

Questioning Natural Consequences

Submitted by Mary Ann Baiyor on 29 June, 2005 - 23:53

Mary Ann points out that if a friend knocked over a cup, we would help clean it up, so why not do so for our children too? *Posted on the Radical Unschoolers' List on Fri, 18 Dec, 1998, at 23:31:48 -0500*

by Mary Ann Baiyor



I used to be a big advocate of natural consequences. After unschooling for 2 1/2 years, I'm beginning to question a

lot of the reasoning behind the idea of natural consequences.

Let me set up a hypothetical situation: a child knocks over her glass of juice, splattering it all over the floor and table. "Natural consequences" says that the child should be responsible for cleaning up this mess. The logic behind this approach is that unless the child cleans up the mess, they don't learn that they're not supposed to go around making messes. Also, the parent, by not assisting in the clean-up, teaches the child that she must take responsibility for cleaning up her own messes.

In this example, it seems to me that the presumption of the natural consequences approach is:

a) children must be *taught* not to make a mess, and b) children must be *taught* to take responsibility for their actions.

As Teresa wrote so eloquently in her post (excerpted below), I prefer to assume that my child wants to become a responsible, caring individual who contributes to the good of the community. If I assume that to be the case, then I don't need "natural consequences" to teach these things to my child.

I like the idea of handling the situation as though an adult friend were in the situation. If a friend knocked over their cup, of course I would help clean it up. Why should the way I treat my child be any different?

One last thought: it seems to me that there is a parallel between unschooling versus schooling and working with a child to get her needs (and the parent's) met and natural consequences. The presumption of most institutional education is that children must be *taught* or they will never learn. The assumption is that without incentives, bribes, threatened punishments, etc. a child would never choose to learn about the myriad of things they need to function in this world. This seems similar to the presumption behind natural consequences: without parent's active teaching of these lessons, children will not learn to be functioning, capable members of society.

Teresa Pitman wrote:

One message I got from this book is that people innately desire to become responsible, to have caring relationships and to work as part of a community. If this is true, then our job as parents is not to train our children to be any of these things, because they will do them naturally. Our job is more to meet those needs they are not able to meet on their own, and to not disrupt their natural process of growing up.

I think many of us still struggle with the idea that unless we MAKE our kids do things they will never do anything good but just be bad, lazy, horrible people. I'm exaggerating here, but I know that's basically what my parents believed, and I know that's what some religions teach. It's been a big step forward for me to understand that my kids want to be responsible, contributing, loving people and that any efforts on my part to push them in that direction are more likely to de-rail that process than help it.

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Comments

YES!

Submitted by Eunay (not verified) on 20 July, 2005 - 15:56

I agree...good point you raise here. Never thought about it that way, always thought I would just do what my mother did. In that case, it may 'cause a lot of resentment

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brilliant!

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 1 November, 2005 - 15:30

This is so true. I am frequently amazed at the ill-logic applied by adults to children. Another aspect of this is that, unaware to the adults, children very early on understand that the adults around them are trying to 'teach' them. The result is that children first and foremost teach themselves to deal with adult coercion. Why not simply act around children in the way you would act around an adult friend? I guess it's because we can get a child to do chores in a way that we wouldnt dream of getting an adult friend to.

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ideal world

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 21 November, 2005 - 19:44

Not using natural consequences and thinking our children will some how get the message is a great idea. I very much doubt this will work in the real world. Don't we all learn from natural consequences? If you go out without a coat then you get cold. So you learn through a natural consequence to put your coat on before you go out. If we don't pay your gas bill then you get cut off - simple. That's how life works. I think you only confuse parents more and create even more children that have no boundaries if you take away this natural form of discipline

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Believer in Natural Consequences

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 12 December, 2005 - 01:09

Yes, I'd help my guest clean up the spill the first time and possibly the second if I didn't have anything else to do. After that...

The human race is going to shortly suffer the natural consequences of not cleaning up its own mess. Too bad there's no God to do it for us.

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Natural Consequences

Submitted by Pam (not verified) on 3 August, 2006 - 16:40

Sadly enough, as the mother of an 11 year old, I am just starting to learn about "natural consequences." Even as a newbie in this area, I found your example faulty. Cleaning up a mess by yourself as what, in all appearances, is an accident comes across as punishment. I do not see this scenario falling into the realm of the natural consequence tool. Intentional behavior by a child, after being told what the consequences would be, would be much more appropriate. For example, "I will buy you one book at the store. If you beg or whine for more than one, you will get none." And then follow through.

