

# How to Give Kids Consequences That Work

By James Lehman

You can't punish your child into better behaviour. Forget about over-the-top punishments or ineffective rules because you'll just end up in a power struggle.

The right consequences motivate your child to good behaviour. They put you back in control and teach your child how to problem-solve, giving your child the skills needed to be a successful adult.

Here are 14 tips to ensure that the consequences you use with your child or teenager are effective.

## 1. Use Consequences, Not Punishments

A consequence is something that follows naturally from a person's action, inaction, or poor decision. A consequence is intended to teach or modify behaviour in a positive way. It differs from a punishment in that a punishment is retribution. A punishment "gets back" at someone for something they did, with the goal of hurting that person.

It's very tempting to deliver a harsh punishment when your child has broken a rule. If for no other reason, you might feel compelled to send the message: "I'm your parent. You need to listen to me."

Unfortunately, punishments are not an effective way to change behaviour, nor are they a constructive way to reassert your parental authority.

## 2. Make Consequences Task-Oriented

A task-oriented consequence is related to the offense and defines a learning objective. For example, if your child stayed out past curfew then the next time, she goes out she has to come in an hour earlier to show you that she can do it. When she shows you, she can do it, you can go back to her normal curfew time.

In contrast, grounding her for a month is not a task that will teach her to observe curfew. It just puts you and your family through the grief and the child learns nothing.

## 3. Make Consequences Time-Specific

Time-specific means that your child has a certain length of time by which she needs to accomplish these tasks. The length of time should be long enough that your child must stretch, but not so long that she loses interest or gives up.

For instance, no swearing for three days is just long enough that she must work at it, but not so long that it feels impossible. And if her reward for a successful three days is getting to use her phone again, you've also gotten her attention by placing "currency" that she values within her grasp.

It's just not effective to remove privileges for vague or long stretches of time. If you take something away for three months, that is an eternity in the life of your child. She'll feel like the whole thing is pointless. Plus, as a parent, it's hard to stick to a long-term consequence. You lose your resolve, you get distracted, or you simply forget.

#### **4. Make Consequences Related to the Original Behaviour**

Related to the original behaviour means that the consequence is connected to the behaviour you want to see your child change or improve.

For example, if he's been breaking curfew, he needs to show that he can come in at an earlier time for seven days in a row before you raise the curfew back to a later time.

#### **5. Consequences Are About Learning**

The best consequences are those from which the child learns something. If your son is disrespectful to his sister, a good consequence is to tell him he can't use the phone until he writes her a letter of apology. In the letter, he needs to tell her what he'll do differently the next time he's in conflict with her.

Writing the letter of apology is a learning experience for him that wins him back his phone. That way, he's not just "doing time" like a prisoner in a jail cell. He's completing an act that teaches him something.

#### **6. Don't Cancel Special Events as a Consequence**

Cancelling an important holiday, celebration, or party to teach your child a lesson is not going to result in improved behaviour. Effective consequences require a child to show improvement in order to earn a privilege. Once a special event has passed, there's no way for your child to earn it back. He'll just be bitter.

If you've tied a consequence to a special day or celebration, like Christmas, the prom, or a birthday party, I encourage you to reconsider. These special moments in your child's life can't be recaptured. They will never have another 16th birthday or another senior prom. Besides, your child isn't the only one who would miss out on these occasions—these are special events that you want to enjoy as well.

I also would not take away sports as a consequence; missing a practice as part of a consequence is okay but taking away the sport entirely is not likely to be effective.

#### **7. What to Do When Consequences Don't Work**

What if your child doesn't seem to get the message? Doesn't the consequence need to be harsh to get them to take it seriously? Not at all. Remember, this isn't about punishing your child. This is about encouraging improved behaviour. It may take time for your child to learn how to behave appropriately, but consistent and effective consequences are the best route.

Think of consequences like speeding tickets. For some drivers, a single ticket gets them to slow down. For others, it takes four tickets, and several insurance rates increases before they finally learn. Some may even need to have their license revoked for a period of time. But they eventually learn if consistent and effective consequences are used.

Consequences don't happen in a vacuum. They need to fit in with an overall style of parenting that is designed to produce children who can respond to limits, meet responsibilities, and demonstrate age-appropriate behaviour.

So, if a particular consequence isn't working, and a parent says, "I took his phone for two weeks and it's not working," that parent needs to look at a couple of things.

First, maybe two weeks is too long. Maybe what you need to tell your child is this:

*"I'm taking your phone until you don't do X for twenty-four hours."*

Or:

*"If you talk abusively to your sister, I'm taking your phone until you don't talk to her abusively for forty-eight hours straight. And every time you're abusive with her, it starts over."*

Go back again to the most important question: "What do I want to accomplish?" If you want to hurt him for hurting his sister, then take his phone for two weeks. But if you do, don't expect better compliance from him in the future.

Instead, if you want your son to work on his self-control and to learn not to be abusive, then set up a task as part of the consequence.

Related content is in the article: ["Why Don't Consequences Work for My Teen?" Here's Why...and How to Fix It](#)

## **8. What to Do When Your Child Says: "I don't care."**

Many parents tell me that their kids don't care about consequences. Understand that all kids will say "I don't care" at one time or another.

