

Consequences Teach Responsibility

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How to discipline children by letting them experience the consequences of their behavior, and by using “time-outs,” “reverse time-outs,” and “think space” are described in this publication.

Introduction

Of the many ways to discipline children parents can choose the ones that suit them as individuals and that fit their beliefs and values. Allowing children to experience the consequences for their behavior is one discipline method.

This “hassle-free” way to discipline children allows them to learn from experiences, just like adults. It’s called “learning the hard way.” Children learn that every act has a consequence. And, they learn to be responsible.

Discipline by Consequences

Parents can declare that the consequence of not coming to the dinner table on time to eat is that the child does not eat dinner that evening. Hunger is a natural consequence of not eating. If he complains, the parent can say, “I’m sorry you feel hungry now. It’s too bad, but you’ll have to wait for breakfast.” The child who experiences the unpleasant consequences of behavior likely will not act that way again.

Parents should tell the child, before it happens, what the consequences are for breaking a rule. If the child knows the consequences of not getting to the dinner table in time to eat with the family, then the child has a choice — whether to get there in time and eat, or to be late and not eat. Children must understand that they have choices and must accept the consequences of their choices.

Children also need to know the reason for the consequence; for example, it is extra work for parents to keep food warm, inconsiderate to expect someone to clean up the kitchen twice, and eating together is a valuable family time.

It is important, too, that parents be willing to accept the child’s decision; that is, they must be willing to allow the child to go without dinner if the child chooses to miss the meal. Doing without one meal will not harm the child.

- **Natural consequences** allow children to learn from the natural order of the world. For example, if the child

doesn’t eat, he will get hungry. If the child doesn’t do homework, she will get a low grade. The parent allows unpleasant, but natural, consequences to happen when a child does not act in a desirable way.

- **Logical consequences** are arranged by parents. The consequence must logically follow the child’s behavior. For example, not having clean clothes to wear is a logical consequence of not placing dirty clothes in the hamper. If the child wants clean clothes and did not put them in the hamper, then he/she will have to wash them.
- **Consequences teach responsibility.** Kristin left her dirty clothes on the floor and never placed them in the dirty clothes bag as requested. Nagging, scolding, and threatening did no good. Kristin continued to leave her dirty clothes on the floor.

Her mother decided to use logical consequences. She told Kristin, in a firm and friendly voice, that in the future she would wash only the clothes that were placed in the bag. After five days, Kristin had no clean clothes to wear to school, and she was very unhappy to have to wear dirty, rumpled clothes. After that, Kristin remembered to place her clothes in the bag.

Kristin’s mother gave her the responsibility for placing her clothes in the proper place to be washed. If her mother had relented and washed Kristin’s clothes when she had not placed them in the bag, she would have deprived her of an opportunity to learn to take responsibility for herself. If parents protect children from the consequences of their behavior, the behavior will not change.

Some parents would not be willing for their child to go to school in dirty, rumpled clothes. Only they can decide if they want to offer the child that particular consequence.

Using consequences can help a child develop a sense of responsibility. It leads to warmer relationships between parents and children and to fewer conflicts. The situation itself provides the lesson to the child.

- **Natural consequences cannot be used in all situations.** Parents cannot use natural consequences *if the health or safety of the child is involved*. If a young child runs into the street without looking, it is not possible to wait until the child is hit by a car — a natural consequence — to teach the child not to run into the street. Instead, the child should be taken into the house and told, “Since you ran

into the street without looking, you cannot play outside now. You can go out only after you decide to look before going into the street.”

This is a logical consequence. Because running into the street can harm the child, he cannot play outside until he learns to play safely in the yard. The child has a choice, to stay out of the street or to go inside. The child is given responsibility for behavior, and any consequences suffered (going inside) are the result of that behavior. *However, consequences cannot be used with very young children who do not understand them.* Remember, children’s minds don’t work like adults’ and they can’t think like adults.

- **Consequences are learning experiences.** The purpose of using consequences is to help the child learn to make decisions and to be responsible. Consequences are learning experiences, not punishment. They won’t work if they are used like punishment. For example, if a father yells angrily at his child, “Put up your toys or you can’t watch TV,” he is not encouraging the child to make a responsible decision. The consequences are not connected to the desired behavior. If he says calmly in a friendly voice, “Stuart, pick your toys up now. If you chose not to pick up your toys, you will not be able to play with them for a week.” He is allowing Stuart to make a choice. The secret of using consequences effectively is to stay calm and detached. Be friendly, not vengeful and spiteful.

