



by Karen Stephens

Reliable and Predictable Discipline: Tips for Enforcing Consequences

If you're a parent, the phrase "Say what you mean and mean what you say," should be part of your daily self-talk vocabulary. What's self-talk? Well, it's that little voice inside your head you banter with all day long. You've used it from childhood. As an adult, it's especially vocal when you're frustrated trying to get the kids to cooperate.

I know it sounds silly, but I recommend self talk as a parenting tool, provided it's constructive. Unfortunately, many parents berate themselves with negative self-talk: "I blew it this time." "I'm not cut out for this." "These kids are driving me to the loony-bin." "I should've never had kids in the first place." "I'm as bad as my mom (or dad)."

It's counter-productive and self-defeating to allow these statements to flood your thinking. You don't have to be victim to them, but it takes discipline and self-control to hold them at bay. Sadly, a negative attitude is easier to slip into than a positive one. But once you master it, positive self talk is a great tool. It helps parents remain calm. And in the thick of confrontation with an irrational child, it's helpful to remind yourself, "This too shall pass . . ."

When guiding kids' behavior, edit negative self-talk. Concentrate on constructive messages. Refer back to the phrase, "Say what you mean and mean what you say." It can guide you to wise discipline responses.

But positive self-talk alone won't do the whole job when disciplining. A positive attitude has to be backed up with decisive and constructive action. It requires guidance based on clear expectations and enforcement of consequences. If that action isn't taken, you end up with children who are disrespectful, annoying, and downright obnoxious. Preventing that is a parent's gift to everyone who interacts with his or her child — relative, neighbor, teacher, co-worker, or employer!

For some parents it seems easier to endlessly nag ultimatums at kids rather than actually enforce them. With children as sparring partners, they participate in round after round of endless power struggles, never taking decisive action to stop the fight. Those parents end up with ill-behaved kids. Instead, children need clear, reliable direction that is consistently enforced. That helps them learn to behave ethically and compassionately for a lifetime.

Following are guidelines for enforcing consequences. They can help you say what you mean and mean what you say. If you consistently put them into practice, your children will learn to trust and count on you. As an added benefit, gradually children will test you less and will be more cooperative and easier to live with around the house! You must take the first step by being clear, firm, reliable, and dependable. That's why you're the parent. Here are tips to help you do your job well.

15 Tips for Enforcing Consequences:

1. Clearly and simply state expectations according to your child's ability to understand: "Hold onto the camera with both hands."

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2. Briefly give the reason behind your expectation so your child learns to think logically. “If you don’t hold onto the camera with both hands, it could drop and break.”
3. If a child is uncooperative, decide upon a consequence. Make consequences reasonable, respectful, and related to the specific behavior you are addressing. Make sure it is a consequence you will be able to follow through on.
4. If a child ignores an expectation, briefly state the consequence. “You can’t take photos of the zoo animals any longer if you don’t hold onto the camera with both hands.”
5. With younger children (and depending on safety issues involved) consider giving one warning before you enforce a consequence. However, if the ONE warning is ignored, IMMEDIATELY follow through with the consequence.
6. For older children who clearly know expectations or who repeatedly test your expectations, enforce consequences immediately at the first sign of an uncooperative behavior.
7. Use appropriate body language with your communication. Stay calm and matter-of-fact when stating consequences. Don’t gloat or say, “I told you so.” Even if you don’t feel calm and confident, act it.
8. When enforcing a consequence, don’t be hesitant or guilty about it. Such behavior gives children a confusing, mixed message. It is your child’s choice to ignore limits. You are merely walking your talk when you enforce a consequence.
9. If your child doesn’t cooperate, follow through on the consequence — each and every time. Infractions become fewer if you are predictable, reliable, and believable.
10. When enforcing consequences, resist being shrill, whiny, or mean-spirited. Resist name calling and belittling. It’s counterproductive. It makes children defensive and puts their focus on you, not on becoming more cooperative.
11. Don’t, and I mean ever, set consequences you won’t keep. Making ridiculous threats like, “I’ll leave you in the store overnight if you don’t come here right now,” shows kids you’ve lost your senses. It also teaches them not to trust or listen to you. It undermines your authority, nothing more.
12. Stick to the issue at hand. Resist focusing on all past offenses or other misbehaviors. Ignore children’s comments when they say, “But Tonya did it first!” That’s not the point. What kids did last month isn’t the point. Focus on the here and now, deal with it, and then be done with it.
13. Don’t let kids unethically play on emotions. It’s not uncommon for kids to manipulate themselves out of a consequence by spitefully saying, “I love Daddy better than you!” Don’t buy into it. Parental preferences are not the point, correcting behavior is. You teach a powerful, destructive lesson if you teach children that emotional blackmail works on you. Simply say: “That’s not the issue,” or “This isn’t a popularity contest.” (And it won’t hurt if you do a little self-talk like, “Oh, give me a break, kiddo.”)
14. Don’t let your child trick or distract you from the issue at hand. Children who don’t want to leave a park will act like every tree, insect, or miniscule piece of litter is an unbelievably beautiful, fascinating treasure. Even as you squeeze them into the car seat, they’ll try to wriggle out and squeal, “Oh, Daddy, look at that tree!” I say, please, daddy, don’t look. Call darling dimples on her game. Say, “We’ve already looked at the tree; it’s time to go home. You’re not going to trick me into staying.”
15. And last but not least, a little empathy goes a long way. For instance, if Charlie screams and cries when you remove him from the sand box for throwing sand, whisper in his ear, “I know. You really want to stay in the sandbox. When you learn not to throw sand you’ll be able to play longer.”

Need more tips on incorporating consequences into your parenting style? Refer to Parenting Exchange article, "Consistent, Clear Consequences Motivate Cooperative Behavior."

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*.

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