**“Why Don’t Consequences Work For My Teen?” Here’s Why….. And How to Fix It**

If you’re having trouble giving effective consequences to your teen, know that you are not alone. Many parents tell me that nothing seems to work, and that coming up with the right thing for their child can seem like an impossible task. If you’re the parent of an adolescent, you may have grounded your child, taken away their video games, or suspended their driving privileges for months on end. But as James Lehman says, you can’t punish kids into acceptable behavior—it just doesn’t work that way.

Rather, an effective consequence should encourage your child to change their behavior – whether that is abiding by the house rules, or treating people respectfully. So first, you need to identify the behavior you want to see changed. For example, if your child swears when they don’t get their way, you want them to behave more appropriately. Instead of grounding or punishing, or even reasoning with your child when he gets angry and lashes out, an effective consequence here would require your child to practice better behavior – and improve their self-control for a period of time before their normal privileges are restored.

* **Effective consequences** are ones that are connected to the original behavior, and are both task – and time- specific
* **“Connected to the original behavior”** means that your consequence needs to be related to the behavior you want to see your child change or improve.
* **“Task Specific”** means that there is something your child needs to accomplish, or practice related to the original problem. This is a concrete behavior, like washing the dishes, meeting curfew, or not swearing.
* **“Time Specific”** means there is a specific amount of time in which he needs to demonstrate that behavior.

So, when your child swears, he might lose access to his electronics until he can go without swearing for two hours. The consequence is tied to the behavior – he swore so he has to practice not swearing. This consequence is task specific – it requires him to exercise the part of his brain that governs self-control. If he wants his stuff back, he has to practice better behavior. And it’s time specific – he needs to demonstrate self-control for two hours, then he is free to have his privileges.

It’s important to understand that you can’t get your child to not feel angry, or not get frustrated. That’s just part of being human. But you can require that they change the way they deal with those feelings. You can expect them to practice some self-control. Your goal is to require that your child practice the better behavior for a certain amount of time before they get their privileges back. So practice – and behavioral improvement – equals the restoration of privileges. If they yell about their consequence, or how unfair it is, you might say, “I understand that you’re angry. Yelling is not going to get you what you want. Once you’ve been able to deal with your anger appropriately for two hours, you will get your electronics back.” Do not continue to explain your consequences, or justify your decisions. He may mumble to himself or text his friends about how awful his parents are, and it may take some time, but eventually your child will decide to practice those skills that earn back his electronics.

**Choosing a Consequence**

Think of it this way: a privilege is a motivator. The withdrawal, or granting, of a privilege should give your child incentive to follow the rules of your house, even when they don’t agree with those rules. An effective consequence is a privilege your child is interested in. For some kids, video games are a powerful motivator, while other kids could care less about them. Taking away a cell phone for two hours works for some kids; others would just find another way to communicate. In order to choose the right privilege to use as a consequence, you have to know your child. What are their interests? What would really impact them if they lost it for a short period of time? Some parents tell us that using the blanket term “All Electronics” woks better than just saying “No Video Games,” which can make kids turn to the computer or the television as a distraction.

Remember, the right privilege should be an activity that your child will actually miss. Withhold that privilege until your child completes the task you’ve set for them. James Lehman suggests that you sit down with your child and come up with a list of privileges and consequences together. The advantage here is that you are working as a team to solve the problem. It can help you identify things or activities your child truly values. It also clarifies what the consequences will be for certain infractions – for everyone involved. Not only will your child know what will happen if he breaks a certain rule, but the parents don’t have to spend time coming up with something in the heat of the moment.

**If Your Child Doesn’t Seem to Care What You Use as a Consequence…**

Many parents call the Parental Support Line saying that their kid doesn’t seem to care what they take away. Recently, one dad said to me in exasperation, “Even though my daughter lives to text, she acts like she could care less when her texting rights are taken away. Nothing works with her!” Some kids appear not to care what activity you restrict; they pretend they didn’t want to do it anyway.

But look at it this way; would your child really want you to know that they care about the consequence you’re giving them? That would make it seem like you have power over them, and they aren’t about to concede on that one! So some kids, like the teenage girl above, feign indifference when you remove a privilege. If you’ve watched your child and know that what you’re taking away really does impact them, don’t worry about whether or not they seem suitably upset at the loss of it.

**What if the Consequences Still Aren’t Working?**

So what if you know you’ve chosen a valuable privilege, and your consequences still aren’t working? The key here is to take a look at the length of time privileges are removed. Is it too long? Does your child lose interest in what you’ve taken away (the “out of sight, out of mind” dilemma)? Is the time frame so long that your child can’t possibly be successful (no swearing for a whole month)?

Remember, your goal is to create better behavior in your child, and the consequence/privilege needs to encourage that improvement by being time-specific. If you truly want your child to improve their behavior, you need to create an environment in which your child can succeed. The time span of your consequence is important – it should be long enough that your child has to stretch their skills, and short enough that you have a good chance of seeing improvement. To be effective, a consequence needs to be short-term, task specific, and involve a privilege your child values. Your goal here is to produce a child who can respond to limits, meet responsibilities, and demonstrate age-appropriate behavior. Your consequences and privileges help get them there.

**One last word of advice:** Parents often want to see their child’s behavior improve overnight. If you are faced with a child who behaves inappropriately under stress, your consequences should require him to practice and get better. Don’t expect perfection immediately. Like any new skill, better behavior takes practice. When implementing a new consequence, you can expect some failure. You can expect that you may need to restart a couple of times. In the beginning, you may find that your child behaves inappropriately every day, and has their privileges removed often. That doesn’t mean you’ve chosen the wrong consequence. It simply means your child needs time to practice better skills. And they need you to keep them practicing.t