

Behavior Training - Consequences

Definition

- Consequences are what happens after a child breaks a rule.
- All children need universal rules and limits about what is good and bad behavior. They need consequences to help them learn the right choice. If the consequence is unpleasant (negative feedback or a punishment), the child is less likely to repeat the bad behavior.
- Young children do not respond to lectures or reminders. Actions speak louder than words. The most effective actions are ignoring harmless misbehavior, redirecting the child to appropriate behavior, or giving your child a time-out.
- Age: Most of this information is about children less than 5 years old: toddlers and preschoolers.

Health Information

Best Consequences for Different Ages

- From birth to 1 year: no discipline needed. Exception: make sure your baby can fall asleep on his own by 2 months.
- From 1 to 3 years: structuring the home environment, distracting, ignoring, verbal and nonverbal disapproval, moving your child, and temporary time-out.
- From 3 to 5 years: the preceding techniques (especially temporary time-out), plus natural consequences, loss of possessions and privileges.
- From 5 to 12 Years: the preceding techniques plus reasoning more with your child, delay of a privilege, "I" messages, and some negotiation about what's fair. Structuring the environment and distraction is no longer needed.
- Teen years: loss of privileges, "I" messages, and family conferences about house rules and fairness of consequences. For teens who are upset and angry, an occasional time-out may still be helpful for calming down.
- The techniques listed above are further described below.

What to Expect

- Any inappropriate behavior can be changed. In young children, most single problem behaviors will improve in 2 to 4 weeks with a targeted plan.
- Behavior training (discipline techniques) gradually changes a self-centered toddler into a mature teen who is thoughtful and respectful of others, assertive without being aggressive, and in control of his or her impulses.

Care Advice

Consequences - Menu of Options

1. **Structure the Home Environment:**

- First deal with your child's safety by using gates on stairways and locks on screen doors.
- Then deal with your toddler's normal need to explore. Put breakables out of reach. Hide valuables.
- If needed, lock doors to rooms where you don't want your child poking around.

2. **Distract Your Child from Misbehavior:**
 - Distracting a young child from temptation should often be tried first.
 - Distracting your child is especially helpful when the child is in someone else's home, a doctor's office, or a store. You may want to give a busy activity in advance if you're going to be on the phone or preparing a meal. Most young children can be distracted with toys or games.
 - School-age children are easier and may only need books.
 - TV or other video devices can serve as a last resort.
 - Distracting is also called redirecting a bored child.
3. **Ignore the Misbehavior:**
 - Ignoring often helps unacceptable behavior that is harmless -- such as tantrums, sulking, whining, quarreling, or interrupting.
 - The proper way to ignore this misbehavior is to move away from your child, turn your back, and avoid eye contact. Stop any conversation with your child. Ignore any continued protests. Sometimes, you may need to leave the area where your child is misbehaving.
 - Ignoring is also called extinction.
4. **Give Verbal and Nonverbal Disapproval:**
 - Mild disapproval is often all that is required to stop a young child's misbehavior.
 - Move close to your child and get eye contact. Look stern and give a brief, direct command, such as "No" or "Stop." Speak in a disapproving but soft voice. You may want to underscore that you are serious by shaking your finger.
 - Also tell your child what you want him or her to do. The most common mistake parents make is talking too much (lecturing).
5. **Move or Escort Your Child to Where He Needs to Be:**
 - Sometimes you will need to move your child from one place to another against his or her will. A common one is taking them to a time-out chair, if they won't go on their own. At other times, they must be taken to their bed, a bath, or the car if they refuse to go on their own.
 - Guide your child by the hand or forearm.
 - If your child refuses to be led, pick your child up from behind and carry him. This is also called "manual guidance".
6. **Give a Temporary Time-Out:**
 - Time-out removes the child from the scene of the unacceptable behavior to a boring place. Examples are to a corner, time-out chair, or bedroom.
 - Time-out is the most effective consequence available to parents for dealing with misbehaving toddlers and young children.
 - Time-outs should last about 1 minute per year of age and not more than 5 minutes. Remember, actions speak louder than words for young children.
 - See the Time-Out Technique handout for details.
7. **Let Natural Consequences Teach:**
 - By experiencing the natural consequences of their own actions, your child can learn good behavior from the natural laws of the physical world. You can stand back and watch. Examples are: Coming to dinner late means the food will be cold; not dressing properly for the weather means your child will be cold or wet; running on ice can lead to falling down; putting sand in the mouth leads to an unpleasant taste; and breaking a toy means it isn't fun to play with anymore.
 - Although it is very helpful for children to learn from their mistakes, it is important that they not be allowed to do anything that could harm them or others, such as by playing with matches or running into the street.

