

Misbehavior, Consequences, and Mutual Respect



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When a child breaks household rules, many parents invoke consequences. “Okay, that’s it,” they say. “No cell phone. No computer. No Game Boy. No PlayStation.” Sometimes kids are grounded for months. Consequences of this sort are really just ordinary punishment, which usually inspires anger, hurt, or resentment. If you doubt me on this point, think back to your own childhood. How did you feel about punishment and punishers? Was it effective as behavior management? How did adults command your respect?

The best consequences, in my opinion, are natural. An example would be rust on a bicycle that is left out in the rain. The message is clear: if you don’t take care of your things, they will get damaged.

If you as a parent want to attach specific consequences to infractions, consider calling a summit meeting with your child. Discuss the reasons why a particular behavior concerns you, then ask what an appropriate penalty for it might be. You don’t need to take your child’s suggestion, just consider it. Remember, though, that consequences are useless as motivators if your child doesn’t know what they are ahead of time.

A better approach, in my opinion, makes privileges, or perks, contingent on responsible behavior and the performance of assigned tasks. If you go this route, your child earns privileges each week by following your rules and behaving appropriately.

You can explain this system with reference to a payroll: you don’t get paid until you’ve done the work. You can also deal with pleas for privileges in advance by

demanding that your child establish a credit rating. Just observe that the bank would not lend money without evidence that there would be timely repayment. By the same token, your child has to build your trust before you will offer an advance on privileges.

If there are several children in your family, compliance with household rules or directives may improve when you take an all-for-one approach. If you adopt this tactic, you might say that no one leaves the house on Saturday until everyone's chores are done. In this way you invite the children who did their chores to pressure the others to follow through so that no one is punished.

Alternatively you could say that no one gets dessert unless everyone exhibits good table manners. You might also describe this as a team approach.

Examine your child's behavior in the context of the relationship between the two of you. If he isn't doing what you ask him to do, address the behavior in this context. Treat it as a problem in give and take. So if your child complains that he's too tired to do his homework, you can reply that you are too tired to fix dinner, and he'll find bread and bologna in the fridge.

You might also say that when she doesn't put dirty laundry in the hamper, pick up her room, or fold the clothes from the dryer (assuming that these tasks are hers), you feel disrespected. Accordingly, you won't buy her preferred foods, allow her to program the car radio, or take her to the mall.

If you really want to command her attention, simply say that you will supply no perks at all until her performance improves. One put-upon wife told her husband and son that they were on their own. She was going on strike and would reassess the situation at the end of a week to see whether she would return to work. After just a few days, she got good results—and from both parties.

In my experience, all of the above-mentioned interventions work best when you can detach emotionally. Resist the temptation to scream. Instead take a deep breath and adopt a neutral tone of voice.

If you have a clear agreement up front, you need only remind your child about it. Then when she does not follow through, you can say, "I am so sad. I had really wanted you to be able to watch *Pirates of the Caribbean* this evening, but my hands are tied. We had an agreement, remember?" Afterward you can plant a seed: "I have great confidence in you. I am sure that it will be a different story tomorrow."

As rewards, use activities and quality time with you rather than material possessions that money can buy. In this way you constantly strengthen your relationship. To hasten the improvement in your child's performance, try

increasing the positive feedback he gets on a daily basis. While you are applying pressure to comply with your directives, you can shower him with love, encouragement, and support.

Leave little notes in the sock drawer, behind the toothpaste, or under the pillow: “You are a wonderful daughter, and I love you to pieces.” Mail greeting cards with compelling messages: “From a secret admirer.” (Kids love mail!)

Create a wall of fame and post “certificates” or thank you notes for jobs well done: Best Dishwasher of March 2006 or Cleanest Room in the State Award.

Say, “Wow, you look like a million dollars in that new shirt!” or “I really like the way you helped your sister this morning. That was just terrific!”

Be silly and unpredictable. Serenade your offspring with the ukulele while wearing a funny wig or blowing bubbles. Offer smooches and hugs at unexpected moments. Clown around.

Use humor to defuse tension whenever you can. Humor can prevent power struggles from escalating and can help all parties keep their sense of proportion during conflict. When there’s a fight, just ask yourself: “In twenty years, who will know the difference?” Often the hostilities stay in memory and the cause is forgotten.

Celebrate your child, your family, and yourself.

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