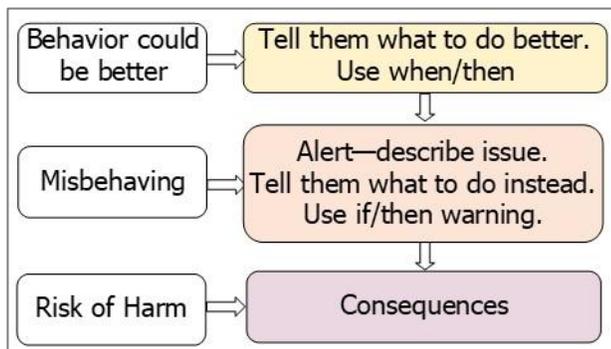


Consequences

Janelle Durham, Parent Educator. Check out my full "discipline toolbox" series at GoodDaysWithKids.com.

When you hear the word "discipline", do you think about punishment for bad behavior – consequences? There's more to discipline than that! Discipline is all the ways we teach children how to be good. We teach through: role modeling, clear expectations, praise, setting limits, and more. There is a time for consequences (the "power tools" of the discipline toolbox), but they should never be our only tool.

Using the Right Tool for the Situation



Sometimes a child is not really misbehaving - doing something wrong - but you do wish they were doing something differently. (Like when you are in a hurry to leave and they are moving slowly.) If that's the case, just tell them what you want them to do better. You could use a "when/then" to remind them of a good thing that will happen when they behave well. "When you get ready for bed quickly, then we have time for two bedtime stories." If that doesn't work, you could escalate to next level.

If the child is misbehaving, then alert them – tell them what they're doing wrong. Tell them what to do instead. (Re-direct, substitute, offer choices.) You could use an "if/then." If their behavior doesn't improve, there will be this consequence. And then, if needed, you escalate up to the consequence.

If your child is hurting someone or something, or if they are at risk of being hurt, you need to jump straight to consequences, without stopping for a warning or to offer other options. (One of the rules you can establish in advance is that "it's never OK to hurt anyone – if you do, there will be consequences.")

Natural Consequences – Let Mistakes Play Out

A natural consequence is what will happen if the child keeps doing what they are doing, and an adult does not intervene. We often rescue children by stopping a behavior just before natural consequences happen. But, *sometimes* we can let it play out and let a child live with the results of poor choices.

If you're going to let a mistake play out, it's only fair to warn the child about the possible problem with an "If / Then". We, as adults, might be able to foresee consequences. But a child may not *realize* what could happen. So warn them, and if they're wise, they'll stop. If not, they'll have a natural consequence.

- "If you pull the cat's tail, then the cat will probably scratch you."
- "If you play with that toy that roughly, then it may break, and I won't buy you a new one."
- "If you don't eat any lunch, then you will be hungry at the park."
- "If you don't bring your comic book inside, then it may get ruined by rain."
- "If you do that, you might spill. Then you'd have to clean it up, and I won't give you more juice."

Natural consequences are best used when the results of the mistake will be a *little* upsetting so a lesson is learned, but not *too* upsetting. For example, if the child might break a cheap toy, you might not intervene, but if they're about to break your laptop, stop them! If they *might* get a minor bump or a bruise, you might let that play through, but if they're risking a broken bone, you will stop them.

When they experience a natural consequence, they are likely to be sad or mad. You can sympathize with the emotion without fixing the situation. "I know you're sad about your toy. I'm sad that it's broken too."

Logical Consequences – the punishment fits “the crime”

Logical consequences are imposed by the parent. They are related to the misbehavior. Here are the key categories of consequences, with examples of an If / Then warning that would precede them.

- Removing the child from the situation:
 - “If you run near the parking lot, then we’ll have to leave the playground.”
 - “If you knock the books off the library shelf, we’ll go home instead of going to story time.”
 - “If you pour the water on the floor, then you’ll have to get out of the bathtub.”
- Taking away the problematic item:
 - “If you don’t pick up your crayons, I’ll put them away. You won’t be able to draw later today.”
 - “If you two can’t share that toy nicely, then I will put it away for the rest of the play date.”
 - “If you knock your plate on the ground, then lunch is over. No more food till after nap time.”
- Requiring the child to do something to repair a situation.
 - “If you spill that you’ll need to help me clean it up.”
 - “If you break that, you’ll have to use your allowance to buy a new one.”
 - “If you don’t clean that up now, I will. But you’ll have to help me with the laundry later.”
- Removing a privilege
 - “If you don’t finish your homework tonight, then no screen time tomorrow.”
 - “Since you hurt your friend, I can’t let you play tag anymore today.”
 - “If you don’t put all your laundry in the basket now, then no cookie at dinner.”
- Time Out means spending time in a boring place with no positive attention, for a prescribed time (e.g. 3 minutes for a 3 year old). The goal is for them to calm down. This tool is effective for some families, not others. Find best practices at <https://gooddayswithkids.com/time-out/>

When imposing consequences, be sure that:

- The consequence is **developmentally appropriate**
 - For a toddler, it has to be immediate and short term – if they start throwing blocks, immediately pick the child up and take them away from the blocks. Then you help them find a new activity to do. A few minutes later, they might wander back to the blocks and play with them appropriately.
 - For a preschooler, the consequence should still follow closely after the behavior but can last a little longer. If they are playing in a way that could break a toy, you take it away right away, and say “I’ll keep this safe till this afternoon, then we can try again.”
 - For an older child, consequences can be more delayed and last longer. For a teenager: “if you don’t do well on winter quarter grades, then I won’t let you do soccer in the spring.”
- The consequence is fair and **in proportion to how bad the behavior was**
 - If a child spilled juice, you wouldn’t say “no drinks at the next five meals.” But you could say “no more juice today. If you are thirsty, you can have water.”
 - If a child failed to put away toys one time, you wouldn’t throw away all the toys. But if clean up has been an on-going challenge, you might put *some* toys away for a few days.
- You choose a consequence that **you can and will follow through on enforcing**
 - Kids need to know they can trust their parents to keep promises. That includes being consistent with consequences. Don’t back down. if you do it once, they’ll test you every time!
 - No empty threats, like “if you don’t come right now, I’m leaving you at the store and not coming back.” They know that’s not true. (And if they thought it was true, that would be very scary!)
- You need to **carry out the consequence calmly**, without anger and shaming – consequences are not about making your child “really regret their choices” – they’re about learning that choices have impact and learning the importance of making better choices in the future.

Moving on: Once a consequence is complete, move on, don’t rehash. We all make mistakes, and need some grace to come back in and try again. If you need to address it later, wait till everyone is calm. Briefly remind them what the rules are, what behavior is OK or not OK, and what the consequences will be if this happens again. Then move on. Don’t nag, let this be a clean slate moment.