[to post comments](#)

Natural consequences? or logical consequences

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 25 August, 2006 - 15:56

I have to agree with Pam, above. A natural consequence should not require the intervention of an adult to 'enforce' it. "If you don't get ready to leave, we'll be late for the movie," is advising the child (or adult!) of a natural consequence. "If you spill your juice, you'll have to clean it up," is describing a logical consequence.

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The problem I see is that

Submitted by Heather (not verified) on 11 September, 2006 - 23:54

The problem I see is that you are ALWAYS stating your underlying expectations of what you expect FROM WHO THE CHILD IS AS A PERSON in every interaction. It is this subtlety of your expectations that are the main influence in how the child develops self image and esteem.

In the case of the spilled milk ~ the implication is that you expect the child to feel bad for having spilled the milk. That you expect that the child doesn't know that they have made a mess ~ do you need to point out that the child made a mess ~ how would you feel if someone did it to YOU ~ and that's the whole point I see the original author stating.

The problem with "natural consequences" is IN WHAT THE CHILD LEARNS. We need to approach our interactions from the place of the child's understanding. We think we are sending a message but they are receiving another. In the spilled milk incident the message the child gets is that he is bad and stupid if you "force" him to clean it up himself. That really isn't any different than if you got a new job and no one went around with you and showed you what to do. What would YOU prefer ~ a companion while you learn new tasks ~ or unrealistic and BELITTLING demands that you just "know"??? You were put here to be that companion for the child.

Why don't you just have the kid go out and change the oil in the car while you're at it. Oh ~ because maybe he's still learning HOW to get things done. Children LEARN by our PARTICIPATION with them ~ let alone it is just social and plain ole NICE.

If someone "forced" me as an adult and treated ME that way ~ I would either rebel or find fault with myself ~ depending on who I am and the strength I have already developed in life BASED ON PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES ~ either based on not having been shamed in the first place or having overcome it later. CHILDREN HAVE NO CHOICE AND CAN ONLY DO THE LATTER based on their lack of prior experience to draw on.

Frankly it seems oximoronic that ANYONE wouldn't get the point ~ but how does me saying that make those of you who don't "agree" FEEL. What are all the things implicated and expected by me IE ~ who I must think you are? Those are the things a child is left with ~ but you will "get over it" because you can rationalize in a way a child cannot.

the point ~ why do we treat children differently than we ourselves would want to be treated? IN ANY situation? It is wholly unacceptable. We reinforce that they will be of value SOMEDAY ~ but not TODAY! That someday they will be deserving of dignity ~ but not TODAY.

to post comments

Cut the umbilical cord.

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 19 October, 2006 - 13:35

This morning, I spilled some coffee, there wasn't anyone around-including my Mom. Guess what happened! I wiped it up by myself! I don't seem to have suffered any emotional damage!

First, you must teach the child to do things on their own. If you were always there to help, and the child who is now 12 years old, and spills something while you aren't home, they will just leave it and wait for you to get home to help them, right? (sound familiar?...like a LOT of MEN do!) What kind of learning would that be? Once the child is strong, in their abilities and responsibilities, and you want to be more "gracious", as you would be to a friend who spills her drink, then you could help occasionally, if the spill is big. (Your children are NOT your friends, by the way!)

to post comments

bad example

Submitted by [a reader \(not verified\) \(http://donthaveone.com\)](http://donthaveone.com) on 1 December, 2006 - 00:27

The juice spill is a bad example.

A child knocks over a cup of juice. Whether the child's parents allow the child to make or mess, or not, is irrelevant. It was an accident.

If my friend accidentally spilled. I would help her clean it up.

But, if I had a friend who came to my house and spread my belongings all over my house and yard (like children have been known to do) and then my friend didn't even attempt to clean it, she wouldn't be coming to my house anymore. I am not in the habit of cleaning up after my friends. I expect my friends not to make messes. If being neat is not possible, I expect them to clean up after themselves.

I am a mother, and I clean up after my kids more than I ever would for a friend. "Help your kids clean like you would help a friend." just doesn't "ring true" for me.

More importantly, if children naturally want to be responsible for their own messes, why would a TCS parent help them clean? Wouldn't that hinder them? Wouldn't that be like helping a ten year old feed himself a banana? (assuming the child wants to eat the banana, and has normal capabilities for a child of that age) Help is unnecessary. The child is willing and able to do that himself.

Didn't I read another article on this website that says messiness can be a sign of creativity? Let the kids be messy. Beethoven was messy... Now children are innately have the good quality of wanting to be neat and clean up?

