



by Karen Stephens

Clear, Consistent Consequences Motivate Cooperative Behavior

The long-term goal of guiding children's behavior is to prepare them for adulthood. One of the keys is teaching them how to behave so they ultimately become adults who can manage their behavior independently. Learning self-control and how to interact respectfully with others supports children's self-esteem and benefits society in general.

Children are more cooperative when they clearly understand what parents (and others) expect of them. The more specific parents can be about expectations, the more likely children will behave appropriately. But there's more to guiding behavior than that. Human behavior isn't controlled by instinct. We have free choice over behavior decisions. It's a privilege and a responsibility to have that choice. The sooner we teach that to our children, the safer we'll all be.

One effective way to teach acceptable behavior is to require children to experience the consequences of their actions. Consequences operate along the lines of cause and effect. If a child behaves a certain way, then there's a specific response. If we shelter children from consequences and distort true cause and effect, children rarely become accountable. Instead, they become confused and go through life blaming the other guy for all their misfortune and "bad luck."

When children experience consequences, they gradually become responsible for their own behavior choices. Enforced consequences motivate children to develop self-control. In parenting books, you'll frequently read about two types of consequences: natural consequences and logical ones.

Natural consequences are outcomes that are directly related to a child's exact act or behavior. If a child breaks a crayon, he colors with a shorter one. If she dawdles during supper, she might not get enough food before siblings eat it. If they delay picking up their toys, they miss their favorite television program.

Experiencing natural consequences is a good way for children to learn; unless the consequence could threaten their mental or physical health. For instance, if a child plays with a sharp knife she could get cut badly. If a child wets his pants on the way to preschool the truly natural consequence would be for him to attend in wet, uncomfortable, smelly pants. Neither of those natural consequences are positive guidance alternatives.

If a natural consequence is dangerous, demeaning, or counter-productive, the parent must think up an alternate outcome for a specific behavior. Such a solution is called a logical consequence. Logical consequences are not all created equal. Some that parents think up are pretty good ones, others are rather poor ones. Wisely chosen logical consequences teach positive behavior. For instance, when children are required to take the time to fix a torn book page with tape, they learn to be more careful in the future.

Poor logical consequences are downright destructive. No good ever comes from hitting kids or locking a child in the closet or worse. (And yes, for some children worse does happen in the name of child guidance.)

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To make sure you choose consequences that do children more good than harm, take a tip from Jane Nelson, author of the book *Positive Discipline*. Apply the “3 R” test to any consequence before enforcing it. Consequences that result in a “yes” to each question in the “3 R” test, leave children’s self esteem intact. They help children become well behaved and responsible. Consequences that pass the “3 R” test teach appropriate behavior without dehumanizing children.

Here’s the “3 Rs” for consequences. Keep them in mind during the heat of any child guidance moment.

1. Is the consequence related to the deed? Can your child understand the relationship between the deed and the consequence? If not, they’ll be confused and distracted.
2. Is it respectful? If a consequence humiliates, demeans, or embarrasses a child, it’s not a wise, respectful consequence. Disrespectful consequences build resentment, not cooperation. They undermine your parenting relationship and damage your child’s self esteem.
3. Is it reasonable? Consequences should be appropriate for your child’s age and level of understanding. If a wise, caring, calm person wouldn’t enforce the consequence, you shouldn’t either. If you’ll be ashamed of the consequence once your anger and frustration fades, don’t use it.

A consequence that is related, respectful, and reasonable is only effective when it is enforced consistently in a timely manner. Consequences should be predictable and reliable. If consequences aren’t consistently enforced, they are useless. Enforcing consequences takes enormous stamina. Unfortunately, kids don’t need guidance only when we have enough energy.

Children are persistent and curious by nature, so they occasionally test our limits and consequences. The more wishy-washy and inconsistent a parent’s response, the more a child will push the envelope of acceptable behavior. He or she may misbehave just to see how much they can get by with, what they can get out of, or how far they can push before you explode.

Sometimes children even take advantage of parents. For instance, if they know you’re very tired, stressed out, or there’s company around, they’ll misbehave and try to get out of consequences. Family reunions can be the worst; children know you don’t want to reprimand them in front of gram and gramps! And I haven’t met a child who doesn’t act up the minute you get on the phone.

However, if you want children to listen to you the first time you say something, you must consistently follow through on consequences right away. Children who are warned ten times to “behave” will not listen up until the ninth warning when your teeth are clenched and forehead is beaming like a stoplight. Consequences that are applied three days after misbehavior occurs don’t work either. Kids literally forget what they did wrong.

It pays to consistently communicate expectations and enforce consequences. Kids who don’t learn to be responsible for their behavior in the preschool years just tire you out. But during adolescence, their behavior can reel out of control, hurting themselves and innocent others. It’s common sense to practice being clear and consistent today so your family can have a smoother tomorrow.

To learn more about expectations and consequences, see Parenting Exchange columns: “The Fundamentals: 7 Steps to Well-Behaved Kids” and “Reliable and Predictable Discipline: Tips for Enforcing Consequences Consistently.”

Resource Books

- *Positive Discipline* by Jane Nelson (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987).
- *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers* by Jane Nelson, Cheryl Erwin, and Roslyn Duffy (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1995).

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.