

Building the tool box: Consequences, making the punishment fit the crime

At some point every child in the world needs to experience a consequence for their action. There are a whole list that most parents use from smacking to grounding and removal of loved items. None of these really work with traumatised children. Children who have a powerful negative working model that says that all adults are dangerous, they are unlovable, and that they can't trust adults to meet their emotional needs will just have their model reinforced by the strategies above.

The first task is to work out what your goal of a consequence is, is it to make the child feel as bad as you? Or to make them as upset as they've made you? If so, then it is really revenge rather than a consequence and making the child feel as bad as they have made you feel is more likely to trigger a backlash of anger and will definitely trigger a loss of trust.

If the goal is for the child to learn, so that they don't do the action again then there are two ways to do this. Firstly by triggering so much physical or emotional pain that they will avoid the behaviour out of fear. This would be smacking or slapping, grounding or removing a treasured item like their phone. The problem with this is that this will trigger anger from the child, and again it destroys trust and relationship rather than build it up. Usually what it actually teaches your child is to learn strategies to avoid detection such as lying or just being sneaky so that you won't find out what they've done. They learn, but not what you want them to do.

So, the best consequence, is to have a logical connection back to the actual behaviour. So, if your child throws something at you they need to pick it up. No one goes out or goes to clubs or with friends until the item is picked up and put in the rubbish bin. You child hits you, they need to get out cream and make it better. Chat to your therapist about the best type of consequences for the behaviours that your child is showing.

Using this strategy also means that you don't save your child from their own natural consequence for their behaviour. If they don't wash, they will smell and children will notice, telling them this is just a trigger for another argument, let them learn it for themselves. They won't do homework; the consequence is that they will get a sanction in school. All children learn best from experiencing the natural consequences of their behaviour. When we tell them about the possible consequence it is as if we are lying to them, even more if their negative working model says that adults can't be trusted to have their best interest at heart.