Some of the articles on here are so thought provoking and unlike anything I have ever read. I enjoyed the one that compared noncoercive parenting to anarchy. Some other articles (like this one) are weak and don't jive with other articles. If you want people to understand the TCS theory, you will need to improve your website.

to post comments

Balancing natural consequences and setting boundaries

Submitted by [Staci \(not verified\)](#) on 22 December, 2006 - 06:32

In reference to the example about spilling - I disagree that it was a faulty example, but perhaps it could be expanded a bit. The way I took it was that we need to show respect for our children if we want them to adopt that attitude. Resisting the common reaction of assuming OR acting like your child did something "bad," "inconvenient," or "irritating" will help to maintain a respectful attitude. Even, and probably especially, when it was intentional. They lack an expanded vocabulary and may be upset about something they can not express, it may not have even just occurred at that moment. If a friend walked in and slapped the wall, I wouldn't tell him to leave my house.

Also, kids are learning coordination, why not lend a hand because we understand that, because we have been there? Just because they have not mastered it does not mean they don't want to. I'm sure they do. They also don't pay attention to things simultaneously, that is a learned skill. What is challenging today will be second nature next year.

It's so easy to forget what it is like to be a child. Most likely because it is painful, when I intentionally remember, I recall feeling misunderstood a lot. And unfortunately, I adopted attributes I said I never would because I didn't have better models. However, I don't blame them. I know they did the best they knew how and I take the responsibility of changing me now that I can. I've come to realize about myself that one of those things pertains to personal boundaries. Often times, I think we parents create punishments because we don't know how to maintain healthy boundaries. I'm learning, it's a journey.

If my child whined in the store before buying that one book, I would say, "We have to share this store with other people. Do you hear how everyone is quiet? People like it quiet in bookstores. Would you like to tell me what you want?" Do it if it's appropriate, explain why if not, or say you want to leave if they continue to whine. Parenting is never cut and dry!

to post comments

natural vs unnatural consequences

Submitted by mammal_mama on 20 January, 2007 - 16:44

I think a child learns about natural consequences when she knocks over her cup and the juice spills -- you know, the laws of gravity and all that. To force her to clean it up alone and speak/ behave in a punitive way doesn't teach natural consequences: it shows her an uncompassionate attitude, an attitude that says she's less worthy of help than an adult friend.

The difference between natural and unnatural consequences is that when a natural consequence is experienced, the child doesn't feel cut off from parental love and support. There may be suffering, but loving parents do what they can to eliminate or alleviate that suffering to the best of their ability.

To behave in a way that causes a child to suffer, or that increases her suffering -- to me, that just seems like another word for punishment. And there's nothing natural about punishing the people we love.

Susan

to post comments

spilled juice - context matters

Submitted by [metteg \(not verified\)](http://www.frie-boern.dk) on 17 February, 2007 - 00:59

like another poster said, it really has to be part of the story whether we're talking about something accidentally spilled or deliberately poured out. To me, an accident obviously just requires a helping hand to get it fixed, deliberately showing non-respect for people or things requires being told that is not a way to behave/act.

It is good that my child learns, over time, by example, through conversation, to fix things for and by herself. So that it just comes naturally to her, that if something is spilled, then she just gets up, grabs a tissue and wipes it up. No specific teaching, no guilt trips, no big thing made out of it, just simply: oops, the juice is spilled, we need a tissue. This works. A child will readily accept a helping hand because this is how she has seen interactions over time. It doesn't really matter that much WHO spilled or WHO cleans up, just get it wiped up and move on :-)

If my child were to deliberately pour out juice on the table or floor for instance, I would tell her in a respectful, calm but clear and firm way, that this is unacceptable behaviour and she is NOT to repeat such things. I wouldn't turn it into a long monologue about moral and "good behaviour" - just make a simple statement. Keep it short, concise and to the point - and I would still help her clean up, not doing the cleaning FOR her, but for instance by handing her a mop and saying "here's the mop sweetie, I'll move out the chairs then you can wipe up, maybe we should get some soap too?"

This way, I communicate my feeling about what I feel was unacceptable, I empower her to handle, evaluate and follow up on her own actions, yet I still stay connected to her (by not just imposing a "consequence" and then withdrawing), which is the most important thing in it all.

It is essential, that my children learn to be active, responsible and engaged members of the household - meaning that no one person runs around and does everything, no, our family is a mini-community that only functions properly when all members participate in and nurture it.