Parents cannot apply consequences if they are angry. They cannot conceal their anger from the child — their voice will give them away. Try to view the situation objectively — as though the child were a neighbor’s child and not your own — and administer the consequences in a firm and kindly manner. Remember that giving a child a choice and a chance to suffer the consequences is a learning process for the child.

The differences between consequences and punishment are:

<i>Consequences</i>	<i>Punishment</i>
calm tone of voice	angry tone of voice
friendly attitude	hostile attitude
willing to accept the child’s decision	unwilling to give a choice

Consequences work when children are trying to get the parent’s attention by misbehaving, and when they fight, dawdle, and fail to do their chores. They can be used to get children to school and meals on time, and to take responsibility for homework. Robert learns that if he doesn’t wash his hands before meals, he won’t be served any food; and if he fights with his brother while in the car, the car will be stopped until calm resumes.

- **Consequences are difficult to use.** It is not easy to use consequences as a way to discipline children. It is hard work to think of consequences that really are logical. And it requires lots of patience! Sometimes it takes several

weeks to get results.

Parents are so used to telling their children what to do that it is very difficult to sit back and let them suffer the consequences of their actions. The effort is well worth it, however, because it means fewer battles between parent and child.

Take a Time-Out

A “time-out” is an excellent discipline method to use when your children are using inappropriate behavior. It works like this: Sandra and Sarah are fighting over a game. Their mother says, “Since you can’t play together without fighting, I think you need a time-out. Sarah, you go to your room, and Sandra, you go to the bathroom and stay for five minutes. I will let you know when five minutes are up.” (They can be sent to any room where they can be alone.)

A time-out is not a punishment. It is just a boring five minutes when nothing happens.

- **Time-outs have many advantages.** They can be used with children aged three to twelve. (They probably won’t work with children younger than three, and they are inappropriate for teenagers.)

Time-outs can be used with as many children as you have places where they can be alone. A time-out can be used when children are fighting, quarreling, or using inappropriate behavior.

Before trying this new method, sit down and explain it to your children when both you and they are in a happy frame of mind. It always helps if children know what to expect. For example, tell them, “The next time you argue over your toys, we are going to try something new. It’s called a time-out. When I say ‘take a time-out,’ it means you have to go to separate rooms and stay there for five minutes. I will tell you when five minutes are up.” The amount of time a child is in time-out should be equal to their age. For example, if a child is three years old, then their time-out would be three minutes long.

- **Call time-outs in a calm, cool way.** It will not work if you make it a punishment or if you scream, “Roger, I’ve told you and Eddie a hundred times not to fight over your toys. You two will just have to take a time-out and see how you like that!”

The objective of the time-out is to stop undesirable behavior. Roger and Eddie cannot fight when they are in separate rooms. The time-out gives them time to simmer down. It also gives them time to think about their behavior and to realize that you will not allow it to continue.

The time-out is particularly helpful for fighting and quarreling between brothers and sisters. Sometimes children fight to get attention. When the parent screams and punishes, the children get attention and thus have reason to repeat their fighting.

The time-out saves parents from trying to decide who started the fight and who is to blame. Placing blame on one child only creates more jealousy. When fighting breaks out, say, “Since you children cannot get along with each other, I think you need a time-out.” If Bryan says, “But

she started it,” say, “I don’t care who started it. You both need a time-out.”

When five minutes are up, say, “Five minutes are up.” Don’t say, “You can come out of your room now,” or “you can come out and play now,” or give any kind of directions. Just let them know that the five minutes are up.

Calling a time-out instead of punishing makes for less tension between parent and child. It causes less wear and tear on the parent. If the time-out doesn’t work, the parent is probably using it incorrectly. Parents who have difficulty using this method are the ones who have trouble saying “no” to their children. If the child refuses to go to the room, simply take him by the hand, lead the way to the room, and close the door. The child needs to learn that the parent means business, and when a time-out is called, she is going to a room and staying there for five minutes. If the child won’t stay in the room, the parent is probably not calling the time-out in a firm manner.

The parent must mean it. Calling time-out and then not seeing that the child goes to a room will not work. The child soon learns that when you say, “Take a time-out,” it will not be enforced.

