

Consequences

Picture this. You're waiting to pick your son up from school and are talking to other parents while you wait. You mention that your son hasn't been doing his homework, and you don't know what to do about it.

"You should ground him," one parent mutters.

"You should confiscate his phone until all his homework is done," another advises.

"He needs to learn the consequences of his decisions," counsels another.

Consequences have become a buzzword lately in the parenting field. There is talk of 'natural' consequences, 'logical' consequences, 'applied' consequences, and 'imposed' consequences. Yet for all these labels, 99% of the time when people are talking about consequences, what they're really talking about is *punishment*.

As far as behaviour modification goes, we know that punishment works. But the real question is... "works" to do *what*?

Often grounding your teenager or taking his phone away would be effective ways of enforcing desired behaviour. However, these actions are based on Behaviourist principles developed from studying pigeons and rats. They're effective... in the short term, and only for as long as we're willing to keep imposing the consequences.

Furthermore, what do you want the reasons to be for your teen going along with what you've asked? If compliance is your only goal, then punishment makes sense. Of course, you have to be there all the time to impose that punishment. If you want your child to do something because they want to do the right thing, deep down, then we need better approaches.

I don't think these tactics are the best way forward. In fact, I think that we can do 99% of our parenting without imposing consequences of any kind. There are two reasons for this. The first is that a lot of the time, natural consequences occur to teach our child the negative results of their behaviour without our intervention. If your child doesn't do their homework, the natural consequence is that they will get a bad mark on the assignment. If they continue to avoid doing homework, they might even fail the class or have to repeat their year level. By explaining the link between their actions and the consequence, you can reinforce the learning without shaming them. "I know that you didn't do your homework all the time. It seems reasonable to me that you received a bad mark in that subject."

However, we can't always rely on natural consequences. After all, the natural consequence of getting aggressive and throwing punches is that someone else will get hurt, and the natural consequence of driving while drunk is a potential car accident.

When we're unable or unwilling to let our child experience the natural consequence of their actions, we need to try something else. Many people advocate for 'logical' consequences – that is, a consequence somehow logically linked to the behaviour. For example, confiscating their phone until the homework is done would be considered a logical consequence, while being grounded wouldn't be. However, both of these 'consequences' are really just punishments. Their goal is to deter the child from undesirable behaviour by imposing a penalty.

Which brings me to the second reason that consequences aren't necessary: we don't need to make our child feel worse for their behaviour to get better.

Instead, we want to explore, explain, and empower.

By **exploring**, we connect with our child and seek to understand the motivation behind their behaviour. Once they feel seen and heard, we can move to **explaining** what our expectations are. Most of the time our kids already know what we expect from them, so we don't need to lecture them. A short and simple explanation is all that's necessary. Then we can **empower** them to collaborate with us in finding solutions that work for everyone.

As a note, these steps only work when our children are capable of logic and reasoning. When emotions are high, those capabilities go out the window. So, if there are tears, angry voices, or other signs of big emotions, the first step is getting everyone back to a state of calm. To do that:

1. Focus on staying calm yourself. Emotions are contagious. If we're not focused, we'll end up catching their chaos rather than having them catch our calm. Breathe.
2. Describe what you see ("It looks like you're having a hard time right now").
3. Help to remove them from the challenging situation and ask them if they want some time alone.

From there, we can move back to explore, explain, empower.

Here's what that looks like in action:

Explore – "I've noticed that you haven't been doing your homework lately. Can you help me understand what's preventing you from doing it?"

Explain – "I'm worried that you might fail the subject if you don't keep up with the homework."

Empower – "How can I support you to get your assignments done?"

Contrary to what anyone may say, our children rarely need to learn the consequences of their actions. They just need to be supported to choose better ones.



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