

Consequences: Discipline Power Tools

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When parents hear the word “discipline” they often jump to thinking about punishment for bad behavior. There’s a lot more to discipline than that! Discipline is all the things we do that help our kids learn how to be good people, and follow rules – skills they need to succeed in school, work, and life. We teach discipline through: role modeling, making sure they know what’s expected of them, praising good behavior, setting clear limits, and many other skills. (Learn more at GoodDaysWithKids.com.) But, there is a time for punishment for bad behavior, or what I call the “Discipline Power Tools.”

When to Use These Tools

If your child is hurting someone or something, or if they are at risk of being hurt, we jump straight to these tools, without stopping for a warning or to offer other options. (Because one of the rules you established in advance is that “it’s never OK to hurt anyone – if you do, there will be consequences.”)

If they are actively misbehaving, but they’re not hurting anyone or anything, you *might* use these tools. But you could also *first* try giving them a chance to improve. You could give a When / Then – “when you do make a choice to do this positive behavior, then you’ll get this benefit”. Or you could give an If / Then warning that “if the negative behavior doesn’t improve, there will be negative consequences”.

Natural Consequences – Let Mistakes / Poor Choices Have Consequences

A natural consequence is what will happen if the child keeps doing what they are doing, and an adult does not intervene. Often, we make them stop behaviors before the natural consequences happen. But, *sometimes* you might let it play out and let the child live with the consequences of their actions.

If you’re going to let a mistake play out, it’s only fair to warn the child about the possible problem with an “If / Then”. We, as adults, might be able to foresee consequences. But a child may not *realize* what could happen. So warn them, and if they’re wise, they’ll stop. If not, they’ll have a natural consequence.

- “If you pull the cat’s tail, then the cat will probably scratch you.”
- “If you play with that toy that roughly, then it may break, and I won’t buy you a new one.”
- “If you don’t eat any lunch, then you will be hungry during the movie.”
- “If you don’t bring your comic book inside, then it may get ruined by rain.”
- “If you do that, you might spill. Then you’d have to clean it up, and I won’t give you more juice.”

Natural consequences are best used when the results of the mistake will be a *little* painful so a lesson is learned, but not *too* painful. For example, if the child might break a cheap toy, you might not intervene, but if they’re about to break your laptop, you should stop them! If they might get a bump or a bruise, you might let that play through, but if they’re risking a broken bone, you will stop them.

When they experience a natural consequence, they are likely to be sad or mad. You can sympathize with the emotion without fixing the situation. “I know you’re sad about your toy. I’m sad that it’s broken too.”

Logical Consequences – the punishment fits “the crime”

Logical consequences are imposed by the parent. They are related to the misbehavior. Here are a few key categories of consequences, with examples of the If / Then warning that would precede them.

- Removing the child from the situation:
 - “If you run near the parking lot, then we’ll have to leave the playground.”
 - “If you knock the books off the library shelf, we’ll go home instead of going to story time.”
 - “If you pour the water on the floor, then you’ll have to get out of the bathtub.”
- Taking the problematic item away from them:
 - “If you don’t pick up your crayons, I’ll put them away. You won’t be able to draw later today.”

- “If you two can’t share that toy nicely, then I will put it away for the rest of the play date.”
- “If you knock your plate on the ground, then lunch is over. No more food till after nap time.”
- Requiring the child to do something to repair a situation.
 - “If you spill that you’ll need to help me clean it up.”
 - “If you break that, you’ll have to use your allowance to buy a new one.”
 - “If you don’t clean that up now, I will. But you’ll have to help me with the laundry later.”
- Removing a privilege
 - “If you don’t finish your homework tonight, then no screen time tomorrow.”
 - “Since you hurt your friend, I can’t let you play tag anymore today.”
 - “If you don’t put all your laundry in the basket, then no cookies today.”
- Time Out means spending time in a boring place, for a prescribed time, getting no positive attention. It is a chance for a child to calm down, then return to better behavior. For a 3 year old, give a 3 minute timeout. For a 4 year old, 4 minutes. This tool is effective for some families, although some don’t find it helpful. Find best practices at <https://gooddayswithkids.com/time-out/>

When imposing consequences, be sure that:

- The consequence is **developmentally appropriate**
 - For a toddler, it has to be immediate and short term – if they start throwing blocks, immediately pick the child up and take them away from the blocks. Then you help them find a new activity to do. A few minutes later, they might wander back to the blocks and play with them appropriately.
 - For a preschooler, the consequence should still follow closely after the behavior but can last a little longer. If they are playing in a way that could break a toy, you take it away right away, and say “I’ll keep this safe till this afternoon, then we can try again.”
 - For an older child, consequences can be more delayed and last longer. For a teenager: “if you don’t do well on winter quarter grades, then I won’t let you do soccer in the spring.”
- The consequence is fair and **in proportion to how bad the behavior was**
 - If a child spilled juice, you wouldn’t say “no drinks at the next five meals.” But you could say “no more juice today. If you are thirsty, you can have water.”
 - If a child failed to put away toys one time, you wouldn’t throw away all the toys. But if clean up has been an on-going challenge, the toys could “take a break” for a day or two.
- You choose a consequence that **you can and will follow through on enforcing**
 - Kids need to know they can trust their parents to keep promises. That includes being consistent with consequences. Don’t go easy and back down. if you do it once, they’ll test you every time.
 - No empty threats, like “if you don’t come right now, I’m leaving you at the store and not coming back.” They know that’s not true. (And if they thought it was true, that would be very scary!)
- You need to **carry out the consequence calmly**, without anger and shaming – consequences are not about making your child “really regret” their choices – they’re about learning that choices have impact and learning the importance of making better choices in the future.
- For older kids, don’t let them choose to take a consequence instead of doing a chore. If they’re refusing a chore, give them a consequence for that *and* tell them they still need to do the chore.

Moving on: Once a consequence is complete, move on, don’t rehash. We all make mistakes, and need to come back in and try again. Don’t nag, let this be a clean slate moment.

Following Up: At a family meeting, when all is calmed down, briefly discuss what happened (without shaming or nagging – they’ve “done their time for the crime”). Briefly remind them of what the rules are, and what behavior you consider unacceptable. Then move on, and talk about other things.

Continue to teach other skills. Consequences can’t be your only discipline tool. Be sure to also be using positive attention, role modeling, guidance in what TO DO, teaching them how to manage big emotions, and more to help your child learn how to behave better. Your long-term goal is raising a child who knows what it means to be a good person. Using a wide variety of tools will help teach them this.