the final word until you have discussed it with your partner (this is not the same as "wait till your father gets home!"). This helps keep consequences sensible and shows a united front.

Keep it Simple, keep it short

Good consequences should not be complicated or people forget the rules and some kids are great barrack-room lawyers.

Whenever possible make the consequence short term.

Generally stopping a privilege for a week will have the same effect on a child's behaviour as stopping it for a month.

However, stopping a privilege for a month is more likely to lead to rebellion, is more likely to not be followed though and you have lost that ammunition should the same thing happen the next week. In fact a week is often too long for most consequences. A day or two may have the same impact on behaviour.



You don't have to decide on the spot how long a consequence will last. If it is logical for a child to lose the use of a bike then tell him this immediately but wait till you talk to the other parents, or till you calm down, before telling him how long. However, do give a definite time as soon as possible. Don't give indefinite sentences: these invite children to give up trying to behave. Once something has been stopped for more than a few months it is probably not having any effect whatsoever on their behaviour.

Most of the time "Keep it simple, keep it short" also applies to what you need to say to the child. Long explanations about what the child has done wrong can delay the consequence and lead to arguments that confuse things. Lectures are usually a waste of time. Your kids probably look on them as an additional punishment (by boredom) and become very good at tuning-out the sound of your voice.

Working out clear consequences

If a child is highly uncooperative or beyond control it can be hard finding useable consequences. Any privilege and almost anything that you do for a child can potentially be used as a consequence. It may be useful to make a list of these.

There are several important things to bear in mind:

- How comfortable are you, and your partner, about using such a consequence? If you are going to be wracked with guilt or more inconvenienced than the child then it is not likely to work.
- Does the child care about it? For many girls and teenage boys not doing their ironing would be a possible consequence and a logical one if they are not treating you as a parent. For most pre-teenage boys not doing their ironing would be completely irrelevant, or even quite cool. However, children don't necessarily have to care **a lot** about something for it to be a useful consequence.
- Does it need cooperation from the child? If so, do you have enough cooperation to make it stick?
- Sometime you need to first give, in order to have the possibility of taking away. Giving regular pocket money allows you to make children pay for breakages or thefts and can even be used as a fine for swearing. If you have already removed all privileges on an indefinite basis then give them back and start from scratch.

It is not possible to work out clear consequences for every possible misbehaviour, but the most worrying and annoying behaviours are usually ones that are repeated.

Give Choices, not orders

If you can clearly define a child's behaviour and clearly define the consequence it becomes possible to give the child a choice rather than an order:

- Instead of "Put your toys away!" (usually shouted) you can say (preferably calmly, even cheerfully) "You've only got 15 minutes till bed time, shouldn't you be putting those toys away? Otherwise they'll disappear for a week."
- Instead of "Don't you dare throw that!" (which to some kids is a challenge they can hardly resist) you can say, "Are you sure you want to throw that, you know it means no Simpson's if you do?"
- Instead of ordering "Get on with your homework!" you can say, "It's your choice, do your homework for 20 minutes and you can use the computer. It's entirely up to you."

- Instead of “don’t you dare use that language!” you can say, “That’s now \$3.50 pocket money. Do you want to calm down or would you like to save me even more money?”

It is much easier for parents to remain calm when they can give a clear consequence. Much parental anger comes from frustration over feeling at a loss. You will find that children’s hearing is much better when the consequences are clear. Both requests and orders seem to make them go deaf, which results in parents yelling. And when your yelling becomes a habit they learn to ignore you until you yell, meaning you yell even more (and they are also learning to yell at people).

When consequences are well enough established they become **house-rules** rather than an arbitrary punishment imposed by a particular adult. It should no longer matter which parent is enforcing them. It takes some of the heat out of the situation, as it is less of a personal battle between adult and child. This can be particularly important for stepparents, when one parent has a poor relationship with a child or when the child only respects the authority of one parent.

Children not cooperating with consequences

Most parents make use of time-out, grounding, early bed, or extra-chores. These are the main weapons in the modern parent’s armoury against bad behaviour. However, all of these require some cooperation from the child if they are to be anything other than an exhausting and frustrating farce. If you have lost this cooperation don’t keep trying to use these without a clear plan. Threatening time-out or groundings that don’t actually happen will make things worse. You need to work out consequences that you **can** control. You can then use these to encourage cooperation with time-out, grounding, extra chores, etc.

Examples:

“If you chose not to go to time-out you have no electronics (i.e. T.V., computer, game-boy) for the rest of the day. Your choice.”

“Last time we sent you to bed early you chose not to cooperate. You can choose to go to bed early or if you would rather you can lose the use of your bike for 1 day for every hour you are up past eight.”

“If you chose not to cooperate with being grounded you will lose all privileges, which means no T.V., computer, snacks, lifts, telephone, etc. for twice as long as the grounding.”



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