

“Why Don’t Consequences Work for My Teen?” Here’s Why...and How to Fix It

By Megan Devine

If you’re having trouble giving effective consequences to your teen, know that you are not alone. Many parents tell me that nothing seems to work and that coming up with the right thing for their child can seem like an impossible task.

If you’re the parent of an adolescent, you may have grounded your child, taken away their video games, or suspended their driving privileges for months on end. But as James Lehman says, you can’t punish kids into acceptable behaviour—it just doesn’t work that way.

Rather, an **effective consequence** should encourage your child to change their behaviour — whether that is abiding by the house rules or treating people respectfully. So first, you need to identify the behaviour you want to change.

For example, if your **child swears** when they don’t get their way, you want them to behave more appropriately. **Instead of grounding or punishing**, or even reasoning with your child when they get angry and lash out, an effective consequence here would require your child to practice better behaviour – and improve their self-control – for a period of time before their normal privileges are restored.

Let’s break this down:

- Effective consequences are connected to the original behaviour and are both task- and time-specific.
- “Connected to the original behaviour” means that your consequence needs to be related to the behaviour you want to see your child change or improve.
- “Task-specific” means that there is something your child needs to accomplish or practice related to the original problem. This is a concrete behaviour, like washing the dishes, meeting curfew, or not swearing.
- “Time specific” means there is a specific amount of time in which they needs to demonstrate that behaviour.

So, when your child swears, they might lose access to their electronics until they can go without swearing for two hours. The consequence is tied to the behaviour. They swore, so they have to practice not swearing. This consequence is task-specific – it requires them to exercise the part of their brain that governs self-control. If they want their stuff back, they have to practice better behaviour. And it’s time-specific – they need to demonstrate self-control for two hours. Only then are they free to have their privileges back.

It’s important to understand that you can’t get your child not to feel angry or frustrated. That’s just part of being human. But you can require that they change the

way they deal with those feelings. You can expect them to practice some self-control. Your goal is to require that your child practice the better behaviour for a certain amount of time before they get their privileges back. So practice and behavioural improvement equals the restoration of privileges.

If they yell about their consequence, or how unfair it is, you can say:

“I understand that you’re angry. Yelling is not going to get you what you want. Once you’ve been able to deal with your anger appropriately for two hours, you will get your electronics back.”

Do not continue to explain your consequences or justify your decisions. They may mumble to themselves or text their friends about how awful you are, and it may take some time, but eventually, your child will decide to practice those skills that earn back their electronics.

How to Choose a Consequence

Think of it this way: a privilege is a motivator. The withdrawal or granting of a privilege should give your child an incentive to follow the rules of your house, even when they don’t agree with those rules.

An effective consequence is a privilege your child is interested in. For some kids, video games are a powerful motivator, while other kids could care less about them. Taking away a cell phone for two hours works for some kids while others would just find another way to communicate.