

Consequences that Actually Work

How to Use
Thoughtful Consequences
to Teach Kids True Wisdom





“You better watch it, or you’ll be getting a CONSEQUENCE!”

How many times have we said (or, more likely, yelled!) those words?

When we say this, what we mean is to warn our children they’re about to cross a boundary and they’ll need to “learn their lesson” in some way to teach them better behavior.

However, when we threaten our children with “a consequence” what they really hear is “punishment.”

For some kiddos, the threat of punishment is enough to stop them in their tracks. For others, they are willing to take the chance and hope the punishment isn’t too severe!

Regardless, **kids are thinking about avoiding outside forces rather than encouraging internal wisdom.**

So as we address the topic of “consequences that actually work,” it’s not from the perspective of “What are the consequences that will put an immediate stop to my kids’ misbehavior!?” That goal is elusive at best, hurtful at worst.

We believe you want more for your family than that.

During this short ebook, we will be guiding you to effectively use **natural consequences**, **logical consequences**, and **restitution consequences** that work to build your kids’ wise understanding and genuine sense of responsibility - for life at home and beyond your walls!

Natural Consequences

Many impacts, or consequences, for misbehaviors like disrespect or irresponsibility occur naturally, *without the intervention of an adult*. We call these “**natural impacts.**”

For example, if a child has a messy room, he may not be able to find his shoes in the morning before school. If a child hits her brother, she may feel “icky” inside. If a child tells a lie, people won’t be as likely to trust him.

By helping your children understand and experience these natural impacts, you will begin to teach them about the true causes and effects that will **follow them into life beyond the walls of your home.**

Helping children learn from natural impacts requires two important ingredients:

1 Avoid protecting children from natural impacts

It can be tempting to rush in and “help” my children solve their relational problems or smooth over their missing homework assignments. But if I protect them now, I keep them from learning from this experience and preparing for greater challenges later on.

It can be difficult to watch my kids struggle with problems I could easily fix, but natural impacts are powerful learning tools because they help children learn that their problems are theirs, not mine.





2 Facilitate awareness and understanding of natural impacts and rewards

Children can only learn from a natural impact if they learn to stop, think about it, and form practical conclusions. Parents facilitate this process by helping children learn to pay attention to their feelings and be internally motivated to change.

For example, at age seven our son Noah was frustrated that he didn't have the money to buy Legos. He whined and begged for me (Jim) to buy him some. I started to lecture him about whining when I remembered this principle about facilitating awareness of natural impacts. So instead, I stopped and empathized: "I know it's frustrating when you can't get what you want." I then used the opportunity to teach... "Your frustration is the natural impact of spending your allowance too fast." ...and encourage (with a smile): "I'll bet next allowance you'll work hard to save for those Legos!"

I helped Noah understand the natural impact of the poor spending choices that led to his whining for Legos.

I also could have helped him understand the natural impact of the whining.

Lectures such as, "Do you know how annoying it is when you whine?!" do not build wisdom. They only "fertilize" the misbehavior with attention and power. **Thoughtful questions help kids discover natural impacts.**

So I could have said:

“Hmm. You must be pretty frustrated, because it seems like you’re kind of whining and demanding about these Legos. But I’m not sure that will be a helpful habit for you in life. How do people around you feel when you whine? How does it make you feel? What else could you do when you’re frustrated?”
(As you ask questions, a friendly, curious tone is essential.)

Your child may not be able to answer those questions in the moment, but they can be the source of a great conversation later. Thoughtful questions also strengthen your ability to slow down and respond in a way that doesn’t “fertilize” the whining.

The “natural impacts” of teaching kids about natural impacts stretch far into their futures as they grow up, leave my care, and become independent.

As an adult, I rarely have other adults give me “consequences” for my bad behavior. Instead, I tend to feel frustrated, sad, or remorseful when I’ve “misbehaved,” and my awareness of these natural impacts helps motivate me to change.

