

discipline lessons that stick

Let your child learn from the natural consequences of his own actions, and you can prevent power struggles without being the bad guy.

by RENÉE SAGIV RIEBLING

WHEN I WAS a kid, “discipline” meant that my parents revoked one of my favorite privileges whenever I misbehaved. Hit my brother? No TV for a week. Didn’t do my chores? Forget that trip to the mall. Not only did this method reign in my house, but it was the MO in the home of everyone else I knew.

Although this classic approach to discipline can make kids cooperate in the short term, research has now shown that it’s not the best way to teach lifelong lessons. “Kids don’t learn when they’re feeling threatened,” says Jane Nelsen, Ed.D., author of the Positive Discipline series. Your child may

comply with your demands because he’s afraid of what will happen if he doesn’t—rather than because he has grasped anything about right and wrong.

These days, experts encourage us to let our kids experience what they call the natural consequences of their actions instead. If your child refuses to wear his jacket, just let him be cold—and he probably won’t put up a fight the next time. Logical consequences entail more adult involvement, but they’re also connected to the misbehavior: If your child runs out into the middle of the street, he must hold your hand for the rest of your walk. It’s this

connection that helps your child understand and learn from the repercussions of his actions.

Sounds easy, right? I thought so too—until my kids did things that didn’t seem to have a natural consequence. What was the real-world outcome of my daughter needing to be nagged 30 times before doing her chores? Or my son’s refusal to walk to day care in anything but his birthday suit on a hot day? The fact is, ideal corrective consequences can’t do the trick every time. But they’ll be effective in more situations than I’d realized. Follow these tips to get better behavior now—and in the future.

He'll be more likely to clean up if he knows what'll happen if he doesn't.



➔ **Consider the Three R's**

A consequence is most likely to teach a helpful lesson when it is related, respectful, and reasonable, explains Dr. Nelsen.

Related, of course, is the opposite of random. So if your child makes a mess, her consequence should be that she has to clean it up (not that she can't play on your iPad).

Respectful means that the consequence doesn't involve shame or humiliation. "Your child already feels bad when he does something wrong," says Dr. Nelsen. "If you say, 'I told you so,' or if you shame him

afterward, you'll lessen the potential for learning because he'll stop processing the experience and instead focus on the blame."

When 7-year-old Vander Cheadle, of Ferndale, Michigan, wanted to take his favorite superhero ski mask to the town's library celebration, his stepmother, Amanda Hanlin, knew it was a bad idea. "I reminded him that it was warm outside and that neither his dad nor I would hold it if he got hot. But he just said, 'Don't worry, I'll take care of it.'" Vander brought the mask—and lost it. "It was tempting to say, 'I told you not to bring that mask!'" Hanlin admits.

"But I could see he recognized he'd made a mistake and was very disappointed." Instead, she and his dad helped him retrace his steps. When the mask didn't turn up, they agreed to take him to the store another day so that he could use his allowance to contribute to the cost of buying a replacement. By staying calm and choosing their words, they allowed Vander to learn a valuable lesson about being responsible for his things—and his choices.

Reasonable implies that a consequence should be a task your child can handle—given her age and know-how—and that's proportionate to her misbehavior. This will help her concentrate on what she's done rather than on resenting you. If your 3-year-old is goofing around and knocks over a carton of milk, don't expect her to mop the whole floor by herself to drive home your point. Instead, wipe up the spill together. If she refuses, put your hand gently on top of hers and physically do the motion with her, suggests Fran Walfish, Psy.D., author of *The Self-Aware Parent*. If she is screaming uncontrollably, you can hold her in your lap after at least part of the mess is cleaned up. When her crying stops and you feel her muscles relax, praise her for being able to calm down and just move on.

An older kid might give you back talk instead of having a meltdown, but resist the urge to get angry or let her weasel out of things. You can help defuse arguments by mentioning a consequence ahead of time ("I've noticed a lot of gum wrappers around the house—please put wrappers in the garbage, or the consequence will be no more gum"). When advance warning isn't possible, help her brainstorm solutions for a problem she's gotten herself into. For example, you might say, "You must be upset that you forgot your project is due tomorrow



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I understand that you'd like me to go buy you those materials now, but it's late and I'm not willing to do that. Do you need help figuring out something you can make with the supplies we have?"

Find the Missing Link

Natural consequences are pretty straightforward if your child has done something he shouldn't have done. I had trouble figuring out how to use them effectively when my kids failed to do things they should (like chores) and the natural consequence (a dirty house) wouldn't faze them. Although I was tempted to take away TV time like my mother had, my approach actually just needed a little fine-tuning.

"When you tell your child, 'If you don't sort your laundry, then there's no TV,' that's punishment, because the connection between doing the chore and watching TV isn't apparent," says Madelyn Swift, author of *Discipline for Life: Getting It Right With Children*. Plus, the "If you don't..." phrase makes it sound like a threat, so he'll think the point is to make him pay for not doing what you asked. However, you can turn this into a logical consequence by substituting a "When you" construction: "When you have finished sorting the laundry, then you may watch your show."

By putting it this way, you articulate the principle that you'd probably like your kids to live by: Do what you have to do before doing what you want to do. Your child may end up missing his favorite show that night—and not be able to talk about it with his friends the next morning—but once he's finished his chore, he'll experience the natural consequence of enjoying a fun activity more because there's no chore hanging over his head.

Another mantra to emphasize is that privilege equals responsibility. "Our family's rule is that all toys

* If your child doesn't speak to you respectfully, tell him that he has lost the privilege of being listened to now.

must be put where they belong by the end of the day, and any toy left lying around is food for the garbage can," says Amy Kertesz, a mom of five kids, ages 4 months to 10 years, in Palmetto Bay, Florida. "My kids know that if they don't take responsibility for their things, the consequence is that they lose the privilege of having them. Only my 3-year-old gets a pass. I'll ask him to put something away rather than just tossing it." (If you'd rather be less hard-core, you could put toys on a high shelf or in a box in another room and return them when your child demonstrates that he's been cleaning up his other toys.)

This is effective not only for material privileges but also for non-tangible ones: If your child can't handle the responsibility of playing nicely with his siblings, then he loses the privilege of getting to play with them. When he doesn't speak to you respectfully, he won't have the privilege of being listened to. However, instead of telling him, "Don't you dare speak to me that way!" calmly explain, "I will be happy to discuss this when you are able to talk about it respectfully. You can find me in my room when you're ready."

And this technique is just as powerful when your child does something right. When my 6-year-old asked if he could play a video game ten minutes before we had to pick up his sister from school, I told him there wasn't enough time. He