My bottom line probably is something like this: this is learned and achieved with time, through modelling. Actions speak way louder than words, as we all know. And I want my children to be helpful and attentive, hence I would NEVER do the "you made the mess, you clean it up" type of thing, because I wouldn't be modelling helpfulness and attention, I would be nurturing self-centeredness and an "eye for an eye"-mindset.

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While I may agree with the

Submitted by simone (not verified) on 13 July, 2008 - 12:56

While I may agree with the sentiment of this post, I really don't agree with the logic. What you are trying to do at home by directing the degree and quantity of natural or logical consequences, is teach a child about the way they will need to conduct themselves when they become independent of you, in order to fulfill their potential and deal with both good fortune and disappointment. It is much more humane to build their confidence in their problem solving abilities, and show them the way in a controlled and loving environment while they are young, than to cast them out in the world when they are grown without the right information and have to deal with the shock of failure and the enormity of 'real world' consequences without the knowledge that they can recover and thrive again.

If I spill my juice, I certainly don't expect someone else to clean it up for me. How abnoxious would I appear to my host, if I knocked over my drink and then cast an expectant look in their direction without so much as offering to correct my own mistake? Of course my host will more than likely ask me to allow them to help me, and of course after the lesson is learned by a child a parent may choose to show kindness to a willing little person to gladden their heart, but to skip the lesson in the first instance would be to court disaster in my opinion.

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OK, if my 2 year old spills

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 12 August, 2008 - 05:26

OK, if my 2 year old spills his juice, I bring him the paper towels and take one myself, then we have to clean it up together, I use this time to teach him... Honey, next time let's put the cup further back, that way maybe you

won't hit it with your arm. Ooooooh good job cleaning up with mommy.

If my 5 or 7 year old spill their milk, IF I am busy elsewhere, I hand them the paper towels, no need to tell them to clean it up, they know it needs to be cleaned because they have been helping clean up messes since they were 2 or younger.

IF someone purposefully spills something, the first thing I ask is, "now why on earth did you feel the need to do that" usually while smiling. Then after they explain, I hand them the paper towels.

Since I started at 2 years old, to explain to them how to prevent messes and showed them what to do when they occurred, we have no issues in them cleaning them up on their own. Mommy isn't always able to walk away from what she is doing to help.

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Gobbledy-Gook

Submitted by Matt (not verified) on 14 September, 2008 - 13:44

Parents are in place for a reason, to teach children, period! If we all fell out of the womb with complete understanding of life and how it works, what need for parenting would there be? Children do not know right from wrong, or good from bad, they must be taught it. Coddling them and reassuring them everytime they make even the simplest of mistakes does not prepare them for the challenges of the real world. It might make you as a parent feel better, and perhaps make you feel more understanding, but in this day and age, disrespect, lack of motivation, and under-education is, in my personal opinion, the reason so many kids act out in violent, abusive ways today. As the aprnet of a teenage boy, I can tell you, tough love may or may not work all the time, but my job as a parent is to prepare my son for life. In no uncertain terms, him and I are not friends, or buddies, I am dad, he is child, I have experienced life, he has not, what good would I be as a father if I didn't force him, at times, to live through and deal with consequences, either natural, or forced?

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The natural consequences of a

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 12 January, 2011 - 14:48

The natural consequences of a child knocking over the juice is that the juice spills. Asking and/or forcing them to clean it up is an imposed consequence. How can you say you are questioning natural consequences when you dont seem to grasp what they actually are. An adult doesnt have to do anything to impose a natural consequence, it happens all by itself. Therefore there is zero coercion involved in it. That is the whole point of them...

[to post comments](#)

Not a natural consequence

Submitted by Alan Forrester on 3 February, 2011 - 22:06

Let's suppose that you have a friend and the friend spills some wine during dinner because he's a bit sloshed. Now, in this case, arguably the adult bears more responsibility for spilling the wine than a child usually does for spilling his juice. The child is learning about how to drink and so on and hasn't deliberately done anything to tip over the juice. The adult has deliberately done something that he knows will result in him becoming clumsier. However, it would be regarded as rude to leave your friend to clean up after himself unassisted. And it would also be a bad idea because you want to get the wine cleaned up so that it doesn't dribble into the garlic bread or whatever. So in this situation the parent is treating the child worse than he would treat an adult friend who is more culpable for the spill.

In addition, it is simply not true to say that leaving the child to clean up the spill alone will make him better at spill cleaning. The adult might be able to help the child learn how to clean spills more effectively by helping him clean up the spill. "You should blot the liquid up rather than spreading it around" and so on.

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