For my children to gain that awareness, **I must learn to guide them to notice and understand the natural impacts of their mistakes so they can learn more effectively.** If I do this well, I’ll need to impose consequences far less frequently, and my children will be much better prepared for their future lives.

My Response:

As I think of my children’s most common misbehaviors, what are some natural impacts of those behaviors that occur without my interference?

How could I ask my children thoughtful questions to help them understand and learn from this?



Logical Consequences

When children are not motivated by natural consequences to make wiser choices, they may need more concrete consequences to help them learn.

A logical consequence is simply an enforced consequence that is related as closely as possible to the misbehavior.

Logical consequences can come in many forms, from fixing the problem (paying for the window your baseball broke) to losing the privilege (losing access to a misused toy for a while).

We see in the Bible that God often used logical consequences -- especially “lose the privilege” -- to discipline his children.

- When Adam and Eve misused the fruit in the garden they lost the privilege of being there (see Genesis 3).
- Moses’ disobedience and poor leadership caused him to lose the privilege of leading the people into the Promised Land (see Numbers 20).
- Jonah refused to go to Ninevah as God commanded, he lost the privilege of walking there himself! (See Jonah 1.)

How does this “logical consequence” principle look with a misbehaving child?

We can find some hints by looking at how consequences *shouldn't* look. Consider a child who uses a toy recklessly and unsafely. Parents frequently send the child to her room or to the time out chair, which is unrelated to the misbehavior.

Or the parent might angrily say, “That’s it, we’re getting rid of this thing since you can’t use it appropriately!” and march to the trash can to drop the beloved toy in.

That kind of approach may be related to the misbehavior, but is excessive and delivered disrespectfully. I (Lynne) did exactly that once when our strong-willed oldest son, Daniel, repeatedly intimidated his siblings with a toy bow and arrow, which I then angrily marched out to the trash.

Is it any wonder our power struggle escalated to a yelling match with no good solution in sight?





Dr. Jane Nelsen, author of Positive Discipline, suggests remembering the following “Three Rs” to ensure that consequences are both logical and helpful:

RELATED

When the consequence is related to the misbehavior, **it helps to cement the relationship between the initial misbehavior and the consequence in the child’s mind.** It is far more helpful than taking away some unrelated privilege (like their favorite toy or dessert). Consider the case of a child who tracks mud into the house after being told to leave his dirty shoes outside. A related consequence here would be to have the child clean the carpet where he walked. If he is too young to do this alone, you can either use the opportunity to teach him or at least help him do the cleaning. This not only lets children know they are responsible for their actions, but it also provides a positive interaction for learning further skills and responsibilities.

REASONABLE

A logical consequence must be reasonable — that is, **appropriate to the age of the child and the severity of the behavior.** Scrubbing the floor where he tracked gloopy mud is a reasonable consequence. It is not reasonable to have the child clean all the spots on the carpet or to forbid him to play outside for three days.

RESPECTFUL

In order to be most helpful, the consequence must be spoken and enforced respectfully. Adding humiliation to a consequence makes it hurtful instead of helpful. Simply and kindly explain, “Tracking mud in the house is not okay because it damages the carpet and makes extra work to clean it up.” A simple explanation of the consequence diffuses negative emotions and enlists cooperation.

We would also add a fourth “R”...

RIGHT AWAY

Have the conversation about the loss of privilege as soon after the infraction as possible. Waiting to implement consequences may extend the problem beyond the child’s memory, which greatly decreases the effectiveness of the consequence. The immediacy of the conversation will help to strengthen the “relatedness” in the child’s mind between the behavior and the consequences.





How might my “bow and arrow fiasco” with Daniel have looked if I had made sure my consequence was related, and also reasonable and respectful?

Perhaps like this...

“Daniel, you’re really having a hard time using this in a safe way. Did you notice the kids screaming and running away from you when you pointed it at them? What do you think they were feeling?” (Questions to spark understanding of natural impact.)

