

10 Alternatives to “Consequences” When Your Child Isn’t Cooperating

June 12, 2014 By [Dr Laura Markham](#)

“Throw the word “consequence” entirely out of your vocabulary and replace it with the term “problem-solving.” – [Becky Eanes](#)

“My 3 year old was sitting on the couch after bath wearing her towel and said NO about 5 times when asked to get into her pj’s. I was busy with the baby and I heard my husband say “OK fine – no books then!” so I said “Hey! We’ve got a problem – it’s bedtime and you need to be in your PJ’s – How do YOU think we should solve it?” And just like that – she got a big grin her face, suggested we all clap our hands and march our feet and we formed a line right into her room – happily! Same thing for teeth brushing and potty later! Each time I said “Hey, great problem solving skills! Thank you!” And her response? “You’re welcome mama – no problem!” – Carrie

Most parenting experts suggest that when children “misbehave” the best response is “consequences.” Parents are told that letting children experience the consequences of their poor choices will teach them lessons. Makes sense, right? Well, no.

I love natural consequences as a teacher. We all have to learn that if we don’t remember to take our lunch, we’ll go hungry.

But when most parents use “consequences” for discipline, they aren’t the natural result of the child’s actions (“I forgot my lunch today so I was hungry”). Instead, they have become for children the threats they hear through their parents’ clenched teeth: “If I have to stop this car and come back there, there will be CONSEQUENCES!!”

In other words, Consequences mean Punishment. Whether you’re threatening the loss of a privilege or a timeout, that is punishment, which means causing another person physical or emotional pain with the purpose of getting them to do things your way (or with the purpose of revenge). And punishment has been proven repeatedly to backfire in child-raising. ([Why Punishment Doesn’t Teach Your Child Accountability](#)) Quite simply, punishment creates power struggles, and it doesn’t help your child internalize self-regulation. Worried about what you’ll do without the threat of Consequences to keep your child cooperating? Next time your child refuses your guidance and you find yourself about to blurt out a threat, try one of these responses instead.

1. Let your child solve it. “You haven’t brushed your teeth yet and I want to be sure we have time for a story. What can we do?” It’s amazing how children step into responsibility when we offer it. They love to help, and to solve puzzles. Sometimes they just need a little respect.

2. Partner for Win/win solutions. If your child doesn’t offer a solution that works for you, explain why and help her come up with one. “You think you should just skip brushing teeth tonight? Hmm...that doesn’t work for me because your poor teeth would stay germly and they could get tiny holes in them. What else could we do to get your teeth brushed and time for a story? Want to put your pjs on, and then brush?” Once your child believes that you’re serious about win/win solutions, she’s much more likely to work with you to find a solution that works for everyone.

3. Invite cooperation with your phrasing. Consider the difference in these approaches:

“Go brush your teeth now.” - Since no one likes to be told what to do, a direct order like this often invites resistance, either direct or in the form of stalling.

“Can you go brush your teeth now?” - Many kids will reflect on this and just say No. Don’t phrase your request in the form of a yes or no question unless you’re willing to accept No for an answer.

“Do you want to brush your teeth now, or after you put your PJs on?” - This strategy works because you’re extending your child the respect of giving him some control, at the same time that you retain the responsibility of making the decisions you need to as his parent. Only offer options you can live with, of course.

“You may brush your teeth now.” - Almost sounds like a privilege, doesn’t it? This is a command, but a respectful, calming one. Works especially well with kids who are over-stimulated by bedtime and overwhelmed by choices.

4. Ask for a Do-over. “Oops. I told you to brush your teeth and you ignored me and then I started to yell. I’m sorry. Let’s try a do-over.” This is a great way to interrupt things when you’re headed down a bad road. Get down on your child’s level and make a warm connection. Look in her eyes. Touch her. “Ok, let’s try this again, Sweetie. It’s teeth brushing time! How can we work as a team here to get those germs off your teeth?”

5. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

- Before transitions, give ample warning AND spend a few minutes connecting with your child.
- Think about what usually triggers problems for your child and take pre-emptive action.
- Always leave extra time to get anything done that your child usually resists, so you’re relaxed.
- Sidestep power struggles in general, so she’s more likely to cooperate when you really need her to.