The first time you try a time-out, your children will be surprised that you are not punishing them. After they are familiar with this discipline method, they will accept it and may even call time-out on themselves. This is a sign of self-discipline.

Think Space

The Think Space method helps children take responsibility for their own behavioral choices while giving adults a safe and responsible way to take themselves out of their child’s emotional loop of misbehavior. This is similar to Time Out but gives your child a chance to talk through or think through better choices for “next time.” The Think Space uses a 6-point procedure that quietly communicates positive messages — from unconditional love to personal responsibility.

1. Calmly and patiently **take** — **never send** — your child to the Think Space.
2. Allow your child to **finish** inappropriate behavior such as screaming or whining in the Think Space without guilt or repression.
3. Help your child to **think** about how to respond the next time: i.e., help him/her **look forward** to better choices in the future. By helping your child think through better choices, he/she is practicing behavior for the next time.
4. Instruct your child to leave the Think Space when he/she is **finished** thinking and is **ready** to cooperate.
5. Look for a **change of attitude**, demonstrated by willing “cooperation.”
6. Guide your child to **repair** damaged relationships and/or physical property as he/she exits the Think Space.

“While this tool is somewhat demanding of an adult’s time in the outset, the investment is well worth the effort. When applied correctly and consistently, the Think Space is both powerful and rewarding in its ability to generate desirable, enduring change,” says Calvin Richert, author of Think Space.

Reverse Time-Out

Reverse time-outs can be used when the child is really “bugging” you. Remove yourself from the situation. You may be unable to change his behavior, but you do not have to suffer through it. Instead of isolating the child, as in a time-out, it is the parent who is isolated.

If the child is acting silly, arguing, or whining, leave her and go where the behavior can’t get to you. For example, take a magazine, go in the bathroom, and lock the door. Come out when peace and calm are restored.

Some parents may dislike this discipline method. It is inconvenient, and they interpret it as “giving in.” However, your children consider your presence rewarding. When you remove your presence, you are withholding a reward. Children soon learn that if they behave a certain way, you will leave the room.

Conclusion

Misbehavior is a normal part of growing up. No child is good all of the time. However, if your child has severe behavior problems, such as repeated acts of violence, these discipline methods may not work, and you may need to look for professional help.

1. Using consequences as a discipline method helps children learn to take responsibility for their behavior.
2. Consequences must be logically related to the misbehavior.
3. The child must see the relationship between misbehavior and the consequence, or it will not work.
4. The child must know that there is a choice when logical consequences are used.
5. Use consequences in a firm, kind, friendly manner.
6. Time-outs work well when your children quarrel and fight.
7. Call time-outs in a firm, calm voice.
8. Calling a time-out instead of punishing makes for a happier atmosphere in the home.
9. Taking a child to Think Space helps children think about solutions and take responsibility for their own behavioral choices.
10. A reverse time-out means that the parents isolate themselves from the child instead of isolating the child.

See How Much You Have Learned

Read the following situations and check an effective way to respond to them.

Situation	Consequences	Time-Out	Reverse Time-out	Think Space
1. Jenny, five years old, left her bike in the driveway.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Mike and Karen are always leaving their toys strewn all over the living area.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Todd keeps pestering his mother for a cookie. Mother knows lunch will be ready in an hour, so she tells Todd he will have to wait until after lunch. Todd continues to beg, whine, and argue.	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. Five-year-old Jose is playing with his favorite red fire truck when Rosa, who is three, rudely snatches it away from him. Jose is furious and tries to take the fire truck away from Rosa. Their quarreling is “bugging” you and you feel like exploding.	_____	_____	_____	_____

Practice Exercises

1. Try calling a time-out when your children fight or argue. Notice:
 - (a) How did I feel?
 - (b) How did the children respond?
2. Try using logical consequences. Pick some behavior that doesn’t get you “uptight.” It is difficult to learn a new discipline method when you are upset.
 - (a) What did the child do?
 - (b) What consequences did you and the child decide on?
 - (c) What happened? Did it work?

Resources

Richert, Calvin & Carolyn. (2001). *The ThinkSpace*, Take V Publications, Box 4490, Overland Park, KS 66204-4490

Acknowledgment

This revision is based on the original NebGuide, “Consequences Teach Responsibility,” by the late Herbert G. Lingren, UNL extension family life specialist.

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1. Consequences
2. Consequences
3. Time-out or Think Space
4. Reverse time-out

Answers to see how much you have learned:

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