“The bow and arrow is going to go on the shelf for today, so all the kids will feel safe. You can try again tomorrow, and I bet you’ll be really careful with it.”

Helping children understand the natural impact of their actions often guides them toward wiser choices. But if it doesn’t, bring in some reinforcements! Remember the “3 Rs” and use logical consequences to help your kids take responsibility for their actions.

My Response:

As I think of the rules in our home, or maybe some recent bouts of rule-breaking, what logical (related, reasonable, respectful) consequences would best address each situation?

Restitution Consequences (aka “Make it right”)

With a strong focus on relationships, **restitution consequences** are a type of logical consequence administered when a child has mistreated someone and hurt has happened.

The goal is to find ways to help the offender “right the wrongs” while restoring the victim and the relationship. The message to the child is:

“Your relationships are valuable. When you mess them up, it’s important to do your best to reconnect.”

For example, when Daniel would get rough or aggressive with our daughter, Bethany, as soon as everyone was calm, we encouraged him to comfort her with kindness. This oriented him immediately toward her, and her toward him.

Restitution consequences are radically different from traditional “punishments.” Punishing the offender usually breeds resentment and therefore more and craftier aggression toward the unpunished child.

Restitution consequences encourage personal responsibility and usually end with one child feeling cared for and the other feeling caring.





It is important to note that “righting the wrongs” does not mean quickly forcing children to “say you’re sorry.”

Forced apologies don’t teach true remorse and reconciliation. The child might conclude, “Say whatever you need to get out of trouble.”

Instead parents can set kids up for sincere reconciliation. (Jesus was always about the reality of the heart, not the outward appearance!) You don’t have to force children through the process, but you can put “distracting privileges” on hold until the restitution is done.

What a restitution consequence looks like depends on the people. The goal is for one or both people involved (depending on who has hurt whom) to reconcile the offense by doing a specific kindness for the other, such as helpfulness, making a little gift or card, planning a special time of connection, etc.

On many occasions Daniel would choose to make chocolate milk for Bethany as his “love gift” for her after aggression or roughness. (She would sometimes even choose to share a few sips with him.) By the end they would both be beaming – Bethany because she loved chocolate milk and being treated like a princess, and Daniel because he had switched from “boy in trouble” to “knight in shining armor.” They often played nicely after that, and both of them have fond memories of their “chocolate milk apologies.”

Restitution consequences work well for older kids as well.

As teens our children often independently reconciled their conflicts by taking each other out for a coffee date. We even sometimes implemented restitution between parents and children to make things right when hurt had happened.

Practically, **restitution consequences often pair well with natural impacts and/or logical consequences.**

For an example, let's think back to Daniel's unsafe bow and arrow use.

It would have been very helpful to have his use of the bow and arrow be contingent on reconciling with his brother and sister. "What are your ideas about how you could make it right with Bethany and Noah after scaring them? When you've done that you can enjoy safe play with your bow and arrow again."

If he didn't have any ideas, I could have offered him a choice of a couple restitution suggestions: "You can apologize to Bethany and Noah if you really do feel sorry for what you did. If you don't feel sorry yet, you could make a big target and figure out a safe, fun game for the bow and arrow you could all play.

Once Bethany and Noah have had a turn, you can join in the safe fun!" If later I could guide him to sincerely apologize, that would be great, but not to be achieved at the price of insincerity.



My Response:

Related to a misbehavior of one of my kids that involves hurting or offending someone, how could I thoughtfully guide my child to sincerely make it right? (Include a discussion of natural impacts and/or the loss of a related privilege if necessary.)



Conclusion

These stories and examples are just a few of the endless creative ways you can guide children toward wisdom and true reconciliation.

Kids will continue to misbehave. (And so will we.)

Conflict will always be part of family life.

But **true reconciliation and restitution gradually build wisdom and strong relationships - filled with deep connection and joy!**

And that's what parents really want for their families. We would love to help you get there.

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