ADULTS SAVING KIDS

Founded by Alvin Erickson

Skill 5

Consequences

Teach children to understand cause and effect.

Helping Children Learn Responsibility Through Everyday Choices

Why Consequences Matter

Every adult lives with consequences—legal, relational, financial, emotional. The question is not whether children will face consequences, but when and how they learn about them. Children who do not learn cause and effect early are not spared consequences later—they encounter much harsher ones when the cost is higher and the damage is real.

> *One of the greatest gifts a parent can give is allowing children to experience small, manageable consequences while they are still protected by home, relationship, and guidance.*

What Often Goes Wrong

Many loving parents confuse consequences with punishment. While both can teach important lessons, punishment often focuses on the wrongdoing, while constructive consequences help children understand the connection between their choices and the outcomes that follow.

When consequences become threats ('If you don't do this, then…'), children may focus more on avoiding punishment than understanding the connection between their choices and the outcomes. Another common mistake is rescuing children too quickly—fixing what they forgot, smoothing over what they broke, or shielding them from discomfort.

> *This teaches children that someone else will absorb the cost of their choices.*

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What Consequences Are (and Are Not)

Consequences are	Consequences are not
• directly connected to behavior • immediate or near-immediate • proportional • calm	• shaming • yelling • unrelated punishments • threats made in anger

A consequence should answer one simple question for the child:

> *"What happens when I do this?"*

Real-Life Examples

EXAMPLE 1

Young Child (Ages 3–6)

When a child throws toys, the consequence is that toys are put away for the rest of the day. No lecture or drama is needed—just calm follow-through. The child learns that throwing toys means losing access to them.

EXAMPLE 2

Elementary Age (Ages 7–10)

When a child refuses to do homework, the parent calmly maintains the expectation that it must be completed, allowing reasonable breaks and offering guidance when needed.

EXAMPLE 3

Preteen / Teen

When a teen misses curfew, the consequence is an earlier curfew next time. The response is logical rather than emotional: "You showed you need more structure."

The Parent's Role

> *Parents do not control outcomes—they control consistency.*

Your job is not to argue, convince, or win; your job is to stay calm, follow through, and let reality teach. If you feel angry while delivering a consequence, pause. Consequences delivered in anger feel like **rejection, not instruction**.

Common Parenting Traps

Parents often fall into common traps, such as making threats instead of applying true consequences ("If you don't clean your room, no birthday party"), inconsistent follow-through where children quickly learn which consequences are empty, delayed consequences that young children cannot connect to today's behavior, or overly harsh consequences where too much pressure causes shutdown rather than growth.

What This Looks Like at Different Ages

Toddlers
Immediate, physical-world consequences.

Elementary
Task-based consequences.

Teens
Loss of autonomy tied to responsibility.

The older the child, the more the consequence should prepare them for adult life.

One Rule Parents Must Remember

THE ONE RULE

Never use a consequence you cannot enforce calmly.

If you are emotionally escalated, wait. Calm consistency builds wisdom, whereas fear can lead to rebellion or secrecy.

Biblical Wisdom

SCRIPTURE

"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows."

Galatians 6:7

Galatians serves as the anchor for this principle, offering one of the clearest statements of cause and effect in Scripture: actions have outcomes, choices matter, and reality responds.

> SCRIPTURE
> *"Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but whoever hates correction is stupid."*
>
> Proverbs 12:1

Proverbs reinforces this with a strong point: wise people learn from correction, while foolish people resist it. That is exactly what consequences are designed to teach.

Practical Wisdom / Application

Most people hear *"A man reaps what he sows"* and think about farming, morality, or major life decisions. That's certainly part of it, but imagine a parent teaching that principle to a child when they forget their homework, stay up too late and feel exhausted, practice an instrument faithfully, treat people with kindness and earn trust, or break trust repeatedly. In each situation, **you reap what you sow**. Children do not learn responsibility because parents lecture them; they learn responsibility when they experience the connection between choices and outcomes.

Now consider Proverbs: *"Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge."* Discipline is not punishment—it is learning. A wise child gradually learns that their choices matter, their actions have consequences, and they can influence their future. Consequences help children understand reality while the stakes are still low, because small lessons today often prevent much larger, more costly lessons later.

> FINAL TAKEAWAY
>
> **Consequences are not about control—they are about preparation.**
>
> Children who learn cause and effect early are not crushed by life later. You are not being unkind; you are being **faithful to reality**.

THIS WEEK

One Thing to Try This Week

Option 1: Don't Rescue

Allow one natural consequence to happen this week, then calmly discuss: "What did you learn from that?"

Option 2: Connect Choices and Outcomes

At dinner ask: "What's something that happened today because of a choice you made?" Parents should answer too.

Option 3: Notice Cause and Effect

Point out one positive consequence this week: "You practiced and got better," or "You were kind and earned trust." Children need to see that consequences can be positive as well as negative.

Wisdom Principle: You reap what you sow.

Scripture Acknowledgment

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