

Consequences That Teach Responsibility

A child with anger control problems often has trouble appreciating the impact that their behavior has upon other people. They don't truly understand and accept responsibility for the impact upon people's time, property, activities, or feelings. A child does not perceive how their actions alienate others and how friendships and family relationships are affected. Since they want to avoid shame and blame, they downplay the extent of their anger. They attempt to minimize the impact of their anger episode on others. Perhaps because they did not intend to get so angry, children typically deny responsibility for their behavior. They may try, instead, to project blame onto others. When punishments are implemented or privileges are lost because of an anger outburst, a child may act surprised and get upset. They don't understand or accept the connection between their actions and the punishment.

Consequences that teach responsibility must emphasize at least 5 factors:

1. The child needs to understand what triggered the anger episode so that they can potentially avoid the problem the next time.
2. A youngster needs to discuss what they could have done differently to control and express their anger more appropriately.
3. We need to make sure that the child practices or role-plays an anger control strategy that might have been helpful.
4. It is important that the child discuss the impact that their anger had on other people in terms of wasted time, disrupted activities, damaged property, and hurt feelings.
5. A youngster must make amends. There must be some form of restitution to the people who were affected by the child's anger. An amends process does not directly involve a loss of privileges or another punishment. Although punishment is sometimes appropriate, making restitution fosters a sense of responsibility without blame or shame. Making amends brings closure to the anger episode.

Make sure that the child has calmed down before you discuss an anger episode. If we rush into a discussion, we may rekindle the child's anger. Initially, a child may need a great deal of coaching as to what the triggers may have been or how their anger affected other people.

Some children are unwilling to accept responsibility and avoid any discussion of how their anger affected other people. They refuse to make amends and insist that the problem was someone else's. In such instances, it may be necessary to restrict a child's privileges until they are willing to work with us. It may take hours, but most children will eventually do what is necessary to begin the restitution process.

Since we are focusing on restitution and not punishment, the amends activities need not be punishing. It is perfectly acceptable for a young child to draw us a picture for our office or classroom as a way of making amends, even if the child likes to draw. Although it is more powerful if a child can come up with their own way of making amends, it is perfectly reasonable for us to suggest some options. Make a connection between the amends activity and the problem that occurred. If your time was wasted the child must do something to save us time. If our feelings were hurt, some type of apology and act of kindness is in order. If property was damaged, some type of payment or work detail seems reasonable.