

“You’re grounded for life!”: Making sure the ‘time suits the crime’

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Many years ago I wrote about a young man who approached me after my talk with his first words being *“Mr Dillon, I made a big mistake ...”* He’d gone out with friends a few weeks before and got terribly drunk. He hadn’t intended to get that intoxicated and when we spoke he claimed he’d never been in such a state before. He was eventually found and taken to the local police station. His mother was called and he was taken home. But it was what happened the next day that he wanted to talk through with me and ask my advice. I’m paraphrasing, but essentially he said – *“I’m grounded until December! That’s a really long time. I know I’ve done the wrong thing but 8 months without being allowed out with my friends is going to be really hard. I’m prepared to take my punishment but do you think there’s anything I can do to change my mum’s mind?”*

Research suggests that the ‘tough love’ (or ‘authoritative’) style of parenting is likely to be the most effective in reducing future risky drinking in their children, i.e., rules, consequences, bound in unconditional love. That’s easy to say but can be so difficult to actually carry out. Trying to work out what your rules are can take a lot of

work, but then you've got to decide what consequences are appropriate if they're broken.

Unfortunately, grounding continues to be one of the most often-used consequences by parents even though evidence would suggest that it's one of the least effective. One of the main reasons it doesn't work particularly well is that grounding is usually blurted out 'on the run' – something happens, tempers flare and the response is created in anger and not well thought through. If you want consequences to work, they must be able to be enforced. Grounding your child for long (or even short) periods of time is just going to make your life tougher and, in my experience, most parents 'give in' pretty quickly and as a result, lose all their credibility as far as rules and boundaries are concerned. It's also important to acknowledge that when parents respond in this way (i.e., telling them they're grounded), they're usually focused on 'winning' the fight (i.e., making it clear to their child that they're the boss) rather than actually teaching their child to do the 'right thing'. Although it can seem like a perfectly appropriate response at the time (particularly when you're angry or hurt), trying to show your child that you're in control and that you're the 'winner' sets up a power struggle that isn't healthy.

Every parent has to make their own decisions around how they choose to discipline their children. Working out what you want to achieve from the 'discipline techniques' you use is important. Do you want to 'punish' your child or do you want them to learn something as a result of the consequences you impose? In an online article, Sarah Holbome writes that, whenever possible, consequences should be used as 'teachable moments' ... *"The word "discipline" comes from the word "disciple", which means, "to teach" ... Essentially, when you discipline your child you are teaching him or her; you are teaching right from wrong, what is acceptable behaviour, and what is unacceptable behaviour. Punishment treats the person as wrong and focuses on what has happened in the past, but discipline treats the act as wrong and focuses on the future and what can be done differently. The goal is for your child to eventually become self-disciplined (demonstrating acceptable behaviour without needing your help and reminders)."*

A couple I once met had recently discovered their Year 10 son had been sneaking out of the house on weekends after being found drunk and unconscious in a shopping centre car park. When I asked the mother how they'd responded to their son's behaviour, you could hear the frustration in her voice when she said – *"Nothing seemed to have an effect. The only thing that worked, when we could actually see that it'd made a difference, was when we took him to the barber and had his hair cut off!"*

Punishment and consequences are very different things and if you want to ensure your teen learns a lesson after doing the 'wrong thing' it's important to know the difference. Cutting her son's precious locks off was a punishment and I can almost guarantee that the 'difference' she saw in her son's face as they were being lopped off was in no way related to a positive 'teachable moment'. The mother did it to show she was in control and that she was boss. She was hurt – that's absolutely understandable. He was angry and resentful. The punishment may result in a change of behaviour, but if this 'power-based' response is regularly used it has the potential to cause great damage to the parent-child relationship.

Am I suggesting that grounding never be used? Of course not, if used appropriately, grounding can be a very effective consequence. It just needs to be thought-through and planned.

Consequences need to be fair (they 'fit the crime'), balanced (they have an impact but aren't designed to 'hurt') and are able to be enforced. The key to finding 'appropriate' consequences for breaking rules is ensuring that they're developed at the same time as those rules. Adolescents need to know what the rules are and why they exist, but they also need to be fully aware of the consequences should they break them. When they know what'll happen should they play-up, they're much less likely to feel that their punishment is unfair – they may not like what will happen but it's no great surprise. The best way to use grounding is to introduce it as a potential consequence when rules around parties and alcohol are discussed, e.g., "*You know our rules around alcohol at parties. We trust you to follow them. If we discover, however, that you've broken these rules then you won't be attending the next party you're invited to.*" Here's the rule and here's the consequence if you break that rule. They can't say they didn't know what was going to happen. It's fair, balanced and enforceable ...



Of course, there'll always be situations that are so out of character that rules in that area haven't even been considered (how many parents would ever develop rules around being called by police because of their child's drunkenness?) and so it is then that consequences are going to have to be worked out after the event. If you want to do this in the most effective way, trying to ensure they actually 'learn' something from what you choose to impose, rather than simply punish them and potentially build resentment and damage your relationship, consider the following four simple steps:

- **Wait:** Never decide and administer consequences in anger. You or your child are likely to say something you will regret and nothing positive will come of it. Wait until things have calmed down and you and your teen have a clear head
- **Talk and then listen:** When the time comes to talk to your child, start by telling them that whatever they do, you'll always love them. You may not like their behaviour but nothing they do will change the fact you love them. Then say why you're upset or angry and give them the opportunity to explain their behaviour. It's important to acknowledge that in many cases teens will not provide any justification for what they've done. At other times, they may try to shift the blame onto others or simply not accept that what they did was wrong. Just listen ...
- **Discuss how that behaviour can improve:** Once they've had their say, give them the opportunity to come up with ways that things could be done differently in the future. How are they going to change this behaviour so they don't find themselves in this position again? This may even involve you agreeing to consider renegotiating rules in the future if they can prove that they can be trusted and their behaviour improves
- **Let them know the consequences:** It's important to ensure that whatever consequence is used it should be connected to the misbehaviour in some way. If they get an allowance and they've spent money on alcohol, it's entirely appropriate for you to reduce the amount you give them for a period of time. When they don't come home at the agreed time, reduce their curfew by half an hour. If you decide to remove a privilege that they've earned in the past, it's also important that they're aware this can be earned back if behaviour changes.

Reference:

Holbome, S. (2016). Why does "You're grounded!" never seem to work? April 5, *Youth Service Bureau*, article accessed 16 November, 2017, <http://ysb.net/youre-grounded-never-seem-work/>