

Curiosity Killed the Consequence

A mother contacted me for help with a recent issue she had with her 7 year-old son. She told me that he had destroyed the family video camera, so as a consequence; she had taken \$100 of his birthday money from him and told him he would have to work off the balance with chores. Mom wanted to know if I thought she had done the right thing in this situation. Initially and without all the details, I gave her credit for not getting angry, not punishing him, and for attempting to use a consequence for a violated agreement or a broken rule. But with mom's next comments, I knew I needed more details about the incident. She told me that no agreements were violated and no rules were broken, he just should have known better.

To truly help this mom, I needed more information and at first, she seemed apprehensive about revealing them. But there was more to this story and after hearing it all, I changed my opinion. I gave mom some suggestions for backing out of the delivery of the consequence and offered some tips on avoiding this type of problem in the future. Here is what happened; her son dropped the video camera into the bowl while he was videotaping himself using the toilet!

As soon as I heard the story, I knew this was a valuable lesson for many parents that I could use in this column. It contained so many important components of the very construct of my methodology; Love, Limits, & Lessons®. Let me break them all apart and then explain why I no longer supported the consequence as a response to what happened.

Seeing the situation from mom's perspective, she was angry that he was negligent and destroyed a valuable device that she and her son enjoyed using, and she had every right to feel that way. She felt that he did not use good judgment and care in using it and mom would now have to either come up with the unexpected cost of replacing the camcorder or go without. For a single mom with one income, finding the funds would be no easy task. With great emphasis, she told me that she felt that he should have known better than to use it inappropriately in the first place.

If we look at the situation from the boy's perspective, there are three factors that led him to using the camcorder as he did; 7 year-olds are normally curious about their body, mom did not set up any "limits" around the use of the camcorder, and just a few days earlier, mom spent some time teaching her son about... digestion. Now we know the rest of the story.

First of all, children are little explorers and are going to be curious, that's how they learn and grow. But yet we certainly can't let their curiosity take them wherever it leads, so we have to do two things; create safe boundaries and agreements to allow them to explore, and keep our emotions in check when they explore a little too far. In the case with this mom, she may have over reacted emotionally to what happened and may have even gotten angry. Reacting in this way to a child's exploration may discourage them from wanting to explore in the future. And the fact that mom was teaching her son about digestion certainly didn't help and obviously increased his curiosity to explore his body further.

I brought to mom's attention that she had said "he should have known better not to use it in the bathroom." I acknowledged her for trusting her son with the camcorder and asked her what limits or boundaries she had set up in advance for its use so that he would have known that. She replied "none." I then told her she should not blame him for taking it into the bathroom because there were no rules set up for using it. She agreed and asked for some suggestions. I also told her we are not always going to have all the rules setup correctly and in every situation, but children learn best when boundaries and limitations are set up in advance. I wasn't expecting her to come up with 180 rules on how and where to use the camcorder, that would be ridiculous, but one simple one

could have been that it is stored in an “out of his reach” location and he has to ask permission to use it. It would be like “signing it out” when he wanted to use it, along with either a time limit or an expected return time. Mom also could have used a family meeting to allow him to help her build a list of all the appropriate uses of the camcorder along with rules for taking good care of it. Children learn so many lessons about life by the examples their parents teach them in everyday family living.

Finally, consequences are a good discipline tool but not practical for every situation. Some reading this might still be asking: “why not in this situation?” In this wonderful example, mom had to deal with a normal drive of curiosity and exploration in her son. She even “stacked the deck” by teaching him about digestion. She also did not have any rules set up about the camcorder’s use. Consequences should only be used when an agreement is violated or rule is broken; neither occurred in this situation. I encouraged mom to tell her son that she changed her mind about the consequences and return the money. She agreed to spend more time creating boundaries and limits in the future.

Bill Corbett is the author of the book “Love, Limits, & Lessons” in English and in Spanish, and the founder and president of Cooperative Kids. He has three grown children, two grandchildren, and lives with his wife Elizabeth near Hartford, Connecticut. You can visit his Web site www.CooperativeKids.com for further information and parenting advice.