

Tenet #5: Help Kids Make Their Own Choices.

The Deeper Cut:

Reasonable rules and fair consequences are essential tools when working with children who lack self-regulation. Clear expectations reduce confusion about what is or isn't allowed. Consistently enforced consequences send the message that rule violations won't be ignored. Together, clear expectations and consistent enforcement can deter a great deal of everyday misbehavior, especially when we make a point to reinforce and reward positive behavior as well. Kids' natural desire for recognition and innate dread of punishment works to keep most children on track.

But what about those who don't seem to care about adult approval, or who aren't worried about receiving consequences? It's tempting to punish them more harshly, criticize them more intensely, or find what they love and take it away. Sure, it works sometimes. If we are willing to intimidate, embarrass or punish a child harshly enough, we can force any of them to be obedient.


But forced obedience isn't really our goal, is it? And with oppositional kids, this approach can backfire badly. Instead of getting resigned compliance, we see tempers flare, angry power struggles erupt, extreme punishments issued, and relationships damaged beyond repair.

Three Types of Consequences

Helping kids make responsible decisions for themselves is one of our highest goals. If we have to use consequences as a tool for managing behavior, remember the pros and cons of these three types:

TACT2 Tenet #5

Help kids make their OWN choices.
Forced compliance doesn't encourage responsibility.



Kids need limits, and sometimes those limits need to be enforced with consequences. But our goal is to encourage good choices, not to force compliance. Help kids consider the outcomes of their behavior rather than threatening them with ultimatums.

1. **Natural consequences occur on their own, without any adult intervention.**

E.g., "You spilled your soda, and now you don't have any more." They are the natural outcomes of a behavior, including hurt feelings, poor performance, and possible injury. Adults cannot be blamed for them (pro), but unfortunately they don't occur consistently enough to be truly helpful with challenging kids (con).

Fair Warning of Natural Consequences:

"Bill, are you *SURE* you want to spend all your money on that video game? If you do, you'll have almost nothing left for this weekend's outing to the State Fair." If Bill chooses to follow your advice, he'll have more money for rides and treats at the fair. If not, he'll have fewer of those things, and perhaps be more frugal next time. Either way, it's HIS choice and the consequences occur on their own.

2. **Logical consequences are applied by adults, but are directly related to the behavior issue.** E.g., "You spilled your soda, so now you must clean it up." Because there's a clear match between the cause and effect, they make sense to kids (pro), but they sometimes require more work and great creativity to employ (con).

Fair Warning of Logical Consequences:

"Lisa, if you mess around and don't finish your work in class, you'll have to come back here during recess to get it done."

If Lisa accepts your warning and gets back on task, she can play with her classmates after lunch. If not, then the consequence is a fair one: return to class after lunch and work until the assignment is complete.

3. **Punitive consequences are also applied by adults, but are unrelated to a child's misbehavior.** E.g., "You spilled your soda, so now you can't watch TV." They are not necessarily abusive, though they can easily escalate to that point. Punitive consequences allow consistent rule enforcement (pro), but they also allow kids to deflect responsibility for their behavior onto 'unfair' adults (con).

Fair Warning of Punitive Consequences:

"Tomas, if you don't pay attention when I'm talking, you'll run laps for the rest of the period." This threat might force Tomas to focus on the lesson, but only because he's afraid of the punishment — and sometimes, that's okay.

But if Tomas is oppositional, this statement could easily provoke an argument that disrupts the entire class.

Which type of consequence is most effective? It depends on your goal with kids. If you are simply trying to change behavior, clear rules with enforceable punitive consequences are often very useful, as long as they are not abusive. The threat of losing cell phone privileges or being banned from Friday's football game are strong incentives to abide by curfew or complete class work.

On the other hand, if you are hoping to foster responsible decision-making in young people, it's better to use logical consequences instead. Kids are more likely to cooperate with us when consequences are fair and make sense to them, such as being required to clean up a mess they left behind.

Summary: Our goal when handling misbehavior should be to facilitate good decision-making, not to force mindless obedience.

Use consequences as a tool for encouraging kids to think ahead about the outcomes of their choices, rather than as a bludgeon with which to punish them for past mistakes.

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