

## Consequences Instead of Punishment

Punishment can be an automatic response from parents who were punished themselves as children. When a child misbehaves, a common response from the parent is to punish the child and make her pay for what she did. This is a response motivated by fear and/or anger, and results in the child feeling badly. The child learns to stop misbehavior from the fear (or even pain) of the punishment and not from learning right from wrong.

A more effective and healthier form of discipline is the *consequence*; a predetermined (logical or natural) action that will occur in response to a child's choice to act or behave. Creating and implementing consequences is one of the most challenging tools in a parent's discipline toolbox because of the lack of knowledge on how and when to do it. They are necessary and effective when a child behaves in a way that is a problem for them or someone else. Consequences are also even more effective if the child was invited to play a part in helping to create the consequences in advance.

One type of consequence is called the NATURAL CONSEQUENCE. It is the direct result of a child's behavior that provides a teachable moment to the child if the parent does not intervene. For example, a child who forgets his lunch on the counter at home has nothing to eat at school and goes hungry for the rest of the day. After a few of these incidents, the child learns to remember to take his lunch to school. Coaching by the parent in advance to help prepare a child to take personal responsibility is good, but intervening to rescue or scold the child when it happens is not. Parents who intervene and run the child's lunch to them at school, rob them of the learning opportunity to remember it next time. A child who forgets, has a parent who remembers for him.

Here are examples in which a natural consequence might work more effectively and a parent's intervention should be avoided: the boy doesn't know if he wants to play basketball this season, the girl received a D on her report card, his friends wouldn't let him join the play group because he was mean to them, the child is bored, the girl did not plan enough time to work on her book report and wasn't happy with how it turned out. Problems such as these require a parent to help the child by coaching them to help them understand the problem and develop their own solutions.

There are many times however, when the results of a child's actions don't bother them and the action can create problems for the adults. This is when a natural consequence cannot be used and a LOGICAL CONSEQUENCE may be required; a predetermine action that will occur as a result of the behavior. The first step in setting up a logical consequence is to sit down with the child and create an agreement in advance about rules, behaviors, limits, and boundaries. Once the child commits willingly to the agreement, a consequence can be created by the adult and the child together. This consequence can even be documented and signed by both the adult and the child, and posted for all to see. When these measures are taken, the child is less likely to repeat the misbehavior. If they do, they are more likely to be ready for, and follow through with, the consequence.

An effective logical consequence must meet certain criteria. Whatever is selected must be reasonable, it must be related to the misbehavior, and it must teach the child responsibility for their actions. It must also NOT contain any form of punishment. Here is an example of the proper application of a consequence. A family rule was setup in advance that each child was allowed one hour of recreational electronics time on school days and two hours on weekends and holidays. This included watching television, using the computer, and playing with the video game system. A timer was used and each child was given the responsibility of tracking their own time. If the parent noticed that the child went over their time for the day, they received no electronic time the following day. So let us do the test; it's *related* to the infraction, it's a *reasonable* action, it teaches the child about being *responsible* for agreements regarding electronics, and it does not contain a trace of *punishment*.

When my grandson was a preschooler, he loved to play with the plastic bucket full of die cast cars I had collected over the years. Getting tired of him not picking them up when he had finished playing with them, I decided it was time to set up an agreement and a consequence with him. I got down to his eye level and using a calm and loving voice, I announced that Grandpa had a new rule about the toy cars. I told him that whenever he wanted to play with the cars, he had to agree to pick them up when he was finished playing with them. He agreed to the new rule by repeating it out loud and then I hugged and thanked him for being so helpful to me. I then setup a consequence that if he did not comply with the rule, he would lose the privilege of playing with them next time. After three incidents of losing the privilege and throwing a fit when I implemented the logical consequence, he learned to pick up his toys when he finished playing with them.

Here is one final note on logical consequences. The delivery of a logical consequence must be implemented without a trace of anger because it is designed to teach them about cooperation, responsibility, and limits. In order for them to work, they must be delivered with respect and love in your voice, in your face, and in your actions. This is called unconditional love, something many of us struggle with because we may not have seen it when we were children.

*Bill Corbett is the author of the parenting class "Love, Limits, and Lessons," and the founder and president of Cooperative Kids. He has three grown children, two grandchildren, and lives with his wife Elizabeth near Hartford, Connecticut. Send him your questions via email to [bill@billcorbett.com](mailto:bill@billcorbett.com).*