"I don't care" is usually just an attempt at manipulation to avoid the consequences. So, when your child does this, realize that it's simply a way to throw you off, to try to save face, or to get their own way.

Most importantly, it's a way for your child to try not to take responsibility for his actions. The answer for parents? You just need to tune it out. If your child says, "I don't care," you can calmly respond:

*"I understand that you don't care. But the consequences stay and that's that."*

By the way, I think there are very few kids who really don't care on some level. They may not care a lot, but even if they care a little, it matters. If you think your child really doesn't care, and the consequence seems to be having no effect, then you need to try a different consequence. You know your child. You know what matters to her.

## **9. Use Rewards as Well as Consequences**

If you want consequences to be effective, you also need to have rewards. A parenting style of all consequences and no rewards is punitive and can hurt your relationship with your child.

For example, the consequence for not getting home by curfew might be getting grounded for a couple of days. But let's say your child comes home by curfew five nights in a row. For being consistent and responsible, you could make her curfew later. In other words, reward her responsibility with more trust.

I also recommend that parents set the rewards and consequences so that you have smaller rewards for minor achievements and bigger rewards for major achievements. The same goes for

consequences—use smaller consequences for minor infractions and bigger consequences for major infractions.

## 10. Create a Menu of Rewards and Consequences

Create a menu of rewards and consequences. The menu becomes a roadmap for how to consistently deal with your child's behaviour problems.

A menu also keeps you from taking shortcuts, which we all do in parenting. Parents are tired, they work hard, they have high levels of anxiety over their finances and their professional careers. In short, they have lots of demands beyond caring for the children. This is true in almost every family.

So, parents often start taking shortcuts that are ineffective, such as taking the cell phone for every offense or impulsively grounding a kid for a week. If you have a menu of rewards and consequences, you can give an appropriate consequence for the offense—one that allows the child to learn. Not a knee-jerk, punitive consequence.

By the way, taking the phone is a significant consequence for a kid these days. Use this consequence cautiously. If you are taking the phone, enable him to earn it back in a reasonable amount of time. Once he earns it back then it is still available to take away as another future consequence.

Related content: “Which Consequence Should I Give My Child or Teen?” How to Create a List of Consequences and Rewards for Children”

## 11. Be Business-Like When Giving Consequences

Be brief and clear when giving a consequence. It should be done in a matter of fact and business-like manner, like a boss giving a performance review. Don't let your child draw you into an argument. If your child insists on negotiating or arguing, then disconnect and walk away.

You want to be firm, not rigid. There's nothing wrong with being firm. Being firm creates a consistency that kids prefer in the long run. But if you're being senselessly rigid, your kids are going to be defiant in response. And you'll just end up in a power struggle.

Some parents are senselessly rigid by sticking with an ineffective consequence just because they are afraid that changing the consequence will diminish their authority. If you need to go back and change a consequence, try saying this:

*“I know I told you that your behaviour cost you access to the car for the next 6 months. Here's what I'd like to do instead. I want you to earn that car back. If you can be home by your curfew for seven days in a row, I'll give you the car for three hours on a weekend day. When you show me, you're responsible enough to return the car within those three hours, then we can talk about extending that time.”*

Similarly, if in the heat of the moment you absurdly tell your daughter she's grounded for life, you can come back later and say:

*“Okay, I was really angry at you because you broke curfew again. Of course, you're not grounded for the rest of your life. Here's your real consequence.”*

Understand that your authority as a parent is not rooted in you sticking to an ineffective consequence. Your authority as a parent is a long-term investment. You build and maintain it by being firm, but not rigid.

## **12. What to Do When Kids Get Furious When Given a Consequence**

I've seen kids get furious when given a consequence—they become enraged and confrontational. Kids who scream and get angry are really trying to intimidate their parents so that they won't set limits. When this happens, you need to stick with the consequence and remain as calm as possible. Don't get sucked into your child's anger and his reactionary mode.

Just remember that this is about your child's behaviour—that's why you're setting consequences in the first place.

And let me be very clear here: do not avoid consequences because you are worried that your child will become enraged. Choose consequences based on their effectiveness. And if he escalates the situation by breaking something or swearing at you, then deal with that later (when you are both calm) with additional consequences if necessary.

## **13. Consequences and Power Struggles**

Sometimes consequences don't work because they are part of a much broader problem—the child is in a power struggle with the parents. One of the primary ways that kids try to win that power struggle by withholding compliance. Once that pattern establishes itself, the only power the parent has is to punish, and the only power the kid has is to refuse to do what they're asked. A vicious cycle ensues.

Consequences alone will not work in that atmosphere. When this occurs, parents need a more comprehensive solution. Often, that means working with a family counsellor or using one of the parenting programs offered by family support agencies, local council or advertised through the school.

## **14. A Final Word on Consequences and Parenting**

Parents need to set clear rules and have realistic expectations that those rules will be followed in their household. Those rules should reflect the values that the parents set for the household.

This doesn't mean parents act like a dictator, randomly doling out harsh punishments for all infractions. Instead, they need to have high expectations for behaviour, but, at the same time, they need to be nurturing and forgiving of shortcomings.

Ultimately, parents should want their kids to become mature and self-sufficient, and effective consequences are an important tool to do just that.