

Logical Consequences Teach Important Lessons

By Ruth Charney

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Children break rules for many of the same reasons adults ignore a stop sign. They are preoccupied, in a hurry, impulsive, distracted, or looking around; seeing neither hindrance nor authorities, they put pedal to the metal!

Children also test the limits, look for instant gratification and undue attention. More seriously, they act out academic and social frustrations. Not understanding the math, for example, a student throws a pencil, crumples paper, and announces, "It's boring!" Children are apt to have more limited coping mechanisms and thus make poor choices more frequently.

Regardless of the source or the specifics, classroom rules need to be upheld and limits reinstated. When we intervene with logical consequences, we seek to make clear to children the connection between their behavior and consequences. We learn, John Dewey wrote, not from experience alone, but from comprehending it. When we intervene to stop unwanted behavior, we also listen, guide, coach and, if necessary, teach an alternative way.

Neither punishment nor permission, logical consequences help children learn alternative ways to behave. Logical consequences:

- *reinstate the limits.* A colleague uses the wonderful example of highway bumpers. Just as you start to swerve off the side of the road, you get jostled and rumbled, reminding you quickly to turn back the wheel. Note that the bumpers give you a significant enough jostle that you wake up, but not so violent a shake that you might lose control. Logical consequences also need to jostle, but not so harshly that a child becomes discouraged or defiant.
- *engage children in critical thinking and problem solving with adults.* "What might you do differently next time?" "What else could you do when you're angry, frustrated or confused?" "Let's make a plan for when you go to music and you don't have the same seat." They help children develop and extend their verbal and behavioral skills.
- *help preserve the integrity of the group and an orderly environment.* When a student who has just ridiculed another with a face or rude comment is sent away from the group quickly, quietly, and efficiently, a clear message is presented. "You need to take a break," the teacher says, perhaps adding, "Come back when you are ready to follow the rules." When children call out, hold side conversations, stroll noisily about during a quiet work period, or otherwise consume the attention of the teacher with misbehavior, the needs of the group might be compromised. Logical consequences help us meet and balance the needs of the individual with the needs of the group.
- *are respectful, reasonable, and realistic.* They are not punitive. Whether something is perceived as punitive or logical might very well rest on "the how" of the intervention. The same action might convey respect or disrespect, depending on how it is carried out.

It is important to note that non-verbal gestures, as well as the words we use, carry great weight. A teacher can require a "time out" with a voice that is quiet and firm, or public and scornful. Tone and attitude can make the difference between compliance or defiance, self-regulation or denial.

It also is important to respond to actions and choices, and not to character. "Talking out of turn makes it hard for others to think," rather than, "You are so inconsiderate."

Logical consequences are reasonable and realistic when they relate to the situation and are neither too harsh nor too lenient. Someone who was dueling with scissors might lose the use of them for the remainder of that period or the next day, until they demonstrate proper handling, but a week's restriction, perhaps making it impossible to complete a project, would likely generate resentment.

A chance to mop up the spill, repair the hurt feelings, make up the missed assignment, or offer a service gives children a way to help solve – not just create – problems. It allows them to have a constructive role in the process. It helps them become more reasonable and respectful.

Logical consequences can fill in for natural consequences. It was not unusual for my middle school students to forget something they needed for their day in school – a lunch, a homework assignment, a book, a bus ticket (their heads if they weren't attached, goes the joke). I began to notice that parents got the job of gofer, turning up with the necessary object, which wasn't helping the students get any better at remembering and taking responsibility. Natural consequences would dictate that those without lunch would go hungry; those without their books or work would fail. Or something like that. In other words, natural consequences offer highly relevant and dramatic lessons.

Except, in school (and life), we can't always risk the outcome. The student who runs after the basketball full tilt into street traffic might have to miss a recess period rather than "learn" by getting hit by a car. A hungry student is ill prepared to concentrate. Students who consistently come unprepared are often confused and soon withdraw or act out.

Still, we need to make the connections between behavior and outcomes if our children are going to be accountable. Logical consequences help frame interventions that keep students safe and also help them learn. For example, in our class, when lunch was forgotten, students could ask their peers to share from their own lunchboxes or take crackers and cheese from a communal cupboard. They didn't go hungry; they also didn't have a choice menu. Work that was forgotten on the kitchen table might be redone that morning or during a break time, so the student didn't come to class completely unprepared.

In conclusion, logical consequences help teachers intervene when in the normal course of school life, children break rules. It is a strategy that reinforces the limits of the classroom, the accountability of each individual, and the wonderful faith that we all can learn to take better care of ourselves, one another, and our environment.