



Logical Consequences

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Introduction

You've created family rules. You've taught new skills and practiced them. Yet, every child tests limits and even breaks those rules you've carefully established. This is a normal part of their development and necessary for their learning.

As a parent or someone in a parenting role, you have the opportunity to transform your child's choice into a teachable moment. In our own lives, if we turn quickly in a store and knock over and break a lamp, we know the logical consequence is that we are expected to buy the broken lamp. Parents and those in a parenting role typically have to guide a child through a logical consequence to reflect on their choice, face their problem, take responsibility, and repair any harm done.

It is important for every child to learn that their actions have an impact on others around them. This is developed over time and requires a lot of practice. In fact, a teen's brain is reorganizing from their childhood magical thinking processes to a more rational and logical thinking process. Their higher order thinking skills are not fully formed until the early to mid-twenties. Your support and guidance matter greatly as your child develops these critical life skills.

This document focuses on how you can teach your child responsible decision-making skills by following through with logical consequences that may result from unsafe or inappropriate actions. First, logical consequences are defined. Next, why it is important to be intentional about following through with logical consequences is explored. And finally, examples of ways to support logical consequences are provided.

We don't need to invent consequences for our children's unsafe or inappropriate actions. They occur naturally. The key is to guide children to repair the harm they've caused.

Logical Consequences Defined

Logical consequences are the natural outcomes that result from a child's actions with others or property. Following through on logical consequences means that the adult guides the child to take responsibility for any harm caused or damage done. The intent is to teach your child that every action has a reaction.

Logical consequences are not appropriate for infants. Infants are constantly learning about the world around them. When an infant grabs your hair or drops something from their high chair, they are doing what is developmentally appropriate by observing and exploring their world. They are not acting out. You can shift their attention to something else while recognizing your primary role is to help them feel safe and

secure while encouraging their sense of discovery. Infants learn about who they are and how they relate to others through sensitive, caring interactions with you. These interactions impact their ability to listen, to communicate effectively, to learn about and manage their feelings, and to trust in you as a caregiver.

Rules are created to keep people, places, and things safe and thriving. When rules are broken, there are natural outcomes that occur. A toy is broken, or a child's feelings are hurt when their toy is snatched away. Sometimes, both physical objects and feelings are harmed. These are opportunities for teaching a child that they can take the next steps to fix what's been broken and to heal what's been hurt. With a parent's ongoing commitment to follow through on logical consequences, a child will learn to think through consequences thereby strengthening their decision-making skills.

[Guidance and discipline for skill building](#) is challenging for many parents.¹ What should parents do when children break important rules? Many parents and those in a parenting role feel that if they do not impose punishment, their child will not understand that their behavior was inappropriate.

In fact, when a child is punished, they often feel scared, humiliated, and hurt. They may also feel a sense of misunderstanding or injustice. This overwhelming sense of fear or hurt impacts their relationship with you – not the misbehavior that occurred. Your child is likely to miss the lesson you want to emphasize entirely and feel unsafe.

Though it may seem easier in the moment, taking away an electronic device or sending a child to their room (“grounding” them) does not often represent a naturally occurring consequence. One size does not fit all when teaching cause and effect. Each time a child breaks a rule, parents or those in a parenting role need to carefully consider: “*What was harmed?*” and “*How can I help my child reflect on what was harmed, and how they can help heal or repair what was harmed?*” Involving your child in deciding how to make the situation right and supporting them through the process of making what's broken whole again (especially when it involves others' hurt feelings) are key to helping them internalize responsible decision-making skills.

Each time a child chooses an unsafe or inappropriate behavior is an opportunity to teach a vital life skill and cultivate a sense of responsibility.

Logical consequences are appropriate for children ages two and older. For parents and those in a parenting role with infants, safety and supervision are essential. Infants come to know and understand the world and the objects around them through all five senses — touch, taste, smell, sound, and sight. Create an environment that is safe for them to explore. Place infant-appropriate toys and board books near your infant. Keep a watchful eye and redirect your infant's focus to avoid unsafe situations. You could say, “*Lets play with the blocks instead of your sister's marker.*”

Following Through With Logical Consequences Is Essential

In addition to developing physically, socially, and emotionally, children are also developing morally. They are increasing their awareness of how their actions impact others. Parents and those in a parenting role have an opportunity to strengthen the connection between children's choices and their values. Parents can offer several limited, authentic choices and encourage proactive thinking about decisions before making them to predict the impact on others.

And, after unsafe or inappropriate choices are made, reflecting on the harm caused and what other options were possible can help a child understand the range of possibilities in their decision making. Small choices become a dress rehearsal for bigger moments in later years when peers will pressure teens to try breaking laws or taking safety risks.

