

Natural and Logical Consequences

The goal of discipline is teaching right behaviors. When parents use discipline, they are teaching their children how to behave. Children learn best when the discipline fits their misbehavior. When it does not fit, children may be confused. Parents can find discipline methods that fit by thinking about “natural” and “logical” consequences.

“Natural consequences” are the things that will happen if the parent does nothing special. The parents do not need to do anything special. The situation will teach the child. For example, a young child might be pulling a cat’s tail. The natural consequence is that the cat will either run away or scratch the child. Then the child learns not to do that. A child may not like dinner and refuses to eat. The natural consequence is that the parent would put dinner away and the child would not get anything to eat. Then the child learns that she needs to eat or she will get hungry.

“Logical consequences” are actions that parents take that are related to what the child did wrong. That means that the parent’s action is about the same size as the misbehavior. It also means that the parent’s action helps children learn what they did wrong and what they should do instead. Both methods help to give children some control. The children learn how to do the right thing and probably will agree that it is fair. For example, your child might not get ready for bed on time. Then you could tell the child that he may not have a bedtime story since it is so late. The child learns to get ready on time in order to have a special reading time. Maybe your son leaves his bike outside all night. Then you could say that he may not ride his bike for two days. Those are logical consequences.

Some punishments are not related and are not logical. Maybe you told your child that she cannot watch TV because she did not pick up her toys. TV does not have much to do with picking up toys. The child might not connect the punishment with her behavior. The punishment may not feel fair. When punishments are not logical, you might be teaching your child to be afraid of you. She may learn to hide the things that she does wrong. Also, she may not learn that she needs to control her behavior whether you are there or not.

Natural consequences

Natural consequences are easy to use. You do not need to do anything. But you must decide when it is good to use natural consequences. Natural consequences will work if:

- The child will notice the consequence when he does something wrong. He will notice even if you do not do anything to punish him.
- The child will care about the consequence.
- The consequence will be the right size to fit the child’s behavior—not too big or too small.

Natural consequences should not be used if:

- They are unsafe or will hurt the child’s health.
- The child doesn’t care about the consequence.

For example, your child needs to learn to stay away from a hot stove. A natural consequence would be to let the child get burned. He will learn to stay away from the stove, but he could get badly hurt. So natural consequences should not be used in that situation. A natural consequence of not picking up dirty clothes is that they will not be washed. They will be dirty and wrinkled when the child needs to wear them next. This will not hurt the child, so you could use natural consequences. But this natural consequence will work only if your child cares about how she looks. If she does not care, you could use logical consequences instead.

Logical consequences

It takes some work to use logical consequences. Parents need to think about what punishment might fit the child's behavior. Logical consequences will work if:

- It is not safe to use natural consequences.
- They are about the same size as the child's behavior. The punishment should be small if what the child did was not very important. It should be big if the child did something serious.
- The punishment is connected to the behavior problem.
- The punishment seems fair to you. You can explain why it is fair. Hopefully, the child thinks it is fair, too.
- You follow through. If the child does something wrong, you will use the consequence every time.

Logical consequences will not work if:

- The child is too young to understand the connection between the behavior and the consequence.
- You do not follow through and use the consequences.

How to use natural and logical consequences

- Tell your child what will happen if she breaks a rule. Try to tell her before she breaks the rule.
- Give your child a choice. Tell him what the consequences will be. Then he can choose to do what you want or to live with the consequences. For example, you can ask him to come to the table on time or be late. If he is late, he will not eat. He must understand that he has a choice. He needs to learn to accept what happens when he makes choices.

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- Explain the reasons for the rules. Also explain the reasons for the consequences. For example, you could explain that it takes you extra time to keep the food warm if he comes late. You also need to put the food away and clean up, and you do not want to spend all night in the kitchen. So if he comes late, he will not have any food.
- Be willing to accept your child's decision. For example, do not give your child food if he chooses to be late. Maybe he will learn to come to the table on time.
- Let the rules be in charge. Don't let it become a personal struggle. Follow the rules the same way every day. Remind the child about the rule. Try to avoid getting into a contest with the child. Try to stay calm and just use natural and logical consequences.
- Sometimes the child might feel that the rules are not fair. Sit down and talk about the rules later. You might decide together to change some rules or some consequences.

It is not easy to use consequences as a way to discipline children. It is hard to think of consequences that are really logical. You have to be patient. It might be difficult for you to sit back and let your children deal with the consequences. But remember, the effort is worth it. She will learn to be a responsible person.

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