

**Perspectives on Discipline: The Effectiveness of
Natural and Logical Consequences
Part III
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

In my two earlier columns about discipline I discouraged the use of spanking and I recommended an approach that focused on preventing or minimizing the emergence of misbehavior in our children. I noted, however, that even with a heavy emphasis on prevention there will be numerous occasions when children fail to act appropriately. We must help them to learn that there are consequences for their behavior. Without experiencing consequences, it is almost impossible for youngsters to become responsible, caring, thoughtful individuals. If we want our children to develop these admirable qualities then we must use consequences that are appropriate, fair, and thoughtful.

But what are appropriate and thoughtful consequences? While they may vary from one child to the next, they should be guided by a couple of principles I highlighted in my first article about discipline. The first is that since the word discipline stems from the word disciple, it is best conceived of as a teaching process. As a form of education, consequences should not be linked to practices that intimidate, hurt, or embarrass children.

The second guidepost relates to the function or purpose of discipline. Discipline should serve not only to maintain a safe and secure environment in which our children learn the importance of and reason for rules, limits, and consequences, but also to develop self-discipline and self-control. The emergence of self-discipline implies that children have assumed ownership for their own behavior so that even when a parent or other adult is not present, they will still reflect on what they are doing and act in a considerate, kind manner.

In this article I wish to define the role of natural and logical consequences in promoting these goals. Children must understand that there are consequences for their actions and that these consequences are neither harsh nor arbitrary. Also, when possible, consequences should be discussed with our children in advance so that they can reflect upon the choices they are making.

Let's examine natural and logical consequences and the differences between the two. Natural consequences follow from a child's behavior without requiring any enforcement on the part of parents. Natural consequences should not be used if they place a child in danger (an obvious example is allowing a young child to ride a bike on a busy street in which there is the possibility of getting hit by a car), but are appropriate in

many other situations. One common example is when children argue with their parents that they do not need to wear gloves on a chilly day. As parents we often insist that they put on their gloves. A struggle is likely to follow. If we become angry enough, we may fall into the trap of relying on arbitrary consequences, some of which have little relation to the current issue.

As an illustration, at one of my workshops a mother reported that she told her eight-year-old daughter to wear a scarf and gloves when she went out to play. Her daughter responded that she didn't need these pieces of clothing, that it was not very cold outdoors. Within a couple of minutes the disagreement led to screaming and yelling from both mother and daughter; the mother responded by handing her daughter the following punishment: she was not permitted to go outside and she lost television for the next two days.

This mother noted that her daughter often questioned her authority and that power struggles were not unusual. I talked about selecting our battlegrounds carefully and in an empathic and hopefully humorous way I asked the mother, "What would have happened if your daughter had gone outside without her gloves or scarf? Was the weather so cold that she was in danger of freezing?" This mother smiled and said, "No," but then added in a more serious tone, "but my daughter has to learn that she cannot dictate to me." I agreed but suggested that she consider which issues warrant taking a strong stand and which do not.

This mother asked me what might be an alternative approach. I responded that if there was not the possibility of her daughter freezing, it might be best to change the usual negative script and simply say, "If you feel you don't need your gloves or scarf right now that's okay, but if it gets colder out you can come in and get them." I added, "A natural consequence will be that your daughter gets cold. If she doesn't want to come in and get her gloves, I am certain she will place her hands in her pockets."

I received a humorous call from this mother a few days later. She said, "My daughter seemed stunned at first when I followed the approach you suggested. Much to my surprise and delight, she came in about 30 minutes later and said that the temperature had dropped and she put on her gloves."

Another example of a natural consequence was reported by a father who purchased a new baseball glove for his son. The salesperson recommended that the boy rub some oil into the glove to soften the leather. The boy's father reminded him to do so on a couple of occasions but the boy said he would do it later. He neglected to do so and in his first game using the new glove, he dropped two throws, in part because the glove was stiff. His father wisely did not say, "I told you to rub it with oil," a comment that

would have been the equivalent of throwing salt into a wound. Instead, the father said nothing. Immediately after the game the boy applied the oil to the glove.

