A Parent's Guide to Natural and Logical Consequences

One of life's important lessons to be learned is that actions have consequences. It is the responsibility of parents to teach children that behaviors and actions have consequences. Children (and sometimes adults) don't always make the association between their behaviors (actions) and the resulting consequences.

Children who experience consequences learn that they have control over them by exerting control over their behaviors. In other words, children learn they are free to choose their behaviors, as long as they are willing to accept the consequences. Parents who use natural and logical consequences are helping teach children that they *can* control their behaviors and have the power to chose their actions.

Often, adults think of punishment as a tool for changing a child's behavior or teaching how he or she *should* behave. Punishment, however, is not a "natural" consequence, nor is it usually a "logical" consequence. This is particularly true when punishment is handed-down out of a parent's anger and frustration.

The definitions that follow will help with understanding natural and logical consequences and how to apply them.

Natural Consequences

Natural consequences occur automatically as a result of actions. Natural consequences are things that happen to the child as a result of his or her behavior, *without parental involvement*. Examples: A child who does not play by the game rules with other children will not be asked to play the next game.   Picking up a honey bee with bare hands results in a stung finger. A teenager caught driving later than the legal curfew has his permit suspended. Children sometimes learn quickly from natural consequences, as in the case of the honey bee. Other times, repetition of the natural consequence must occur, such as learning to play by the rules.

Natural consequences do not require parents to actively inject themselves into the situation. Parents can simply allow the natural consequences to occur. Natural consequences let the child learn, personally, sometimes the hard way. Children should be allowed to take SAFE risks and learn from their own decisions as much as possible. In other words, parents should not rescue their children from all of life's "hard knocks."

When the child's natural environment provides safe, natural consequences and demonstrates clear lessons of cause and effect, parents should allow them to occur, rather than imposing additional consequences. When children experience natural consequences, no lectures or lengthy comments are needed; however, discussion may be helpful to the child if he or she wants to talk the situation through with the parent.

Many times, natural consequences are a good way to learn. At other times, natural consequences are not the best way to guide children.

Natural consequences should NOT be used or allowed to occur in the following cases:

1. *When the natural consequence is dangerous* or may be harmful to the child. Examples: allowing the child to play in the street where she may be struck by a car, or allowing a young child to climb in a tree, where he might fall and be injured.

2. *The natural consequence is delayed for a long period* after the child's action or behavior. When the timing of the consequence is too far in the future, the child does not associate the behavior with the consequence. This prevents the consequence from impacting the child in a way that positively affects the behavior. Examples: A child does not complete her school work and fails. A child leaves his new bike out in the yard, instead of the garage, and it rusts.

3. *The natural consequence is not isolated to the child*, but also causes problems for others. If allowing a natural consequence to occur causes problems for others, including the parent, then it is not appropriate to allow the consequence. Examples: Missing the bus results in a parent having to drive the child to school. A skateboard left in the driveway results in it being backed over by the car, damaging both.

Logical Consequences

Logical Consequences are imposed by the parent. However, logical consequences are different from punishment in some important ways:

- Logical consequences are planned in advance by the parent. They are not reactive or angry responses.
- Logical consequences are often planned with input from the child.
- Logical consequences *make sense* in relation to the behavior. They are "logical."

Logical consequences require time and thought on the part of the parent. They need to be planned in advance to be most effective. There are some basic guidelines that can be helpful to parents in developing logical consequences.

Guidelines for Developing Logical Consequences

- Logical consequences should be developed in advance of behaviors, when possible. Developing of the consequence might occur after a misbehavior, but in advance of the next re-offense.
- Logical consequences are most effective when agreed upon (in advance) by both parent and child.
- Logical consequences should make sense when viewed in relation to the behavior. For example, it is more logical to follow curfew violations by not permitting the child to go out the next weekend than to forbid watching television for a week. The latter does not make sense in relation to the misbehavior.
- Logical consequences should be neither too strong nor too weak in relation to the behavior. Parents who act out of anger usually impose consequences disproportional to the misbehavior. Some parents soften consequences because they are greatly disturbed by the child's distress over consequences.
- Logical consequences should occur as soon as possible after the misbehavior. Don't delay them to the point where they become too far disconnected from the misbehavior.
- Logical consequences should be enforceable – don't make-up consequences you can't enforce. If consequences are too demanding on parents' time or energy, they are likely not to follow-through with them.
- Logical consequences should be applied consistently. Consistency is a critical element of logical consequences. Inconsistency sends the message that sometimes there are no consequences for misbehaviors. The child gets intermittent reinforcement for "getting away" with the misbehavior. Intermittent reinforcement is a powerful force in perpetuating a behavior.
- Logical consequences should be appropriate to the child's age. For example, having a 3 year old child sit in time-out for 30 minutes is an exercise in frustration and ineffective for that age.
- Logical consequences are not threats. Threats have no value. Threats teach children to be afraid rather than problem-solve and reason-out the connection between behaviors and consequences.
- Logical consequences should not be cumulative. Piling-up restrictions only serves to make the child see the consequence as beyond his or her control. This can lead to more misbehavior, rather than teaching the child to take responsibility for behaviors

It is not possible to apply a logical consequence to every misbehavior; however, setting some general rules in advance can make applying consequences a little easier when the situation requires it. Of course, setting these rules should be done with the involvement and knowledge of the child. Here are some possibilities that parents have used.

- If you break something, you will be expected to pay for it out of your savings or allowance.
- You must do school work before watching television, playing video games, going out, etc.
- You have a curfew of _____. If you don't come in by that time, you won't be allowed to go out the next weekend.
- If you don't put something you borrow back in its place, you don't get to use it the next time.
- If you don't do your chores at agreed upon times, you will do them during your alloted (computer time, video game time, TV time).
- If you violate your limits on computer usage, you will forfeit computer time the next day.

Of course, there are may others, but this list provides a general idea of how logical consequences can be developed in advance of misbehaviors and agreed upon by both parents and children.