

Logical Consequences and Why Children Don't Cooperate

An excerpt from *Positive Time-Out and Over 50 Ways to Avoid Power Struggles in Homes and Classrooms*, by Jane Nelsen

I suggest that parents stop using logical consequences because they so often try to disguise punishment by calling it a logical consequence. Instead, focus on solutions—or help children explore the consequences of their choices rather than trying to impose consequences on them. Imposing creates resistance and rebellion. Exploring teaches children accountability and responsibility when done in a friendly atmosphere.

Eight-year-old Jake didn't do his homework. His father confiscated his bicycle and told him he was grounded (negative time-out) until he got it done. Dad thought this was a logical consequence for not doing homework. Jake was so angry that he sat in his room and thought about how he would refuse to do his homework or do just enough to get by to get even with his father. He certainly wouldn't do his best.

Sixteen-year-old Emma didn't do her homework. Her father asked Emma for an appointment to talk with her and asked, "Which would work best for you, 6:30 or 7:00 this evening?" (Giving Emma a choice allows her some power, which usually invites cooperation instead of defensiveness. Waiting even a short time before a discussion allows both adults and children some time-out for calmness instead of the kind of attack and defensiveness that often happens when a discussion occurs out of anger.) Emma thought she knew what was coming and chose 6:30 to get it over with.

At 6:30, Emma was surprised when her father started by asking, "I wonder if you love yourself as much as I love you?"

Emma laughed and said, "What are you talking about, Dad?"

Dad said, "Well, I just wanted to let you know how much I love you. Because of that, I have your best interests at heart. I just wondered if you love yourself as much and if you think about your best interests?"

Emma was very suspicious, "Is this your way of conning me into doing my homework?"

Dad replied, "Why would I try to con you into doing your homework if you don't think that would be good for you? We both know I can't make you do anything you don't want to do. However, I am willing to help you explore what is good for you, and I'm willing to help you create a plan that works for you to accomplish what is best for you."

Emma said, "Okay, Dad. I'll do my homework." (Dad invited Emma to discuss the problem instead of using lectures and punishment, which she would resist, resent, and rebel against. Emma quickly figured out that doing her homework would be in her best interest.)

Dad replied, "Honey, it doesn't work for me to have to remind you all the time. That seems to create a conflict between us. I don't want to spend our time that way. You wouldn't agree to do your homework if you didn't know that is in your best interest. How about taking it a step further? You might find it helpful to create a regular evening routine that includes the best time for you to do your homework—one that would work for you and that would take me out of the loop. You can show me what you come up with tomorrow night. I have faith in you to know what kind of plan would work best for you."

Emma agreed. The next night she showed her dad the following plan:

3:30–4:00	Chill out after a hard day at school
4:00–4:30	Phone time with friends
4:30–5:30	Homework
5:30–6:00	Chill (and maybe help out a little) before dinner
6:00–6:30	Dinner
6:30–7:00	Finish homework if not completed
7:00–8:00	Favorite TV programs

Dad said, "Looks like a good plan. Now this routine can be the boss instead of me. I think you will find this kind of organization very useful throughout your life."

Why Children Don't Cooperate

Many parents don't believe their children would be as cooperative as Emma was. If these parents have established a pattern of power struggles instead of guiding their children to use their own power in useful ways, then they are right—the children probably won't cooperate. What parents usually mean by *cooperate* is, "Do what I tell you to do." This definition does not invite cooperation; it invites rebellion.

When children don't want to cooperate, it could be that parents and teachers have not created a cooperative environment where children are truly involved in creating plans and guidelines and brainstorming for solutions. Many children have more practice in trying to protect their "sense of self" through resistance and rebellion against being controlled instead of through self-control and cooperation.

Emma was used to having her parents turn the responsibility for her actions over to her. They had spent many hours in regular family meetings brainstorming for solutions to problems. Emma had been involved in creating

routines (bedtime, morning, mealtime) since she was two years old. Her parents established this process early on in life.

Exploring the Logical Consequences of Choices through Curiosity Questions

The method of using curiosity questions has been presented in previous chapters. Helping children understand the consequences of their choices is a powerful life lesson. Sometimes it takes a series of what and how questions to help children use their own thinking ability to explore consequences. (What happened? What do you think caused that to happen? What did you learn from this experience? How could you solve this problem? What do you want to accomplish? What do you need to do to achieve your goals?) At other times, one question might be enough, (What was our agreement? What are you supposed to be doing now? What do you need to take if you don't want to be cold outside?) However, asking what and how questions is not effective if it is used to get children to recite a script you have in mind. The point is to help them explore for themselves the consequences of their choices.

Emma's parents had often helped her explore the consequences of her choices by asking her what happened, how she felt about what happened, what she had learned, how she could use what she had learned in the future, and what ideas she had for solving the problem now. They did not ask these questions if either they or Emma were upset because they knew that the time of conflict (when people have lost perspective and are thinking irrationally) is not the best time to focus on learning and on solutions. They often used positive time-out to wait until everyone could be in a more rational mood. Sometimes they would go to their separate special time-out areas; other times they would go to time-out together; on occasion they decided to put the problem on the family-meeting agenda to serve as their time-out.

Many parents have shared with me how many power struggles were eliminated when they stopped using "logical consequences" and, instead, "focused on solutions."