While logical consequences may, at times, overlap with natural consequences, logical consequences involve action taken on the part of parents in response to the behavior of their children. Logical consequences should not be harsh, arbitrary, or inconsistent. If logical consequences are too severe, such as when we rely on spanking or demeaning words, children are more likely to resent us rather than learn from us. If logical consequences are arbitrary and inconsistent, changing from one moment to the next, perhaps based on the mood of the parent, children will have a more difficult time learning right from wrong; they will have greater difficulty developing accountability and self-discipline.

An example of logical consequences applied in a calm, consistent manner involved parents who told me about their 10-year-old son. He was constantly late getting ready for school each morning. When he missed the school bus, one of them drove him to school. They felt that their son was capable of getting ready on time and that when they drove him to school they were actually reinforcing his tardiness and not helping him to learn to be more responsible for his behavior.

They decided to tell their son that if he were not ready when the bus arrived, he would have a choice: either walk to school (a safe, 3/4 mile walk) or remain home and miss school for the day. They felt comfortable offering this second choice since they knew that he liked school; a similar choice would not be wise if the child did not want to go to school. It has been my experience that providing children with reasonable choices lessens power struggles and increases cooperation. Very importantly, they also engaged him in a problem-solving discussion that involved possible steps he could take to ensure he would be ready on time.

Even with all of this planning, their son was late for the school bus. His parents wisely adhered to the consequence that had been established, not deterred by their son offering excuses and saying he would not be late again. He ended up walking to school, where a notation was made of his tardiness. It was the last time he was late for the bus.

In an example involving both a natural and logical consequence, a girl left her bike outside overnight after her parents had warned her on several occasions that it could be damaged if it rained or could even be stolen. The bike was stolen—an unfortunate natural consequence. The girl asked her parents to buy her a new bike. They responded in an empathic way, outlining a logical consequence. They told their daughter that they knew she was upset that her bike had been stolen, but if she wished to have a new bike she would have to buy it from her savings. Although their daughter was not thrilled by

this consequence, she bought a new bike with her own money. She thus learned an important lesson about taking responsibility for her actions.

As Dr. Sam Goldstein and I discuss in our book “Raising Resilient Children,” consequences should fit the “crime” and as much as possible our children should be aware of the rules and consequences in advance. This “advance notice” lessens the possibility of our children perceiving rules and consequences as arbitrary and unfair. For instance, a 17-year-old, who was permitted to use one of the family’s cars, had a 12:30 a.m. curfew on Saturday nights. He and his parents agreed that should he break this curfew, he would be grounded the following Saturday night. One Saturday the boy came in at 1:00 a.m. and explained that his lateness was a result of his driving several friends home after a party.

His father calmly told him, “Next time you decide to drive friends home, you have to start early enough for you to be home at 12:30 as we agreed upon. You know the consequence; next week you can’t go out on Saturday night.” His son argued that he was just trying to help his friends. His father remained calm and said, “I’m pleased you wanted to help your friends but you’ll have to figure out how to help them without breaking your curfew.”

This father observed, “I must admit that when my son said he was just trying to help his friends, I came close to saying I would overlook things this time. But I realized that he had not lived up to his responsibility that we all had agreed was fair. If there had been some unexpected circumstance like mechanical problems, I would have been more tolerant, but what happened was within my son’s control.” The father added, “I think it worked since it was the last time my son broke his curfew.”

In ending this article about the use of natural and logical consequences as productive disciplinary practices, I wish to emphasize once more the main points from my two earlier columns about discipline, namely, corporal punishment presents many problems and that an approach that focuses on prevention is very effective. While it is not possible to anticipate every behavior (or misbehavior) on the part of our children, the more we can discuss in advance expectations, rules, and consequences and also elicit their opinions, the more receptive they will be to understand and follow these rules and consequences. This process will strengthen their sense of responsibility and enhance their self-discipline, thereby nurturing their resilience.