

When Consequences Don't Work

Your son rides his bike without a helmet. Again. You've nagged, begged, pleaded, and informed him of the dangers of riding without one. Next, you've issued Consequences! You've taken the bike away and put it in the garage for a day, then a week and then, a whole month. You've done everything the parenting books say for a consequence to work. It's reasonable. Anyone can live a day without a bike. It's respectful. You're not hitting or calling him names. And it's related. No helmet, no bike. It's simple to understand. But the problem is that he is still riding a bike without a helmet! And the situation could turn into a huge power struggle every time you take the bike away.

Punishment or solution?

In some cases, parents find that setting up a connection between not wearing a helmet and losing bike privileges is enough to do the trick. When the parents take action, the child takes the rule seriously. Clearly, however, in the case described above, the Consequence has not worked. Why not? Often, consequences are disguised as punishments. They do not help in making amends, cleaning up, fixing things, nor do they solve problems. Children really need to see the purpose in logical consequences and very often, there is no real purpose, other than to inflict pain and inconvenience for the child until they change their behaviour. However, children will not change their behaviour until the underlying feeling or need has been addressed and a solution found.

In this instance, the consequence was issued as more of a punishment than a solution. Taking the bike away does nothing to solve the problem of why the helmet is unacceptable to the child. How to tell the difference between consequences as a solution and consequences as a punishment? If you are threatening a

consequence, it's probably more of a punishment, and not a workable solution, and even with the three R's, (respectful, related, reasonable) it won't work to bring about a positive change of behaviour.

Talking about solutions

What to do? Sit down with your son and probe why he doesn't like the bike helmet. Perhaps it's in an inconvenient place to access. He needs a solution to make it handier to use. Perhaps he just never can remember. He needs solutions to help him remember. Perhaps a visual picture on the door might work. Perhaps the helmet doesn't fit right or looks goofy. He needs to obtain a different helmet. This isn't all on the parent's shoulder to fix. Involving the child in finding a solution is essential in developing their problem solving skills, creativity, and teamwork, as well as making it more likely they will accept the solution chosen.

Consequences that teach

So, make sure that the consequences are solution focussed rather than pain focussed. A common concern is, "Won't my child ever learn the consequences of his actions if I don't set up logical consequences?" Of course he will. The rest of the world will be happy to teach your child the logical consequences of his actions and sometimes it will be painful and inconvenient for him, but only you, the parent, can provide the safe haven of your loving relationship to teach him how to solve problems, make restitution and make amends. That's the harder job. But the bonus is that you'll enjoy less power struggles and more connection, teaching, and learning, in your relationship.

by Judy Arnall

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