

## 4. NATURAL CONSEQUENCES: ALLOWING THEM TO HAPPEN

The power of positive reinforcement for positive behavior - finding ways to acknowledge your child's moves in the right direction - is made all the more effective by how you address your child's negative behaviors. The bottom line? Let the negative consequences resulting from "negative" behavior be felt and heard. It may surprise you to learn that the direct, negative outcomes of your child's actions (failed grades, missed social events, a cold supper)—what we call "natural consequences"—are among the most powerful promoters of change.

Many parents have a variety of strategies for the punishment of negative behaviors (grounding, time outs, withdrawing financial support, scolding) but find it difficult to let the natural consequences happen. You want to protect your child from the effects of neglecting homework or sleeping late. From a behavioral standpoint, however, when you shield your child from the uncomfortable result of his actions, he learns that there's no downside. The net result? Why *wouldn't* he continue the negative behaviors?

Of course, some consequences are too harmful to allow. Your job is to identify the negative consequences you can tolerate and let them "speak for themselves"; they will often be more convincing than anything you could say or do, and you will be relieved of the burden of arguing. The world is a powerful teacher if we let it be.

The combination of reinforcing positive behaviors and allowing the natural consequences of negative behaviors is more powerful than either strategy alone. With this "reinforcement," your child will experience for himself the connection between positive behavior and good things happening, and start to recognize his role as the producer of good (or bad) things in his life.

### WHAT IS "ENABLING?"

It's important to understand this often misused word. It means softening or removing the negative consequences of another person's negative behavior, which in effect *encourages* the continuation of that behavior. If you rush to get your kid out of bed for football practice, even though he stayed out too late the night before, he never has to face his upset coach or teammates. He never has to link his behavioral choice (staying out too late) with the natural consequence (upset coach). He only has to face your upset and stress, which are likely very common and easily tuned out.

The confusion? Many parents think enabling means doing *anything* nice for their child who is abusing substances. If, in your anger and disappointment at certain negative behaviors (using drugs, coming home late), you withdraw *all* your positive attention (even when he is sober and trying to engage in a nice conversation), you create a negative environment that is not good for anyone, you or your child. Making a difference requires understanding the difference:

- **Promote positive behaviors with positive outcomes.**
- **Allow negative behaviors to have negative outcomes.**

Simple, but hard to do. Keep practicing; you'll get better at it, and so will your child.