



When to Soothe and When to Set a Limit

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How do you know when your child is truly in distress and needing your comfort? If your child has a meltdown and doesn't even remember the mean words or actions they did, do you still give them a consequence? Do you still give consequences even if it seems like it doesn't change the behavior and just makes the outburst worse? Here are some pointers that might help you in making these decisions.

Stay connected: It is human nature to be kinder to people when we feel closer to them. This is true for children as well. Your power is in building a close relationship with your child. Bring the joy and playfulness back into your relationship. If children anticipate that your interaction is going to be a direction or correction, they will enter into the interaction with their guard up. By contrast, children tend to want to please when they feel connected to the parent. Note that shared joy and connection is not the same as being permissive or spoiling a child. Children do need limits!

Catch the Successes: Children are much more motivated when caught in their good moments rather than busted in their bad ones. Your power is in catching and celebrating your child's successes. Limits are necessary, and children need them. However, limits, corrections, and consequences will not be effective if that is where you are putting your emotional energy as a parent. If you're coasting when they behave and plugging in when they misbehave, you are teaching your child to misbehave to get your attention.

Consider the power of ignoring negative behavior: You can eliminate 80% of problem behaviors simply by ignoring negative behavior and paying a high level of positive attention to positive behaviors instead. There is lots of research to support this. This means that you need to be completely calm in the face of problem behaviors and work your hardest to "emotionally unplug" in response to these negative behaviors. This is your first go-to strategy for all non-dangerous behavior. This is particularly well suited for irritating behaviors like arguing back, sassy tone, rolling eyes, baby talking, whining, interrupting, and a teen swearing under his/her breath.

Empathy is key when setting limits: So, what about those times when you do need to set a limit? Here's the good news. You can be calm and empathic while setting limits. You can say things like, "Oh, I wish we could go get ice cream. It's such a hot day! I bet you'd like that.... But we can't. We need to go home and let the dogs out. What could be our cool treat at home, I wonder."

Acknowledge what might be hard for your child as a means of disarming the angry reflex response (e.g., “I’m sorry to interrupt. After you take the trash out, you can come right back to what you’re doing.”). It’s also okay to set a limit with words that are more affirming and less triggering for your child such as “Yes-When” language. “Yes you can definitely have a sleepover when we clear up that problem of missing assignments. I know you’ve been wanting to have Paige over for awhile now.”

Wait until everyone is calm before solving problems: If a child does a problem behavior in a state of emotional upset, you can soothe and deescalate first. In fact, this is recommended. Kids and adults do not solve problems well when they are very upset. This is not the time for a lecture! Save the problem-solving for when everyone has calmed down.

Tantrums: If your child is having a tantrum, sometimes you can warn them of a likely consequence and help them bring their behavior back in check. If your child is also just having a good old-fashioned tantrum, you may want to hold off on the cuddles and just ignore it, particularly if this is likely to reinforce the tantrum behavior. You can tell whether it’s just a tantrum if the behavior is goal-directed and if the child’s behavior stops in response to either the threat of a consequence or the child getting what they wanted.

Meltdowns and Rages: If they have passed the tantrum phase and moved on to a meltdown or even a rage, do not discuss consequences until after the emotional storm has passed. You have missed the critical window, and discussion (or threatening) of consequences are just likely to stoke the fire.

When to use a consequence: When the child is calm, you may need to have a consequence for the problem behavior. For example, if a teen tears up family photos while angry, there might be consequences for the destruction of the photos once the teen is calm and ready to begin the repair process. If the child simply screamed, cried, and huffed off when upset, you may not need a consequence at all. You simply move on and focus instead on catching successes with handling emotional upsets going forward. Problem behaviors that definitely need limits and may also need a consequence are hurtful words towards others, threatening others, stealing, hurting others physically, property destruction, or unsafe behaviors. Examples of unsafe behaviors might include taking off without permission; riding a bike without a helmet; and at the more extreme end, driving while intoxicated.

When a Re-Do is enough: Many problem behaviors can be corrected simply by stopping an interaction and telling the child to “Try that again.” This works for bossiness, rude tone, and demanding/grabbing rather than asking. For interrupting, you can add “Try that again. This time, wait for the pause.”