But, how does a parent or someone in a parenting role distinguish between logical consequences and punishment? After all, if use of an electronic device has been abused by a child, then taking it away for a time may be a logical consequence.

A first clue comes from asking yourself, “*Are my reactions coming out of anger?*” Thoughts like, “*I’ll show them who’s boss here*” or “*I’ll make sure they never do that again*” stem from anger. Because anger comes from the primal, survival part of the brain (the one that can only focus on fight, flight, or freeze), you will be less likely to have the mental resources to help think through a logical consequence if you are angry.

If angry, parents and those in a parenting role require their own time out to breathe, focus, and reflect on what makes the most sense when they return to the problem. In those quieting moments, parents can ask, “*How can I help my child deal with their emotions first?*” And then ask, “*How can I guide my child to repair the harm that’s been caused?*”

Supporting [social and emotional skill development](#) by following through on logical consequences, you can directly impact your child’s decision-making skills and improve outcomes. Social and emotional skill development results in a stronger work ethic, deeper family relationships, increased job performance, and improved health across the lifespan.

Ways to Support Logical Consequences

Using logical consequences as teaching opportunities for your child requires parents and those in a parenting role to learn new research-informed strategies. Children will test your patience when they break rules and make poor decisions, and your reactions can be among your greatest parenting challenges. Practicing new strategies when small misbehaviors occur can help build your abilities and prepare you for the bigger challenges. Four strategies include: Dealing With Feelings First, Modeling the Skills, Focusing on Decision Making, and Intentionally Practicing.

Dealing With Feelings First

Children’s behaviors are often influenced by their feelings. Feelings are spontaneous reactions to people, places, and experiences.^{2,3} These range from basic feelings like hungry or tired to more complex ones like feeling unsafe, disconnected, insecure, or lacking confidence. Feelings are not right or wrong, but what your child does with the feeling may be appropriate or inappropriate. Children and teens may react to these feelings in a lot of different ways (interrupting, grabbing or throwing a toy, withdrawing, acting defiantly, or saying hurtful things). And sometimes, they may simply be acting impulsively. Research confirms that when children and teens learn to manage their emotions, they strengthen their executive functions.³ They are better able to use self-control, problem solve, and focus their attention.

To transform an unsafe or inappropriate behavior into a teachable moment, it’s critical to identify if your child has an unmet need and what big feelings might be influencing your child’s behavior. Are they hungry, tired, or stressed? Do they need someone to listen or give them attention? Do they need some alone time or help so they can be successful at something they are trying to do? If you can uncover why a child is choosing a behavior then you can respond in ways that prevent it and promote more positive behaviors.

Remember, you want to look past the behavior to uncover the feelings that may be influencing the behavior. There are no “bad” feelings. Every feeling a child has is a vital message quickly interpreting what’s happening around them. As a parent or someone in a parenting role, the challenge is to avoid

interpreting the behavior before trying to understand what is motivating the behavior. The feelings behind the behavior may be from an unmet need.

It is critical to deal with feelings first (both yours and your child's) before attempting to solve any problems. Reacting quickly when upset can create more hurt and may result in words or actions that will later become regrets. Take the time needed to accept feelings (your own and your child's), deal with them, and then refocus on how you can respond to your child in healthy ways.

Model Self-Management Skills by Taking a Parent Time Out

Your child has pulled apart and destroyed a project you've been working on for months. When you see the destroyed project, you feel the heat rise through your body. Your heart speeds up. Your breathing becomes short and rapid. You are furious. As your child walks into the room looking guilty, how does an emotionally intelligent parent or one in a parenting role react?

In fact, an emotionally intelligent parent knows that any kind of reaction to the child in that moment will be fueled by anger and is likely not going to be the best choice. Instead, that parent might say, "*I need a minute.*" Or even without uttering a word, the parent could go to a favorite chair, sit down, close their eyes, and simply breathe. The parent need not open their eyes or reenter the conversation until they have regained some focus and calm and are ready to reflect on the situation at hand. Some parents find it helpful to keep their eyes closed until they have thought through exactly what they'll do and say that is healthy and constructive when responding to their child.

Guide Your Child to Calm Down

Saying to your child, "*Calm down*" when they are genuinely upset does not work. In fact, whatever you say in a heated moment might not be heard. That's why it's important to set up a plan in advance for calming down so that it's at the ready when your child needs it most. Where does your child feel most comfortable? Is there a private spot they could set up with a favorite pillow, bear, notebook, or other comfort object? Can you practice deep breathing together at bedtime so they know how it feels? Laying your hand on your heart can often become a cue to become intentional about slowing down the rapid beats. Practice moving to the calm down spot and go through the motions of what your child might do to feel better in that place. Can they hug their bear? Can they draw or write? Can they breathe deeply? Then, when your child is upset, you can gently remind, "*What would help you feel better? Would your comfort spot help you?*" Using this strategy will help your child begin to internalize self-management skills and take responsibility for their own process of calming down.