8. **Take Away a Possession or Privilege (Logical Consequences):**
 - Logical consequences are logically linked to the misbehavior. Most logical consequences are simply the temporary removal of a possession or privilege. Examples are: taking away toys or crayons that are not handled properly, not replacing a lost toy, not repairing a broken toy, sending your child to school partially dressed if the child won't dress himself, having your child clean up milk he has spilled, cleaning the floor your child has tracked mud on, and turning off the TV if children are fighting about it.
 - In addition, your child can temporarily lose TV, telephone, shopping, bicycle, and car privileges if they are misused.
 - The schoolteacher will provide appropriate logical consequences if your child does not complete homework assignments.
 - All of these help your child become more accountable for his mistakes and decisions.
 - Do not take away important privileges that build social skills. That would include going to a birthday party, soccer game or a scout troop meeting. Also, don't take away an event your child has looked forward to for a long time, such as a concert.
9. **Delay a Privilege:**
 - This technique requires your child to finish a less desirable activity before allowing a more desirable one. It's the old reliable "work before play".
 - Examples are: "After you clean your room, you can go out and play"; "After you finish your homework, you can play video games"; and "After you taste all your foods, you can have dessert."
10. **Give an "I" Messages:**
 - When your child misbehaves, tell your child how you feel. Say, "I am upset when you do such and such."
 - Your child is more likely to listen and respond positively to you than if everything you say to your child starts with "you."
 - "You" messages usually trigger a defensive reaction.
11. **Negotiate with Your Older Child:**
 - As children become older, they need more input into problem-solving.
 - A parent can begin such a conversation by saying, "We need to change such and such. What are some ways we could handle this?"
 - Discussions involving the whole family (family conferences) are helpful in the teen years.

Consequences - Guidelines for How to Give

1. **Teach Your Child any New Rule and Consequence in Advance:**
 - Teach them when they are in a good mood and not busy. Tell them the rule and why it is important.
 - Tell them calmly what you will have to do if they break the rule. Then ask: "Do you understand?" After you get a "yes", add; "We will work on this together. I know you want to be better".
 - Then when they misbehave, you can ask: "What is our rule about that?"
2. **Mean What You Say:**
 - Mean what you say and follow through. Be clear about what you want. Parents need to be in charge.
3. **Correct with Love:**
 - Talk to your child the way you want people to talk to you.
 - Avoid yelling or using a disrespectful tone of voice. For example, say gently, "I'm sorry you left the yard. Now you must stay in the house."

4. **Give One Reminder of the Rule Before You Correct Your Child:**
 - Say "Stop that or you will need a time-out".
 - When you know your child understands the rule, a reminder is not needed. You can give your consequence without a warning. This is especially important for hitting or other aggressive behavior.
 - Tell them what they did wrong while you are taking them to time-out.
 - Avoid threats (repeated reminder) of what are going to do if your child does not stop. Threats cause "parent deafness" and do not work.
5. **Give the Consequence Now:**
 - Delayed consequences are less effective because young children forget why they are being punished. Consequences should happen very soon after the misbehavior. They should be given by the adult who saw the misdeed.
 - An exception may work for children older than 4 years who misbehave outside the home. You can put checkmarks on your child's hand with a felt-tip pen for each misbehavior to indicate the number of punishments the child will receive when you get home. The consequence might be 30 minutes of lost video time for each checkmark.
6. **Punish Your Child for Clear Intent of Aggression:**
 - This mainly applies to aggressive children. Try to stop your child before someone is hurt or damage is done. An example would be that you see your child raising a toy to hit a playmate.
7. **Make a One-Sentence Comment About the Rule When You Correct Your Child:**
 - "No hitting. We don't hurt people". That's all.
 - Avoid lecturing. Talking and explaining is not helpful for most young children.
8. **Ignore Your Child's Arguments While You Are Correcting Your Child:**
 - This is your child's attempt to delay the consequence. Young children understand action much more than words. Don't try to reason or argue with your child when they misbehave. They are not in a learning mode.
9. **Make the Consequence Brief:**
 - Time-outs should last no longer than 5 minutes.
 - Take toys out of circulation for no more than 1 day.
 - We want each day to start with a clean slate and an opportunity for your child to succeed.
10. **Follow the Consequence with Love and Trust:**
 - Welcome your child back into the family circle. Do not comment upon the previous misbehavior or require an apology for it.
 - Avoid degrading comments such as, "You never do anything right" or "You're driving me crazy".
11. **Expect Behavior to Get Worse Before it Gets Better:**
 - Children who are out of control initially go through a phase of testing any new rules, before accepting them as law.
 - This testing usually lasts 3 days.
12. **When Consequences Don't Seem to be Working, Try Love:**
 - Assume he may have what I call: Affection Deficit Disorder (ADD).
 - Shower him with extra love and hugs when he is behaving. Love helps children want to listen to and please their parents.

Call Your Doctor If

- Your child's misbehavior is dangerous
- Your child is also having behavior problems at preschool
- Your child can't keep friends
- Parents can't agree on behavior training plan (your rules and consequences)
- Parent can't give up physical punishment
- Misbehavior is not improved after using this plan for 4 weeks
- You have other questions or concerns

Pediatric Care Advice

Author: Barton Schmitt MD, FAAP

Copyright 2000-2020 Schmitt Pediatric Guidelines LLC

Disclaimer: This health information is for educational purposes only. You the reader assume full responsibility for how you choose to use it. The information contained in this handout should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. Listing of any resources does not imply an endorsement.