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| **Kids Who Ignore Consequences: *10 Ways to Make Them Stick***  *by* [*James Lehman, MSW*](http://www.empoweringparents.com/author_display.php?auth=James-Lehman) |

**Does your child ignore every consequence you give him? This week, James Lehman gives you 10 specific ways to make consequences work—even for the most resistant child.**

When kids are faced with something unpleasant, they'll often act like it doesn't matter to them. When your child says, “I don't care” or seems unaffected when you give him a consequence, what he’s really saying is, “You can't hurt me.” That’s because receiving a consequence makes kids feel powerless. Their sense of self almost requires them to respond by shrugging and saying, “Whatever,” simply in order to feel in control again.

**Focus on what you want your child to learn from the consequence—not whether or not he's going to care.**

Personally, I don't think parents should worry too much when their child appears not to be affected. Instead, I think you should focus on what you want your child to *learn* from the consequence—not whether or not he's going to care. In fact, I think trying to get your child to care is a misdirected goal. Don’t put so much weight on making him “hurt” that you're not thinking about trying to get your child to learn a new behavior. If your child can stymie you by saying “I don’t care,” you’re giving him way too much power.

To put it another way, if you're looking for your child to surrender, forget about it. A consequence is not designed to make your child say, “I’m sorry, Mom, I was wrong.” Rather, it’s there to help your [child change his behavior](http://www.thetotaltransformation.com/?webSyncID=46cc6e66-a917-0807-8d72-3347544b6a7a&sessionGUID=3b4cd808-7384-e552-a531-8662a5a8eaa6). Think of it this way: the consequence for not following the speed limit is that you might get a speeding ticket. You may shrug and say, “Whatever,” to the police officer when he pulls you over, but that won't stop him from giving you that ticket. And if you say, “I don't care,” he'll say, “Well, here you go, sir. Have a good day.” He won’t argue with you; he’ll simply hand you the ticket and walk away.

In my opinion, you have to be like that police officer when [giving your child a consequence](http://www.empoweringparents.com/How-to-Give-Kids-Consequences-That-Work.php). Don't get sucked into an argument when your teen says, “I don't care,” because that argument brings you down to his level—and that's what he’s looking for. Instead, just say, “All right, fine, but you’re still going to lose your cell phone for 48 hours.” Then simply turn around and leave the room.

Again, if you're trying to get your child to care about the consequence you give him, that's like trying to get him to like you. You shouldn’t try to control his emotional life. Just say, “These are the consequences.” And even if he says he doesn’t care, let him know that he will encounter them again if he breaks the rules.

**How to Give Consequences So They’ll Stick—Even When Kids Say They Don’t Care**

**1. Use Consequences That Have Meaning**   
It’s almost never effective to give your child a consequence in the heat of an argument. Often, parents will be either too harsh or too lenient, because nothing appropriate comes to mind immediately. I advise parents to sit down and write a “Consequences List.” You can think of this as a menu of choices. When compiling this list, keep in mind that you want the consequence to be unpleasant, because you want your child to feel uncomfortable. If, like most teens, your child’s cell phone has meaning for him, don’t be shy about using it as leverage. It’s also important to think about what you want him to learn—and this lesson should be attached to the consequence. So let's say your [child curses](http://www.empoweringparents.com/How-to-Stop-Your-Child-or-Teen-from-Cursing-or-Swearing.php) and is rude to his sister, and you want him to learn how to manage his feelings. I think an effective consequence might be that he would lose his cell phone until he doesn’t curse and isn’t rude to his sister for 24 hours. In those 24 hours, he might also have to write a note of apology to his sibling stating what he’ll do differently the next time he gets frustrated. If he fails to write the letter, he doesn't get his phone back—and the 24 hours starts all over again.

**2. Don’t Try to Appeal to His Emotions with Speeches**   
Remember, your job is not to get your child to love his sister or to appeal to his emotions with a speech, because all he will hear is, “Your sister looks up to you, blah, blah, blah.” Your job is to take his phone and say, “Hey, we talk to each other nicely around here. And if you can't do that, then you can't use the phone. We’ll talk about giving it back to you after you talk nicely to your family for 24 hours.”

**3. Make Consequences Black and White**   
When you give a consequence, the simpler you keep things, the better. Again, you don't want to get into legalese or long speeches. What you want to do is lay out your consequences for your [child’s inappropriate behavior](http://www.thetotaltransformation.com/?webSyncID=46cc6e66-a917-0807-8d72-3347544b6a7a&sessionGUID=3b4cd808-7384-e552-a531-8662a5a8eaa6) very clearly. It's often helpful if he knows ahead of time what will happen when he acts out. Just like there are speeding signs on the highway, the consequences for your child’s behavior should be clear to him. Tell him, “If you talk nastily to your sister, this is what's going to happen from now on.”

And whenever you're going to introduce an idea to your child that may be unsettling, anxiety-provoking, or frustrating to him, do it when things are going well—not when everybody's screaming at each other. Wait until a calm moment and then lay out the consequences simply and clearly.

**4. Have Problem-Solving Conversations**   
I think it’s vitally important to have problem-solving conversations with your child after an incident has occurred. When things are going well, you can say, “If you get frustrated with your sister in the future, what can you do differently, other than to call her names? Let’s make a list.” You might help jump start some ideas by saying, “Instead of calling her names, how about going to your room and listening to some music for a few minutes? Could you do that?” And try to help your child come up with his own ideas. He might say, “If she follows me around the house, I’ll go to my room.” You can then say, “All right, why don't we try that? For the rest of today, if your sister bothers you, pick one thing that you’re going to do from this list and see if it's helpful.”