And what about adolescence? As your child gets older, keep in mind which limits you can let go. You are transforming to a more democratic style of parenting when your child becomes a teen. As much as possible, you want to use natural consequences (e.g., a bad grade on quiz if they fail to study) and have your child begin to feel the weight of their own actions. This obviously has its limits. You don't want to use natural consequences to the point that your teen has dug themselves into a hole that is too hard to get out of.

Use leveled responses when possible: Ideally, you want to use a leveled response when intervening with your child. Level one might be gentle redirection or correction (e.g., "Try that again with respect please."). Allow for compromise if they can try again with respect. You want to teach your child that they can have a healthy voice and input. You also want the goal of restoring connection with your child. Level two might be giving your child clear choices (e.g., "You have two choices.... You can head to the car in 5 minutes, or you can take the next bus to school.").

Level three would be the point where you are using clear, effective commands (e.g., "Please turn off the Xbox now.") one time. Use a calm, firm, lower tone, no-nonsense delivery, and keep it brief. You can still be polite, however. If a child is given a direction and fails to comply, you can also slowly count to 3. When you get to 3, you need to remove a privilege if the child has not complied. You should only count if you have actually given a clear direction (not a question or request or schedule announcement) and you've made sure first that you have the child's attention (eye contact!). If the child does comply before you get to 3, praise them – even if they wait until you count to 2! Don't give warnings before you start counting. Are you giving warnings like, "You don't want me to start counting, do you? You know what's going to happen if I get to three." In essence, such warnings are the equivalent of counting to 10. If you simply repeat the direction with more irritation in your voice and without follow through, you are training your child to only listen when you start to yell or sound mad. With younger children, the consequence when you get to 3 might be a time out. As children get older, the use of time outs needs to shift more to directing a child to "take space" to go calm down. Also, for older children, the consequence tends to be more focused on the removal of a privilege (e.g., losing play date, losing electronic privileges).

Use Action-based consequences when possible: Most problem behaviors needing a consequence can be solved with action-based consequences where the child performs certain actions in order to earn the lost privilege back. This is in contrast to time-based consequences such as taking a phone away for two weeks. The bigger the crime, the more actions the parent might expect in the way of repair before returning the privilege. If the problem behavior has resulted in loss of trust (e.g., sneaking porn on internet, stealing, driving without permission), it would also make sense for privileges to be restricted (e.g., no phone, no car use, no going in others' bedrooms) for a certain period of time as well until parents feel that trust has been restored. The advantage of action-based consequences is that it allows for restoration of privileges once the child has made the repairs. If you're one of those parents who takes something away for weeks at a time and then you struggle to follow through, this may also help you to hold your ground.

Action-based consequences can also include having the child *reflect* on the problem behavior and what they could have done instead, make *repairs* to the person hurt by the behavior, and also *rehearse* the desired behavior before getting the privilege back. Keep in mind that you don't need to have the "ultimate" consequence to teach a lesson. It can be tempting to escalate threats of additional punishments if the child is acting non-phased by your initial consequence. Your job is to be consistent, not to have the ultimate zinger of a consequence.

So, here it is in a nutshell:

1. Shared joy, affection, playfulness, and tenderness in the relationship are the glue that motivates a child to keep their behavior in check and to please you.
2. Parents need to give positive attention for positive behavior while simultaneously ignoring negative behaviors when possible.
3. Stay calm yourself!
4. Soothing is always okay. It is not the same as permissiveness. You can soothe and still set limits. If, however, it's just a good old fashioned tantrum, you may want to ignore rather than swooping in with the cuddles.
5. If a child has passed a tantrum and is in meltdown mode, they may need soothing (or space) to calm down.
6. Wait until the emotional storm has passed before trying to solve the problem or before discussing or enforcing consequences.
7. Clear, consistent limits are the way to go.
8. Action-based consequences that help the child reflect on the desired behavior, build empathy, and practice lagging skills that led to the problem are best when consequences are necessary.