Everyone says you should let your child face natural consequences, but what exactly does this mean? Many parents struggle with this concept because they don’t fully understand what constitutes a “natural” consequence. And sometimes parents have difficulty relinquishing control of consequences because they feel they always have to get their child to obey, even if it means getting into a huge blowout.

Natural consequences allow you to take the stance of, “This isn’t my problem. You’re the one who made the choice. What are you going to do differently next time?”

I’ve talked to many parents who have structure and consequences in place for their child to motivate them to do their homework. Many refuse to accept that there is little else you can do to make your child do his homework if he doesn’t care about the consequences. There comes a point, though, where you have to let go and let your child feel the natural consequences of poor grades, such as failing, getting spoken to by the teacher, or even detention. Believe me, I’m not advocating an uninvolved approach here—far from it. I’ll explain more about this later on.

Natural Consequences: Why Are They Important?

Natural consequences can best be described as the logical outcome of a decision your child makes. These consequences sometimes come from outside forces such as other adult influences such as teachers, but may also come from you setting limits on how much you will do for your child. One of the most notable benefits of letting your child face the natural consequences is you don’t have to come up with them yourself; rather, you’re allowing the chips to “fall where they may.” They also help your child to learn about what happens when they make various choices on their own. It shows them that rules are here for a reason and going against them is unpleasant. Natural consequences allow you to take the stance of, “This isn’t my problem. You’re the one who made the choice. What are you going to do differently next time?”

Areas Where Natural Consequences Are Effective

1. Poor decisions at school: I’ve worked with many parents whose kids get into trouble at school for the way they acted, but instead of letting their child face the music, they try to bail their kid out. Parents, remember this: your child’s version of the story is not always the true version of what has happened. Your child will sometimes rearrange the facts to justify his poor choices—and omit information about their own behaviour. When your child makes a poor choice at school, such as a lewd comment or pushing a peer in the playground, the information you get about the situation is probably just the tip of the iceberg. There is much more that goes on every day that teachers see and hear that you don’t know because most of the time it’s harmless and there is no need to tell you. And teachers know that all kids make mistakes and accept it as part of growing up. When your child is given a consequence at school, there’s more often than not a very good reason for it. It’s important that you let your child face these natural consequences such as missing recess, going to detention, or attending school on Saturday. If you try to get your
child out of trouble at school, you undermine the school’s authority and your child gets the message that he doesn’t have to listen to his teachers, and behaviour will likely worsen.

2. Personal space at home: In most cases, it’s effective to let your child be in control of their own space and their own belongings. If you tell your child that you will only wash the clothes they put in the laundry each week, but they don’t put any in the laundry basket, the natural consequence is that you won’t wash them. You aren’t doing anything extra here or going out of your way to do something your child can do themselves; you are simply washing what there is to wash. Another possibility here is that maybe they’ll have to do their own laundry. Another example: The natural consequence of a dirty room is that your child won’t be able to find things or they’ll step on something that hurts their foot. If your teen refuses to wear a coat in the winter, the natural consequence will be that they are cold. If your child brings their favourite new toy to school (when you told them not to) and it gets lost or stolen, that’s the natural consequence. If they had listened to you, they would still have those cool new Legos.

3. Household chores: The most common way for families to handle chores is to provide a small allowance. It works best to break the allowance down into a payment for each chore. When children don’t do the chores, they don’t get paid. It’s just like in the real world—if you and I don’t do our work, we don’t get paid either, and then we don’t have the money to buy the things we want or do the extra fun things we want to do. This can work for any child in grade school. With younger kids, you could do a token system or create a single behaviour chart that will allow them to earn a reward every day or two, such as playing a game with Mum or watching a movie with Dad. Another system I love that works well with kids who leaves their things all over the place is the “Saturday Box.” Every night after bed, you pick up whatever your child left lying around the house and put it in the Saturday Box. And, as the name implies, they won’t get it back until Saturday. If one of those items happens to be their handheld game device for example, then you have a bonus natural consequence: they won’t get to play until Saturday. And that’s on them, not you, as long as you told them about the Saturday Box ahead of time.

4. Homework: Homework and school projects are another area where your child really needs to take responsibility. The natural consequences are plentiful—they may get lectured by the teacher, they may have to stay in from lunch to finish it. I know this sounds harsh, but think of it this way: You aren’t going to follow your child around to their job when they grow up to make sure they do everything their boss wants them to do, right? That’s why it’s best for your child to learn now what happens when you don’t meet your responsibilities. (This is not to say that you ignore homework altogether—I will talk about when to step in and how to do it in just a few moments.)

5. Behaviour in the community: We say this all the time here at Empowering Parents: no matter how much you would like to, you can’t control your child’s behaviour outside your home. There may come a day when your child does something rude or obnoxious at a friend’s house; the natural consequence might be that they aren’t allowed over there for a while. Or, your teen might get caught speeding, an action which also has its own natural consequences. When misbehaviour outside your home poses a safety risk, you certainly do want to impose some consequences of your own at home, of course, but that speeding ticket is a natural consequence for your child’s choice to speed while driving the car.
When Should You Give Your Child Consequences?

A good starting place here is this question: Is this a serious safety concern, or is my child’s poor decision in this situation likely to have long-term negative or unhealthy consequences? If the answer is “yes,” then you are going to want to set some clear standards and hold your child accountable in some way. For example, if your child’s grades are failing, you can establish a daily structure where they have no access to electronics or favourite toys from after school until the work is done. You could also try to add additional incentives for your child to follow this structure at least 3 or 4 days per week. This would allow them to earn a little something extra on the weekend, like extra time playing video games.

After you’ve tried consequences and rewards, understand that the rest is in your child’s hands and they’ll choose whether to risk the natural consequences again or not.

Additionally, you must step in if there is a safety is a concern. If your child has been experimenting with alcohol, the car can be off limits for a while. If your child refuses to wear a helmet, the bike is locked up. If your child has shoplifted, they might lose the privilege of walking to the store on their own for a while. These are just a few of many possible examples.

With every child, it’s helpful for you to talk with them about their decisions and the outcomes of those decisions. Younger children will need you to offer them choices, while Primary aged kids and up can make choices more independently, but discussion and coaching with all kids is helpful. When you talk, you can discuss your child’s reason for making a decision, what the outcome was, and what he could do differently next time. This will help him maximise the learning that comes from mistakes and give them the skills to avoid unpleasant consequences in the future—natural or otherwise.

The Real World Experience Kids Gain by Facing Consequences

While it’s your responsibility to coach your child and point out the consequences of their choices, your child learns best when given the opportunity to identify their own choices, consider each choice, choose, and then experience the outcome. Even the best-behaved kids will make poor choices now and again. The hard truth is that decision-making is a skill your child needs to learn so they can function as an adult. Natural consequences are one of the best teachers (and aids) a parent can have in coaching their child about life in the real world learning to let your child experience these lessons is part of your job as a parent.