



Center for Attachment & Trauma Therapy, LLC (CATT)

Lynne Lyon, MSW, LCSW • 183 Franklin Corner Road, Lawrenceville, NJ 08648
phone: (609) 217-2366 • fax (609) 219-6664 • e-mail: lynnelyon@comcast.net
websites: www.attachmenttherapynj.com • www.attach-china.org

Who Said that Consequences Don't Work?

Lately, I've been hearing from parents that "consequences don't work". That may be partly true. What I will say is that consequences *alone* don't work. Just as cereal is only *part* of a balanced breakfast, consequences are only *part* of a total healing program for your child. Other parts should include attachment and trauma therapy, and may also include neurofeedback, psychotropic medication, and elimination of foods and dyes which your child may be sensitive to.

One of the major symptoms of Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), or attachment impairment, which I look for is that the child is overly controlling or independent. That is because before the child was adopted into his forever family, the grown-ups who were supposed to be taking care of him weren't doing a good job. And so, in order to feel safe, the RAD child feels he must take care of himself. But it's a Catch-22, because if a child is truly taking care of himself, by definition, he is *not* safe.

A normal, healthy child obeys mom and dad because she wants to please them. A child with an attachment impairment doesn't have any interest in pleasing her parents, because she doesn't trust them. Attachment therapy is designed to increase the level of trust. But in the meantime, consequences are necessary so that the child can start to learn from her own experiences until she is able to learn from mom and dad. In addition, children with an attachment impairment have a deficit in cause and effect thinking. They don't understand that if they break their brother's toy, it will cause upset feelings and further disrupt an already poor relationship. Children with attachment impairment also have toxic shame – the feeling that "I am bad" – not just that "I feel guilty because I did a bad thing." Consequences allow a child to fix their mistake, which allows healing from the toxic shame.

It's important to understand the difference between Punishment and Consequences. Punishment is used when our child has done something wrong, it makes us mad, and we want our child to feel just as bad as we do. Consequence, on the other hand, takes our feelings of anger out of the equation, and is designed to help the child both fix his mistake and learn cause and effect thinking. The intent of both is to help the child learn right from wrong, but punishment often elicits feelings of resentment in the child, and can often backfire, setting up an adversarial relationship, instead of a cooperative one.

The rules of consequences are simple:

1. Empathetic listening by the parent comes first
2. Consequences should be something good for the child, such as exercise, chores or learning, never dangerous, demeaning or humiliating
3. Consequences should only be imposed after the child has calmed down from a meltdown
4. All fun stops until the consequence is performed

Consequences are not a stand-alone technique when doing therapeutic parenting. It is first necessary to use the four steps of empathy, to help the child understand why she committed the act in the first place, especially if it was an act of aggression. Empathy is putting yourself in someone else's place – walking in someone else's shoes. Our kids need us to empathize with them when they are at their most intense. They are shouting or yelling because they don't feel heard. So we need to listen. And we need to understand their feelings and help them to verbalize them. Often they don't know what they are feeling, so they can't tell us. It is our job to help them figure it out and speak for them until they are able to do it themselves.

So how do we know what they are feeling if they can't tell us?

1. **Observe the Behavior:** "I see that you're slamming the door"
2. **Name the Emotion:** "You seem pretty mad"
3. **Find a Reason:** "I wonder if it's because I have to go to work and you're going to miss me"
4. **Validate:** "I can understand why you would feel that way. I would, too"

It is only after you have empathized, and your child has calmed down, can you begin to impose consequences. Consequences are always things that are good for the child, and they can be Natural Consequences, Supernatural Consequences, or Restitution.

Natural Consequences follow through logically from the offense.

- If you spilled your milk by mistake, you just clean it up. If you spill it on purpose, you clean the whole table or floor.
- If you break something, you help fix it and do chores to earn the money for the materials.
- If you flush your sister's DS game card down the toilet, you give her yours. Or you give her your gift cards so she can buy a new one.

- Child dawdles getting ready for school and misses the bus, so he pays Dad “cab fare” to drive him to school.

Supernatural Consequences are those created by Mom and Dad when a natural, logical consequence does not come to mind.

- Chores are great consequences. Chores are widely used as therapeutic activities in many programs, such as the Betty Ford Clinic, a substance abuse treatment program. A daily routine which includes chores helps reduce anxiety by teaching competence and instilling self-esteem. Doing chores helps children attach by contributing to the family and learning from their parents.
- I recommend that children do chores side-by-side with a parent.
- Child spends a half an hour in a rage, wasting a half an hour of Mom’s time, so she owes Mom a half an hour of “hassle time.” Child would spend a half an hour doing something that Mom would normally do, preferably a chore.
- Reading and copying from passages from life-affirming, positive, philosophical writings can help train the brain to respond with positive self-talk in times of distress.
- If sister is tormenting her brother, brother gets paid a quarter (or other appropriate, small sum) for each offense. Sister will be outraged to learn that she is enriching her brother by her behavior – precisely the opposite of her intent.

Restitution is an “Act of Apology.” For people with a conscious, words of apology have meaning, because the corresponding feelings of guilt serve as a deterrent to repeating the behavior. Attachment impaired children do everything they can to block the feelings of toxic shame which come with knowing they did something wrong, so their words of apology are empty, because they are saying them just to get it over with, and avoid any feeling which goes with them. That is why the “Act of Apology” should be literally an action.

- Make cookies or a card for the child she wronged in school
- Replace a toy which was deliberately broken, either with one of child's own, a newly purchased toy, or with a gift card
- Sibling who is teasing other sibling must do one of his/her chores
- Give Mom/Dad a foot or neck massage.

I recommend that parents make a list of small chores and Acts of Apology ahead of time, so that in the heat of a melt-down by a child, rather than yelling in anger to force the child to behave, the parent can respond with empathy and calm, knowing that she has a full toolkit of consequences and restitution at the ready. Using this approach will help your child become capable and responsible, and help parents and children to form a life-long connection.

Lynne Lyon, LCSW, is an adoptive mother, and has been an attachment advocate and educator since 1999. She is the founder of Attach-China / International Parent's Network (www.attach-china.org), a web site and on-line support group for parents whose internationally and domestically adopted children suffer from attachment impairment, trauma, and the effects of institutionalization. Ms. Lyon is available for phone and Skype consultations. Visit her website at <http://www.attachmenttherapy.com>.