

Parenting for Success Class #3

Positive and Negative Consequences



Introduction

Why are consequences important?

Giving consequences is essential. Consequences teach kids to think—they help children learn that their actions lead to results, both positive and negative. Children learn that life is full of choices and that the choices they make greatly influence what happens to them. When parents give effective consequences, children learn successful ways to behave.



Positive Consequences

- Positive consequences are things people like and are willing to work to get.
- Behavior that is followed by a positive consequence is more likely to occur again.
- Rewards are a form of positive consequences.
- Praise and encouragement are some of the most powerful rewards.
- Other positive consequences may include special activities, possessions, time with other people, attention, extra privileges, etc.



Negative Consequences

- Negative consequences are things people dislike and want to avoid.
- Negative consequences encourage people to change their actions so that they won't receive more negative consequences.
- Behavior that is followed by a negative consequence is less likely to occur again, or will not occur as frequently.
- Removing a privilege is a negative consequence.
- Other negative consequences may include time out (away from all fun things in a child's life), adding chores, etc.



Elements of Effective Consequences

- **Immediacy**—This refers to how quickly a consequence occurs after a behavior. Parents should give a consequence right after the behavior occurs. Delaying a consequence reduces its impact and weakens the connection between the behavior and the consequence.
- **Frequency**—This refers to the number of times a consequence is given. If parents give the same consequence too often or too seldom, it tends to lose its effectiveness.
- **Degree**—This refers to the severity or size of a consequence. Typically, parents should try to give the smallest consequence they think will be effective. For example, giving large positive consequences for minor behaviors may result in a “spoiled” child.
- **Consistency**—This refers to how often a consequence is given for a particular behavior. If parents do not give a consequence at the proper ratio (4:1—at least 4 positive consequences for every negative consequence), it will not be effective.
- **Importance**—This refers to whether the consequence has personal meaning to the child. One way to find out what is important to your child is to watch what he or she chooses to do during free time.
- **Warnings**—Stay away from threatening consequences that will not be followed-up on.



Creating a Contingent Environment

The key to effectively using consequences to teach appropriate behavior is to create a contingent environment, where children understand the direct connection between their behaviors and the consequences they receive. Parents can create a contingent environment both before and after behaviors.

This can be accomplished either before or after a behavior occurs.



Creating a Contingent Environment

Before Behavior

- **“If you do this... then this will happen.”**
- “If you do your homework before dinner, then you may go to Mikey’s after dinner.”
- “If you take out the trash, then you will earn an extra 15 minutes to watch television.”



Creating a Contingent Environment

After Behavior

- **“Since you did this... now this will happen.”**
- “Since you were home on time every night this week, you can stay out an extra half hour tonight.”
- “Since you left the house without asking permission, you cannot go out again tonight.”



Using Positive Consequences

Using positive consequences is a way to increase the amount of time kids spend doing positive things. If parents only give negative consequences, they run the risk of becoming negative consequences themselves. Children may avoid spending time with parents, and the parent-child relationship may suffer. When you give positive consequences, your kids find that spending time with you is more enjoyable.



Bribes vs. Consequences

- While positive consequences can be very effective, be careful not to use bribery with your kids. Bribery occurs when rewards are given to stop an inappropriate behavior. For example, giving a child a candy bar to stop him from crying in the grocery store is a bribe.
- Remember that rewards are a natural part of daily life, and they can range from obvious things to very subtle things like a smile or wink.



Using Negative Consequences

- When children misbehave, they need to receive a negative consequence. If the consequences are given in a firm, fair, and consistent manner, they will be effective.
- Two forms of common negative consequences are taking away a privilege and adding work. Many times, the consequence relates directly to the problem; in fact, the consequence may even be designed to “make up” for the misbehavior.



Examples

Taking away a privilege

- Your teenage daughter comes home an hour late. You may choose to remove a part of the privilege (coming home an hour early next time), or if this is a frequent problem, she may lose the privilege of going out altogether.
- Your two kids are arguing about which TV show to watch. You can shut off the TV until they settle their differences, or they could lose TV for the rest of the evening.



Examples

Adding work

- Your son breaks a friend's toy. To teach him responsibility, he must use part of his weekly allowance to buy a new toy.
- Your daughter throws her clothes in a pile on the floor in her bedroom. She must fold those clothes as well as help you fold the next full batch of laundry.



When It Doesn't Work

Sometimes parents feel that consequences aren't working as effectively as they would like. Here are some tips and reminders that should help.

- Be positive!
- Give it time!
- Don't mistake privileges for rights!



When It Doesn't Work

Be positive!

- Parents sometime give many negative consequences and neglect giving positive consequences. Remember, this can make negative consequences lose their effectiveness; also, children may start to identify you as the negative consequence.
- Remember the 4:1 ratio: try to deliver four positive consequences for every negative consequence.



When It Doesn't Work

Give it time!

- Real change takes time. Your children didn't learn to behave the way they do overnight. Be patient and look for small improvements. Give the consequences time to work. You'll be surprised.



When It Doesn't Work

Don't mistake privileges for rights!

What are privileges? What are rights? Children will often try to convince parents that everything is a right. If parents treat privileges as rights, they limit what they can use as consequences.

- Rights include nourishment, communication with others, seasonally appropriate clothing, shelter, education and love.
- Privileges include phone calls, time with friends, television, video games, allowance, toys, special meals, etc.

Remember, you *can* take away privileges; you *cannot* take away rights.



Warnings

As parents, we tend to warn our children when they are starting to misbehave. Unfortunately, warnings usually do not work, and they become a source of frustration for the parents.

If you find yourself dealing with the same negative behavior over and over again, you may be talking too much (giving too many warnings) and not giving enough consequences.

When we use warnings, we're sending the message that it is okay to use the behavior because they won't get consequences for it.

Remember, warnings are *not* consequences.



Is It Really Negative?

In some cases, parents mistakenly assume that a consequence is negative.

Example: A mother's 6 year old son continually fidgeted and talked in church. She told him that he couldn't come with her the next time if he continued causing problems in church. Sure enough, the child fidgeted like crazy and talked more than ever. He didn't want to be in church to begin with. The mother's "negative consequence" actually encouraged more problem behaviors.

- Remember, if the behavior stops or decreases, you really have delivered a negative consequence.
- If the behavior continues or becomes worse, you've actually given a *positive* consequence.



Avoid “The Snowball Effect”

When using negative consequences, it’s important to know when to stop. As parents, we can sometimes respond over-emotionally, but it is not effective to deliver a consequence that is too extreme for the situation. It’s not practical to ground your child for “eternity” or to force them to do “millions” of chores.

Remember that the correction needs to fit the behavior. Simply ask yourself, “does the time fit the crime?”



Conclusion

Remember that giving consequences is essential. Consequences, both positive and negative, are beneficial to our kids. Creating a Contingent Environment is a great way for parents to teach kids to think for themselves and to learn that their actions lead to results.



Next Class

In class #4, we will look at one of the most powerful positive consequences—effective praise—and see how we can use it to reinforce positive behaviors in our children, thereby reducing the need for frequent punishment.



Thank you!

We hope this class was useful to you.

For more free parenting resources, including additional classes in this series, please visit:

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