Be sure to supplement these strategies with [Guidance and Discipline for Skill Building](#).



Tip

It is important that both you and your child are calm before attempting to solve any problems. Ask yourself, "*What are the signs that I am calm and ready? What are clues that my child is calm and ready?*" Take the time needed before attempting to solve problems to avoid more hurt and frustration.

Modeling the Skills

As a parent or someone in a parenting role, you are constantly modeling for your children. Sharing examples of when you make mistakes or poor choices can help children understand that it's normal. You can also share how you fail and try again or work hard to mend relationships if you've hurt them. This means that as a parent or someone in a parenting role, you don't always have to get things right. Teaching children a sense of responsibility means admitting mistakes and being willing to recognize and apologize for the impact your actions have on others. Admit failure and be willing to apologize. Here are a few specific examples of how you can model the skills you want to teach.

Make Amends

Often when mistakes are made, feelings get hurt. It's critical that parents and those in a parenting role model the skill of repairing relationships. When you've argued or been upset with your child, they are hurting. How can you show them you love them no matter what?

Whether it's an apology, a sincere hug, or words of loving reassurance that you'll always be there for them, how can you make amends in your relationship? Making amends is a vital skill that you can model for your child and teach them how to do when they make poor choices. Tending to and repairing relationships develop your child's social and emotional skills such as perspective taking, emotion regulation, and responsibility.

Fix What's Been Broken Together

Whether it's a lamp that's been knocked to the floor by a rogue indoor ball, red punch spilled on a new ivory rug, or a precious necklace given to your child by Grandma that has broken apart, the stuff in our lives is vulnerable to children's play. Things will break or be damaged.

In the rush of busy family lives, it's easy for parents to sweep away the mess, throw away the broken dish, and mend the rip in a child's jacket. But attending to those damages on your own does not involve your children in taking responsibility for their actions and repairing the harm they've caused.

Indeed, it may take more time in the short run to help your child glue the lamp back together, but those steps will lead to a child who understands exactly how to repair the harm they've caused.

Focusing on Decision Making

Although improved social and emotional skills develop healthier decision making, it is helpful for you to explicitly focus on how your child makes decisions. Get curious about the thinking process involved in your child's decision making. Ask your child what the thought process was and whether the outcome was positive or negative.

It can be as simple as asking, "*Why did you make that decision?*" or "*What were the considerations you took into account when you made that decision?*" or "*What were some of the consequences you thought about when you made that decision?*" This will help highlight any gaps in their decision making. More importantly, if you do this on a regular basis, it will increase the likelihood that your child will slow down and pay more attention to their decision making.

Intentionally Practicing

Following through on logical consequences does not always come easily. In high stress situations, it is tough to maintain self-awareness, manage heated emotions, and express empathy.

Often the steps necessary to follow through on logical consequences take more time if there's relationship or property mending to do as well as reflecting on choices and harm caused. Intentionally practicing calming down before returning to the problem and generating ideas to make a next better choice can assist parents and those in a parenting role in aligning with their deepest values while assisting their child in internalizing responsible decision-making skills.

The more these skills are practiced, the more natural they'll feel and the greater likelihood that they will be accessible when needed, especially in high-stress situations. Intentional practice means being deliberate about trying a particular social and emotional skill you want to develop. Once you get better at a skill, try adding the next skill.

Closing

Following through on logical consequences is the process through which you can assist your child in acquiring essential life skills when they make unsafe or inappropriate choices. These skills include knowing and caring for oneself and others, achieving goals, and mending relationships. They are developed over the lifespan from birth throughout adulthood and are learned through dealing with feelings first, modeling, attending to decision making, and intentionally practicing. The skills built by following through on logical consequences are critical to success in life. They are correlated with outcomes such as academic success and emotional wellbeing in childhood, healthier relationships, and improved work performance.

References

[1]Zero to Three. (2016). *Tuning in: Parents of young children speak up about what they think, know and need*. Author: Zero to Three.

[2]Johnston-Jones, J. (2015). *Why Children Misbehave*. Retrieved from <https://www.drjenniferjones.com/why-children-misbehave.html>

[3]National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). *Children's Emotional Development Is Built into the Architecture of Their Brains: Working Paper No. 2*. <http://www.developingchild.net>

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