

Skills for Good Parenting: Middle School - Consequences

Now let's consider giving consequences, known by some as punishment.

When giving consequences it's important to be fair, firm and consistent. Try to give the consequence in a friendly manner; you are not punishing the child, but rather enforcing consequences for a behavior or action. Ideally, we want to reinforce desired behaviors in order to prevent undesired ones. We want to support the child being good much more than we want to punish an undesired behavior. If you see your child set aside their cell phone while doing their homework, praise them for exercising good judgment. Don't wait for them to have a meltdown at midnight because they spent the afternoon and evening on SnapChat rather than writing that essay.

We want to communicate clear rules and expectations so children know what to expect in advance. In all cases, you want to name the behavior to help make things clear, both in the moment and later, when you're talking about what happened. It's also helpful for parents to have a menu of reasonable consequences ready in advance so that you're not scrambling at the last moment to come up with something and then possibly overreacting. Also remember to keep your expectations and consequences age-appropriate. We've included some helpful information in our list of resources.

Pause here for a moment and note down some negative behaviors and consequences you want to use in your family, for example: if your child hangs out with friends after school without first letting you know, you can require that they come home directly from school for a week. If you're stuck coming up with ideas here, look at our list in the Resource Guide. Remember to "pick your spot" and don't be too ambitious. It is also important to take your parenting style and your child's temperament to use consequences that are the right "fit" for your family.

When giving consequences, it's important to apply the punishment immediately or to allow the natural consequences to do the teaching. Never threaten a consequence you won't be willing to follow through on. For school age children or older, for example, if someone overslept, rather than rush and scramble to drive them to school, allow them to be late and let the school apply the consequence. Or if a child forgets their homework, rather than emailing it to them or driving it to school, allow the school to apply the consequences. And this might call for a new rule: homework must be done and the backpack organized and left by the door, ready for the morning, before the child is allowed any screen time. If a child stayed up late and is overtired the next day, that is a natural consequence. They've stayed up too late and the natural consequence is tiredness or sleepiness.

When giving consequences, the discipline should fit the crime. If your child leaves a mess on the table after having an after-school snack, have her help clean it up, don't scold her and clean it up yourself. Again, we want to be careful to not overreact or underreact, and this is where natural consequences can be very helpful.

We always want to consider developmental level when giving consequences. Consequences should also be appropriate to the situation – they should be teaching a lesson or applying something that allows the child to learn from the situation. We don't want to give something that is beyond or below the child's developmental stage. With this age group, pre-teens want to conform with their peers. It's all about fitting in for them. Ideally, consequences at this age should not humiliate your pre-teen in front of their friends.

SDJ 8/13/18