

Being the Boss –Chapter Two The Power of Consequences

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I think having two “chapters” may not be all that practical. I would have long since forgotten what last month’s article was about! So to re-cap, we left our family last time sitting at the dinner table. One child is missing because even though he knows he needs to hang-up his coat and backpack before coming to dinner, he has decided not to. We are hoping that this child has now decided to do just that and is on his way to the table where he will be graciously welcomed. But what if he doesn’t come to the table? What if she digs in her heels and says she’s not hanging up her things and she’s not coming to dinner either! What do you do now???

Chances are, after being such a calm and reasonable, supportive and empowering parent all evening, you’ll just want to scream; “OK, don’t come to dinner at all! Go to your room and stay there until tomorrow morning and I hope you’re good and hungry by then!!

Then your child is crying and maybe your spouse is disagreeing with your tactics and the other kids are looking upset and now you just want to go up to your room and cry!!

Don’t give-up! Let’s think again about the big picture - what all parents are trying to do. We’re all trying to raise children to become responsible, caring, disciplined adults – adults who hang-up their coats without being asked and who might even hang-up someone else’s coat without being asked! We are raising our children to be **self-disciplined**. Dr. T. Berry Brazelton says it this way: “The long-term goal is self – discipline. That means years of teaching; it doesn’t happen overnight. . . . The goal is teaching not punishment.” In the end you want your child to act with caring, honesty, integrity and responsibility when there’s no outside “force” to make them.

So, what do we do with the child who has decided she is going to fight this battle to the end and she is **not** hanging her coat and she is **not** coming to dinner. First, remember to breathe! If you feel your heart rate speeding-up and you’re clenching your teeth, you know you need to take a few deep breaths. Remember, “The goal is teaching not punishment.” Second, you are in charge here, you do not have to do anything right this second, so don’t. Instead, think, for a minute. What do you want to teach this child, and how do consequences fit into that learning.

We can probably agree there are two kinds of “real-life” consequences:

- **Natural consequences** – These just happen naturally. If you go out without your mittens, your hands will be cold. If you tip your chair back, eventually it will fall over.

- **Reasonable consequences** – These are clearly linked to the child’s action. If your child borrows a friend’s toy and breaks it, he needs to get a plan (with your help) to replace it/pay for replacing it.
- **Combination of both** – If your child doesn’t come to dinner when it’s ready, the food will be cold (natural consequence) or she’ll have to heat it up (reasonable).

It seems we all learn our best lessons from natural consequences. We learn about the world we live in and we also learn that we have power in our lives. If we don’t want to have cold hands we’ll wear our mittens. If we don’t want to lose things we’ll make a system to get ourselves organized. The key here is children (and adults) are empowered by dealing with natural consequences. They learn how to make choices and solve problems. So, whenever we can connect natural consequences to helping our child become self-disciplined, it can be very powerful.

HOWEVER, there are serious limits to natural consequences. They can be life-threatening or unhealthy. The natural consequence to letting a child run into the street is clearly life-threatening! The natural consequence of not brushing your teeth is cavities or worse so we probably would intervene, and not wait for the natural consequences to occur. Clearly unhealthy or life threatening consequences are not good tools for teaching self-discipline! When natural consequences won’t work, we can turn to reasonable consequences.

Reasonable consequences take more thought on the part of parents. But if you have to think too long, it’s probably not reasonable. Stay focused on the big picture – your child has created a problem for herself and you want to support and empower her to solve her problem and learn from that experience. Barbara Coloroso (*Kids are Worth It!*) suggests parents think about reasonable consequences with **RSVP**.

- **R** – Is it reasonable? Is the consequence connected to the action and does it teach. If we think about our dinner table scenario, perhaps a reasonable consequence of your child’s decision to delay his dinner until he puts his things away, would be the child could heat- up her food and then eat. It may be that everyone else in the family is finished by now, so he’ll probably have to put his own dishes in the dishwasher or wash them. These are reasonable consequences of not coming to dinner on time. If your child really doesn’t now how to heat-up their dinner and you find your self saying “That’s your problem, I’m not going to show you.” you may have decided punishment is what this child needs.
- **S** - Is it simple? In my family we had some great debaters. The older they got, the better they debated. If I tried to cover every circumstance, that only encouraged looking for loop-holes. Keep it simple. If you borrow anyone’s things and loose them, you need to replace them or make a plan for replacing them. If your child borrows your scissors and then loses them, he either needs to use his own money to replace them or he needs to earn the money to replace them. (In my family, I am the one who loses the scissors, so I have to replace them!)
- **V** Is the consequence a valuable learning experience? Having to replace the scissors out of your own pocket or effort helps teach your child the importance of

fairness and honesty. If you lose someone else's things, you are responsible for replacing them – that's fair.

- **P** – Is it practical? Getting back to our child who won't put away their things, you may want to just take away the backpack and the coat until they learn to put them away. Practically speaking, that won't work because you aren't going to send your child off to school without a coat or a backpack. That consequence also has no value because if you don't have a backpack or a coat, you'll never have to learn how to organize them and that's what you were trying to teach in the first place!

Again, none of this is easy and it does take lots of energy, patience and perseverance. But with your asset –building love and support and your empowering belief in your child's ability to learn to solve his or her own problems, you will get there.

Be encouraged and don't forget to breathe!