Conversations like these are how you get your child to think about alternative solutions other than yelling at his sister, name-calling, or acting out. Look at it this way: we all get frustrated, we all get angry, and we all get anxious. But everyone has to learn to deal with those feelings appropriately—and a problem-solving conversation is the most effective way to talk with your child about change.

**5. Don't Get Sucked into an Argument over Consequences**   
Don’t accept every invitation to argue with your child. Understand that he *wants* you to get upset so he can drag you into a fight. Your child also wants to show you that he's not hurt by the consequence you’ve given him. Believe me, I understand that it's annoying and frustrating as a parent. Kids will try to push your buttons by saying, “Who cares; whatever.” But don't get sucked into it. Just say, “All right, it’s too bad that you don't care—that means it's just going to happen more often.” Then go do something else. And remember, while you don't want to get sucked into a power struggle, you also don't want to destroy your child’s pride by demeaning him, either—you just want him to stop talking poorly to his sister.

**6. Don’t Teach Your Child How to “Do Time”**   
Many parents get frustrated and ground their kids for long periods of time in order to make the punishment stick. Personally, I think that’s a mistake. If you simply ground your child, you're teaching him to do time—and not to learn anything new. But if you ground him until he accomplishes certain things, you can increase the effectiveness of the consequence by 100 percent. I always say to make your consequences task-oriented, not time-oriented. So if your child loses his video game privileges for 24 hours, he should be doing something within that time frame that helps him [improve his behavior](http://www.thetotaltransformation.com/?webSyncID=46cc6e66-a917-0807-8d72-3347544b6a7a&sessionGUID=3b4cd808-7384-e552-a531-8662a5a8eaa6). Simply grounding him from his video games for a week will just teach him how to wait until he can get them back—not how to behave more appropriately. Remember, if you ground him for 30 days, you’ve fired your big gun. If you ground him for 24 hours, you still have plenty of leverage. Many parents believe the key to making consequences effective is to get a bigger hammer, but that’s not a sound teaching method.

Again, we want consequences to be learning experiences. A consequence that doesn’t fit the crime will just seem meaningless to your child, and won’t get you the desired result. Remember, you don’t want to be so punitive that your child simply gives up. That will never translate to better behavior.

**7. Engage Your Child’s Self-interest**   
Learn to ask questions in ways that appeal to your child’s self-interest. So for example, you might say, “What are you going to do the next time you think Dad is being unfair so you won't get into trouble?” In other words, you’re trying to engage his self-interest. If your child is a teenager, he won’t care about how Dad feels. Adolescents are frequently very detached from that set of feelings. They might feel guilty and say they're sorry later, but you’ll see the behavior happen again. So learn to appeal to their self- interest, and ask the question, “What can you do so you don't get in trouble *next* time?”

Put it in his best interests: “Understand, if you're going to talk to your sister meanly or curse at her, things are only going to get worse for you, not better. I know you want to keep your phone, so let’s think of ways for you to be able to do that.”

**8. How Will I Know If a Consequence Is Working?**   
Parents often say to me, “My child acts like he doesn’t care. So how do I know if the consequence I’m giving him is actually working?” I always tell them, “It’s simple—you’ll know it's working because he’s being held accountable.” Accountability gives you the best chance for change.

**9. Some Things Should Never Be Used as Consequences**   
In my opinion, there are certain things that should never be taken away from kids. For instance, you should never prohibit your child from going to the prom. Not ever. That’s a milestone in your child’s life; personally, I think that milestones should not be taken away. Your child is not going to learn anything from that experience—he’s just going to be bitter.

I also believe that sports should not be taken away. I have no problem with kids missing a practice if that’s part of a consequence, but taking away the sport entirely is not a good idea.

**10. Don’t Show Disgust or Disdain**When giving consequences to your child, I think you should be consistent and firm, but don’t show disgust or disdain. In my opinion, you should never be sarcastic with your child because it's wounding. What you’re trying to do is raise someone who can function, not somebody who feels they're a constant disappointment to you. It's very important to shape your behavior so that your child knows you're not taking his mistakes personally. Remember, the look on your face and the tone of your voice communicates a lot more to your child than your words do. Positive regard is critical for getting your message across.

I think it’s important to remember that life is really a struggle for many kids. Going to school is difficult, both academically and socially, and there is tremendous pressure on children and teens to perform today. Personally, I think that kids should be recognized and respected for that. Think of it this way: what you're really trying to do is work on your child’s behavior to get him to try to do different things. So if your child misbehaves and you ground him from everything indefinitely, you're losing sight of all the other things he did right—and he will, too.

Instead, we want to look at inappropriate behavior as a mistake your child makes. Parents often wonder why their kids make the same mistakes over and over, and I say, “Well, they do that because they’re kids. They’re not pretending. They perceive things very differently than adults do.” We want our kids to learn, so we use the things they enjoy as leverage to teach them better behavior. After all, giving your child a consequence until he shows you he can do better is an effective tool you have at your disposal at all times—even if he tells you he doesn’t care.

Read more: <http://www.empoweringparents.com/Kids-Who-Ignore-Consequences-10-Ways-to-Make-Them-Stick.php#ixzz3Im3L3Kky>