

PARENTING young teens

Using Consequences to Promote Responsibility



Children need guidance and discipline to grow into responsible, caring adults. Respectful and kind discipline that sets firm limits will teach youth to be responsible. Natural and logical consequences will help youth learn what is expected of them.

Natural consequences

A natural consequence results from a person's action. Natural consequences help youth experience the outcome of their actions and learn to be responsible.

A parent who uses natural consequences allows a young teen to discover the benefits of order and rules. The parent does not threaten, argue with, or give in. Youth who experience natural consequences develop self-discipline and inner strength, and learn to respect order not from fear of punishment, but because they see that following rules leads to better living.

An example of a natural consequence is allowing a young teen to face a teacher and explain that homework did not get done the night before because she chose to play versus doing homework. If, however, the parent "rescues" her and writes an excuse or allows the teen to stay up to finish homework, she learns that it does not matter if she does homework when she is supposed to—someone will take care of her and no unwanted consequences will result.

On the other hand, punishment for poor behavior can result in rebellion against parents, especially by young teens. For example, a teenager who is scolded by parents or loses a privilege (such as playing video games) for coming home after curfew may feel angry and want to get even. Other teens may not rebel, but feel hurt and see themselves as "bad," which may result in low self-esteem.

To develop skills that will help them as adults, youth need to learn that something uncomfortable happens when they do not follow rules. Natural consequences allow the discomfort to occur naturally, rather than be created by an adult. For example, a young teen who cheats at games soon has no one to play with; and a teen who leaves clothes on the floor finds that the clothes do not get washed.

When natural consequences do not work

Parents should not use natural consequences when the consequence is dangerous or harmful; may not immediately follow the behavior; and is not uncomfortable for the young teens.

Logical consequences

When natural consequences do not work, the parent can create logical consequences. Logical consequences take the place of punishments and are practical, enforceable, and related to a teen's behavior.

Adults must arrange and explain consequences to a young teen ahead of time in a calm, clear, and respectful manner. It is highly important that adults inform a child of the reasons for expected behavior and wanted outcomes.

Examples of logical consequences

The teen who arrives home past curfew must have an earlier curfew for a few nights or may lose the use of a car.

The child who plays carelessly and breaks a neighbor's window must use allowance money to pay for the repairs.

As with natural consequences, logical consequences must fit the behavior and should not threaten or punish the teen. The parent allows the teen to decide actions, break the rule, and face the consequence.

The result is good behavior when the teen sees that things will go better when he decides to follow rules. Punishment, on the other hand, often leads to good behavior only when the teen fears being caught and leads to misbehavior when parents are absent.

Timing

Timing is key to the use of natural and logical consequences. It is difficult for parents to remain pleasant and calm when upset by a young teen's behavior. Always wait until you and the child are calm before you discuss the unwanted behavior and give the consequence. When the unwanted behavior occurs, you may want to say, "I'm upset right now. We'll talk about this later."

Most unwanted behavior that bothers parents takes place over time, so parents have time to think about logical consequences that might end or lessen bothersome behaviors. Discuss your concerns with your young teen and some consequences for the misbehavior.

Once you've decided on a consequence, follow through with the course of action. Otherwise, your child will learn that there are no negative effects of unwanted behavior. For example, if a young teen breaks a family rule by having friends over when a parent is not home, the parent can say, "Our family rule is no friends over when a parent is not home. You have broken that rule. The consequence is that you cannot go to a friend's house or have a friend over at our house for one week." At that point it is important to follow through with the consequence.

The most important job for teens is to grow more independent from parents throughout the teen years. While it can be challenging for parents, a teen must take small steps to become able to leave home in the future and live responsibly. Young teens whose parents have always controlled their actions often show one of two kinds of behaviors. Once out of parental control, some young adults who have not faced consequences to their actions may engage in dangerous behavior. Other young people may remain emotionally dependent on their parents and find it hard to develop fulfilling relationships.

As young teens become more independent, they should be given more choices. A suitable and logical consequence for a 10-year-old may be viewed as punishment by a teen. It is fitting for parents and preteens or teens to work together to solve problems. Then a parent must ensure that agreements are kept.

Natural and logical consequences are not the only ways that work to discipline young teens. In fact, they are not always possible or proper. If a behavior does not have any uncomfortable consequences, or if you cannot think of a reasonable consequence, you may need to find another way to solve the problem. Parental guidance and discipline should always be based on firm limits used with kindness and respect.

When you use natural and logical consequences, remember the three Rs: related, reasonable, and respectful. The consequence should relate to the behavior, be fair, and show respect for the young teen's feelings and right to choose how to behave.

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