6. When your child defies you, focus on the relationship, rather than on discipline. A good relationship is your foundation; guidance doesn't work without it because your child stops caring about pleasing you. A child who is rude is either very upset, or expressing her need for a better relationship with you. In either case, "consequences" will make the situation worse. I'm not suggesting you put up with rudeness, just that you see it as a red flag to do some repair work on the relationship.

7. Make sure your expectations are age-appropriate.

- A one year old needs a baby-proofed house, not to learn by consequences how to leave the DVD player alone.
- A four year old needs your help to get through the bedtime routine, not to lose reading time with you when he gets distracted and dawdles.
- A ten year old needs your help to make the homework routine into a habit that works for him, not to lose his TV privileges. (Although letting kids watch TV during the week will almost certainly lower their grades. But that's a lifestyle choice, not a punishment.)

8. Get to the root of the problem. Usually when kids defy us, they're asking for help with their emotions. You'll know this is happening when your child seems unhappy and is making you unhappy; when whatever you try just doesn't work. At those times, your child is showing you that he has some big feelings he needs to express, and he needs your help. He may be angry, or afraid, or sad. He may just need to cry. So if you set a limit and your child defies you, forget about punishment and consequences. This is a red flag that he needs your help. Connect with him, restate your limit, and let him have his meltdown. After your child gets a chance to show you all those feelings he's been holding down, you'll find him much more cooperative.

9. Engage the brain. When humans are upset, our brains don't work as well because "fight or flight" takes over and thinking stops. Start by taking a deep breath and calming your own emotions, to signal to your child that it isn't an emergency. Then connect warmly with your child so she feels safe again. That moves out of fight or flight, so she can think again. Finally, invite her brain to engage by helping her understand what's happening:

"You are so upset. You were having so much fun playing with Daddy. Then he told you to go brush your teeth. You were mad, right? Then Daddy said No story tonight. Right? Now you are sad and mad.... I am right here. I love you. Daddy loves you. Daddy was upset, too, but now he is here to hug you. ... Let's find a way that we can all have a good evening and feel good when we tuck you in to bed. Maybe we all need a Do-Over?"

This builds emotional intelligence in your child — and in your partner. And even if it doesn't get you all on the same page, at least it gets you into the same book!

10. Use natural consequences. I'm not suggesting that you move heaven and earth to protect your child from the natural outcome of his choices. We all need to learn lessons, and if your child can do so without too much damage, life is a great teacher. (Meaning, you won't let him get a concussion to teach him to wear his bike helmet.) But you'll want to make sure these are actually "natural" consequences that your child doesn't perceive as punishment so they don't trigger all the negative effects of punishment. What's more, you'll want to be sure that your child is convinced that you aren't orchestrating the consequence and are firmly on his side, so you don't undermine your relationship with him. Consider the difference in these approaches:

"Of course I will bring your lunch to the school, Sweetie. I don't want you to be hungry. But try to remember it tomorrow." - Child may or may not remember his lunch tomorrow. There is no harm in doing this once or even twice, if you can do it easily. We all have forgotten things like lunches, and it is not a sign that your child will be irresponsible for life. But it is a signal that you need to help your child with self-organization strategies.

"I'm certainly not going to drop everything to bring you your lunch. I hope this will teach you a lesson." - Child will probably learn to remember his lunch. BUT he concludes that parent doesn't care about him, and becomes less cooperative at home. (And as my teenager says, "I would never ask a parent like that for help when I really needed it.")

"Ok, I will bring your lunch but this is absolutely the last time. You would forget your head if it weren't glued on and don't expect me to always drop everything to bail you out." - Child does not learn to remember lunch but does learn that he is a forgetful person who irritates his parent. In the future, he acts in accordance with this expectation.

"I'm so sorry you forgot your lunch, Sweetie, but it doesn't work for me to bring it to you. I hope you won't starve and I will have a snack waiting when you get home." - Child learns to remember lunch AND feels cared about AND self image stays intact.

Retraining yourself can be tough. But as Becky Eanes says, just throw the word "consequences" out of your vocabulary and replace it with "problem-solving." You'll be amazed at the miracles you can make.