

INCENTIVES THAT REQUIRE COOPERATION

The most common problem parents have with children occurs when the child does not perform a required task. Not doing chores, taking medicine, getting ready for bed, feeding pets, wearing seat belts, and doing homework are prime examples of these “acts of omission.” Surprisingly, punishments have very little power to motivate children to cooperate, but fortunately, uncooperative, irresponsible behavior can easily be corrected by making children an irresistible offer. Which of the following statements is a punishment?

1. “You can’t watch TV tonight because you didn’t put your clothes away.”
2. “You can’t go skating next Friday because you did not put your clothes away.”
3. “You can watch TV as soon as your clothes are put away.”

Statements 1 and 2 are punishments. Technically, a punishment is an unpleasant consequence that cannot be avoided. The child has no control over the outcome of the situation and the parent has to do all the enforcing. Statement 3 is an irresistible incentive. The child can escape or avoid the unpleasant consequence by performing the desired behavior. Privileges are not taken away, they are only withheld until the task is performed. Because the child has the option to avoid a nasty outcome, parents can throw tremendous weight into the incentive:

You can watch TV (talk on the phone, eat snacks, go outside, finish playing that game, have your prize collection of baseball cards back, listen to the stereo, play video games, cuddle your “blankee,” go to bed, or continue whatever else you are doing) after you have put away your clothes.

IRRESISTIBLE INCENTIVES

Irresistible incentives are guaranteed to work as long as parents withhold privileges and immediately reward children as soon as they have cooperated. If children vegetate to avoid doing a task, that is their choice. Parents are wise to watch for potent moments in the day when an irresistible incentive will have a speedy impact. The following pointers will help parents set the most direct course for success:

- Establish deadlines for starting chores before favorite TV shows, other desired activity, or snacks. Arrange fixed deadlines for starting routine chores.
- Use everyday events for deadlines. Don’t threaten to take away a special event next week.
- Pick deadlines that you can enforce. Don’t expect chores to be done before you get home from work, but offer rewards (see next page) when tasks are done on time.
- Give children time to mentally prepare themselves. For example, ask children to complete an unscheduled task during the next TV advertisement rather than telling them to do it right now.
- Don’t nag! When the deadline starts, enforce the consequence until the child cooperates.
- Use a timer to “announce” the deadline. This will ensure that you follow through.
- Use nonverbal communication as reminders. For example, hang a bag of things that need to be put away in front of the TV or stick a note on the TV screen explaining that the video control box will be returned once rooms have been cleaned.
- When a deadline isn’t available, be your child’s shadow, sing opera, hold his or her earlobe, or hug him or her until the task is started.
- Move the arms and legs of very young children like a puppet when they have not cooperated with a request by the count of 3.

- Ignore pouting and complaining as long as the child is performing the task. If you find it hard to do this, remove yourself from the scene. Discussions about the “unfairness” of a chore should take place after it is completed to avoid manipulation.
- In some cases, it is fine to delay the return of privileges until children are ready to perform the desired task. Save power struggles for essential issues.
- When children are upset about something other than their chores, they may be given the option of talking about what is bothering them before starting their work.

When a child’s responsibilities seem to unduly frustrate him or her, even with the above approaches, it is important to investigate what might be causing the difficulty: Is the child depressed and not motivated to do much of anything? Does the child have an attention deficit disorder that makes it difficult to complete a task without constant supervision? Does the child know that he or she can “get away with things” because one or both parents wish to avoid conflict? Is the chore unreasonable? Professional assistance may be needed to identify these and other underlying problems.

NATURAL AND LOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Whenever possible, use natural and logical consequences instead of irresistible incentives. Older children who are supposed to do their own laundry can run out of clean clothes until they are ready to put through a wash. A child who doesn’t want his food can simply wait for the next scheduled meal to eat and, perhaps, experience a little hunger. This is much healthier than creating power struggles over food.¹

REWARDS

Rewards can give an extra boost to irresistible incentives and are helpful for times of the day when powerful deadlines are not available. For example:

- A 5-year-old can be given a sticker for cleaning her room before the timer rings.
- “Purchase points” can be earned for being ready for school on time, to be used later to buy desired items.
- When chores are done before the parents get home, a child can expect a special treat.
- Children can report when they have hung up their towel or returned their glass to the sink for a prize.

Even when children earn rewards for being responsible without reminders, it is still important to enforce deadlines with irresistible incentives for the tasks they will inevitably forget. Use verbal rewards liberally. Describe what you see and feel—“It’s such a relief to have the dishes done early!” Let your children overhear you say positive things about them to other people—“The kids surprised me and had everything put away before I got home.”

¹ See *Logical Consequences: A New Approach to Discipline* by Roudolf Dreikurs (NAL Dutton, 1993).