
Responsive Classroom Newsletter

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Punishment vs. Logical Consequences

What's the Difference

Logical consequences are directly related to children's behaviors and help them to fix their mistakes.

The use of logical consequences is one part of an approach to discipline used in the *Responsive Classroom*[®]. It's a powerful way of responding to children's misbehavior that not only is effective in stopping the behavior but is respectful of children and helps them to take responsibility for their actions.

Teachers often ask, "How are logical consequences any different from punishment?" It is a critical question because there are some basic and important differences between the two—differences which must be understood in order to use logical consequences well. Take the following example:

Six-year-old Jacob is zooming around the classroom when suddenly he trips and falls into Michelle's block building. Michelle lets out a scream and the teacher comes over.

Using punishment

This first scenario involves a teacher who uses punishment. Feeling irritated, the teacher looks at Jacob and says loudly in front of the other children, "I have told you over and over again not to run in this classroom. Now see what you've done with your carelessness. Go sit in that chair and don't move until it's time for lunch."

What might be going on for Jacob? He might be thinking, "*I wasn't even running. The teacher doesn't know what she's talking about. She's always picking on me. Now everybody's looking at me. I hate this school. It was a stupid building anyway.*"

Now, here's what might happen with a teacher who uses logical consequences. The teacher, although also feeling irritated, takes a deep breath and makes herself begin by describing what she sees: "Michelle is very upset right now because Jacob knocked over her building. I need to talk with Jacob first and then we'll figure out how to help Michelle."

The teacher takes Jacob aside and begins by asking him a question.

"What happened?"

"I just tripped and fell into it accidentally. I didn't mean to knock it over."

"Hmmm. So it was an accident. I did notice that you were running before it happened. Could that have been why you fell?"

"Maybe."

“When kids run in the classroom, accidents often happen. That’s why our rule says to be safe. What do you think you could do to help Michelle?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe she would like some help putting the building back up.”

Jacob nods and the teacher walks back with him to the block area. Michelle accepts Jacob’s offer to help and together they build for the rest of the period.

Now, what might be going on for Jacob? He might be learning, “When I knock things down I have to help build them back up. I can fix things when I mess up. My teacher helps me solve problems. I have to remember to walk in the block area.”

Here are some of the fundamental differences in the two approaches:

The goal of punishment is to enforce compliance with the rules by using external controls or authoritarian discipline.

- While effective in stopping the misbehavior of the moment, punishment does little to increase student responsibility.
- Punishment often leads to feelings of anger, discouragement and resentment and an increase in evasion and deception.

The goal of logical consequences is to help children develop internal understanding, self-control, and a desire to follow the rules.

- Logical consequences help children look more closely at their behaviors and consider the results of their choices.
- Unlike punishment, where the intention is to make a child feel shamed, the intention of logical consequences is to help children develop internal controls and to learn from their mistakes in a supportive atmosphere.

Logical consequences are respectful of the child’s dignity while punishment often calls upon an element of shame.

- Logical consequences respond to the misbehavior in ways that preserve the dignity of the child. The message is that the behavior is a problem, not that the child is a problem.
- The teacher’s tone of voice is critical in distinguishing logical consequences from punishment. There are many ways to say to a child that they’ve spilled their juice and should clean it up. If the tone is angry or punitive, then it’s no longer a logical consequence.
- The same consequence can be respectful in one situation and demeaning in another. Mopping the floor is a respectful consequence for the child who chooses to have a water fight at the drinking fountain but not for the child who fails to complete his work.

Logical consequences are related to the child’s behavior; punishment usually is not.

- Leaving the group is related to being disruptive in a group; missing recess is not. Cleaning up graffiti on the bathroom wall is related to drawing the graffiti on the walls; being suspended from school is not.
- Logical consequences require that the teacher gather more information before reacting. The teacher takes time to assess the situation and determine, sometimes with input from the child, what will help fix the problem.
- Here are a few questions teachers might ask themselves when trying to assess a situation:

What are the developmental issues at work here?

Is it clear to the child what is expected?

What rule is being broken?

What problem is the behavior creating?

What will help to solve the problem?

The belief underlying the use of logical consequences is that with reflection and practice children will want to do better, whereas the belief behind punishment is that children will do better only because they fear punishment and will seek to avoid it.

- Teachers using logical consequences begin with a belief in the basic goodness of children and the knowledge that every child is a learner, struggling to establish meaningful relationships with us, each other, and the school community.
- These teachers expect that all children will from time to time lose their controls and make mistakes.
- The use of logical consequences helps children fix their mistakes and know what to do next time.

Teachers frequently ask, “Is it ever okay for a child to feel bad about their behavior?” Of course it is. When children misbehave, chances are they already feel bad. Our job is not to make them feel worse but to help them choose a better course of action the next time.

As Ruth Sidney Charney says in *Teaching Children to Care*, “Our goal, when children break rules, is never to make them feel ‘bad’ or defeated, although they may, in fact, feel bad. Our goal is first to help them recover self-control and self-respect. When I observe a child acting the part of the bully, or sneaking out of a job, or putting down a classmate or teacher, it is not a picture of self-control and self-respect. It is a sign of distress and a signal for help. Something needs to stop. The use of logical consequences urges respect for the rules and the people they are designed to guide.” ■

Recommended Resources

Here are some excellent resources for learning how to use logical consequences in the classroom:

Positive Discipline by Jane Nelsen

Teaching Children to Care by Ruth Sidney Charney

Setting Limits in the Classroom by Robert J. Mackenzie

Positive Time-Out by Jane Nelsen

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39 Montague City Road
Greenfield, MA 01301
800-360-6332 413-772-2066
www.responsiveclassroom.org