

Failure, Consequences, And Learning

My 14 year-old son initiated the 9th grade at Cathedral Catholic High School this fall. Like any first time high school student, he is faced with new and more difficult demands than those he experienced in junior high school. He also has recently joined a local Carmel Valley competitive soccer club. There are practices (2 to 3 times a week), school activities, and increased academic responsibilities. He is required to leave our house in Carlsbad by 6:30 am, with his lunch, backpack, and soccer gear in hand. He has done pretty well this first couple of weeks. However, today he made his first error. He forgot his soccer bag. Our plan was for him to bring his gear to school, I would pick him up, bring him back to my school to spend the 3 hours prior to practice, snacking, reading, studying, and resting. At the same time I intended to spend the time getting ahead in the work that I do at Sage Canyon and Sycamore Ridge. My wife called me to let me know that Nolan had left his soccer bag at home and my first reaction was to drive home and pick up his gear for him (I would do this after giving him a lecture on being responsible and threatening punishment if it happens again). My wife suggested that he wear his school tennis shoes and shorts, but in my initial thought that idea was not suitable. After all, he'd be slipping without cleats, he'd be hot, he'd be embarrassed, he wouldn't do as well, and his coach would not be happy! Then it dawned on me, while it was true he would experience all of the above-mentioned consequences, he would not be psychologically scarred for life, he would survive the inconvenience, and, just maybe, the natural consequences he reaped would help him learn and retain a valuable lesson. Stifling my impulse to rescue him and allowing him to experience the results of his actions, or lack thereof was actually the most loving and helpful choice I could make in this instance!

The concept of "Natural Consequences" is not new, but seems to be even more topical today than when it was introduced over 50 years ago by Rudolph Dreikurs. As the above example points out, I'm right there with each and everyone of you who on a daily basis "save" your children from experiencing the consequences of their behavior and as a result, prevent them from learning valuable lessons of life. If the kindergartner slides down a wet slide after being told not to by the teacher the child will get his/her clothes wet, if the 3rd grader forgets their lunch, she/he will be hungry, if the 6th grader forgets to bring a book home to study, he/she may earn a less than suitable grade. We as parents can jump in and rescue our children in every one of these and

thousands of other instances in an effort to make sure they will not be the “victim” of what really are Natural Consequences (e.g. being wet and uncomfortable, being hungry, or being disappointed by a bad grade). Perhaps I’m being picky here, but in the above examples the subtle message we give by saving our children from experiencing these consequences is that they don’t have to listen to the teacher, they don’t need to remember to take their lunch, and it isn’t important to remember the books needed for studying because in each instance mom, dad, or a teacher will step in and make it right! Allowing Natural Consequences to teach our children how to accept responsibility for mistakes and misbehavior is a parental gift that will pay dividends for the future and will result in self-sufficient, confident, and pro-social children.

Now you may be asking yourself, how do Natural Consequences apply when a child is proceeding in a line of behavior that has possibilities of disastrous consequences, e.g. running into the busy street? Additionally, what about behaviors that do not appear to have a natural consequence such as walking into the just cleaned house with sand all over his/her feet? In these cases and in the thousands of other situations like them, Logical Consequences should be the appropriate response. Logical Consequences are predicated on foundation of respect, the development of a reasonable response, and the application of a response that is related to the behavior. In the example of sand tracked into the house the response is obvious. The child is directed in a respectful manner to right what he/she has wronged. He/She will need to clean the floor, returning it to its original state. If a child runs into the street, they lose their privilege of playing in the yard or outside for a period of time. So, when a Natural Consequence is not appropriate try to find a Logical Consequence.

This short introduction to the concept of Natural and Logical consequences is offered as a jumping off point for those who are interested in changing or developing their parenting skills. I have to admit that I am hitting the books, once again in this area, as it is obvious I have fallen into the “rescue trap.” For parents and teachers interested in the subject of Natural and Logical Consequences the following references may be useful:

[Children: the challenge](#), Rudolph Dreikurs with Vicki Soltz

[The Shelbys Need Help: A Choose-Your-Own-Solutions Guidebook for Parents](#), Dr. Ken West

Postscript: It has been four years since this article was written and Nolan is now off to college. Over his four years in High School he encountered many more “learning” consequence experiences. In each case my wife and I had to control our impulse to save him. Over the years he became much better regarding taking care of himself and his responsibilities and we became

more comfortable letting him do so. He's not perfect by any means, but we are confident that he is better prepared to accept increased and much more serious responsibilities of college life and beyond.

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