

The Truth About Consequences by Dr. Patricia Nan Anderson

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A lot of parents tell me they've tried using logical consequences to manage children's behavior but with not-very-good results. They can't figure out why this supposedly fool-proof method doesn't work for them. Usually it's because they're not using it correctly. Check and see if this could be the case for you.

Logical consequences was popularized by psychologist Rudolf Dreikurs in the 1940s and 50s. Dreikurs' most famous book on child guidance, *Children: The Challenge*, emphasized developing children's selfdiscipline and self-control in a supportive parenting environment. According to Dreikurs, logical consequences allow children to learn to limit themselves without putting parents in a controlling role.

So why do many parents struggle to make this work? It's because they have trouble letting the Universe be their child's teacher. Logical consequences is effective because it's impersonal. Nobody inflicts punishment or teaches anybody a lesson. In fact, in a logical consequences situation, the parent can sympathize with the child and share in her disappointment in how things worked out. The parent is not the disciplinarian. But giving up this role is hard for many moms and dads.

Here are five ideas to keep in mind that will make logical consequences work better for you.

1. The consequences have to be logical. They have to arise from the situation and not be something created by the parent. So a logical consequence of leaving your jacket out in the rain is that you have to wear a wet jacket (or no jacket). It's not a logical consequence if leaving your jacket out in the rain results in no dessert tonight. Parents get frustrated here because if their child has another jacket to wear the consequence doesn't bite hard enough to suit the adult. But if leaving a jacket out is no big deal, then it's no big deal. That's logical.
2. The consequences have to be immediate. Especially for young children, who have such an imperfect understanding of time, an effective consequence has to activate the moment a mistake was made. Throwing a block at the wall leaves a mark, which the child must work to fix - now. Staying home on Saturday from a planned trip to the zoo in order to fix the mark on the wall is not immediate and so seems disconnected from the act of throwing a block. Parents delay consequences because stopping everything to let the consequence have its effect is often inconvenient. But teaching children is always inconvenient. It would be so much easier if they already knew everything!
3. The consequences have to be neutral. Consequences are not good or bad, they just are. Trying to make them worse or more dramatic than they have to be inserts into the experience a parent's wish to punish. But once you take sides, you're lost. This is not logical consequences then but just an elaborate method of exerting control. Staying neutral in the matter of consequences is not easy for most parents, who are afraid that their child is "missing the point." But again, if you have to jack up the consequence in order to make it more noticeable, then maybe the whole thing was no big deal to begin with.
4. Consequences aren't part of a judicial system. Consequences are natural because they arise naturally. They are the outcome of natural laws, not human laws. When a parent makes the point that the child "chose" to behave badly and so "chose" to be punished by some predetermined sanction, that parent isn't using logical consequences but is acting as judge and jury. This is punishment, plain and simple. Justifying punishment by saying the child "chose" it is a cover-up intended to make you feel better about making your child feel bad. Your purpose should never be to make your child feel bad and you should never have to feel guilty or embarrassed by the way you guide your child.

5. Your role as a parent is one of lending sympathy. If your best friend left the top of her convertible down and then it rained and ruined the upholstery, you wouldn't say "I told you so! I told you to watch the Weather Channel!" No, you would say how awful that was and wonder along with her how much it will cost to fix things and where she might find a good person to do the work. Your role with your child in a logical consequences situation is exactly the same. If you have to be "right" and point out how you could see this coming but your child was too thoughtless and pigheaded to listen, then your problem is not one of discipline but a problem of good manners. Be nicer! You might see now where you've been applying logical consequences in ways that pretty much guaranteed failure. You might also understand that the technique of logical consequences is really a way of aligning yourself and your child in relationship to the way the world works.

Logical consequences is a valuable method that leads to good child outcomes. But for most parents, it's not easy. We need to be mindful of what really is logical.

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