

Consequences - a Parent's Elixir for Fear

Consequences, I'm sitting here in my office having this rational then irrational conversation with Melinda about her adopted daughter Kris. Kris had refused to go to class, the school called the juvenile officer and the incident escalated into an unnecessary crisis. I could tell that Melinda was dys-regulated just by the look in her eyes, so I let her rattle on a bit while I focused on my own self regulation. Melinda told me that she needed to give Kris a consequence so Kris would learn that she would lose her make up when she doesn't go to class. I breathed and prayed myself back to regulation because I wanted to say, "Melinda, just ask Kris what will happen next time she doesn't go to class, I'm sure Kris would say she would lose her make up. I didn't go there. Melinda attempted to explain why a consequence was necessary. Melinda knew that I don't support consequences. I gave her permission to give the consequence to Kris if that was what she needed. Her fear had driven her to a point of feeling out of control and she needed the consequence for her to feel better. Now that she had regained control she was more regulated. I continued to breathe. I explained that I wanted Melinda to understand that giving Kris a consequence was not necessarily going to keep Kris from missing class when she was dys-regulated. She sort of nodded in agreement with me. At that point I considered Melinda as a little child that had just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar and could not admit that she stole the cookie. Melinda, like the child, had a loaded gun to her head. Because of her fear Melinda could not admit that she was wrong. She could not say that her dys-regulation had caused her to implement a fear-based consequence. But it did make her feel better. Consequences.

My experience tells me that parents use the word consequence because it seems more socially acceptable than using the word punishment. Consequences, by definition are a logical chain of events. Is there logic in losing make up when you miss class? Scroll ahead 8 years and I'm sure that when Kris considers skipping class in college, she will attend for fear of losing her make up. Punishment on the other hand, is defined as suffering, pain, or loss that serves as retribution. The Webster Dictionary says that "punishment does not act as a reinforcer unless a person is working from their cognitive memory". Easton's 1987 Bible Dictionary tell us that punishment is not primarily intended for the reformation of criminals, nor for the purpose of deterring others from sin. So, by definition, consequence and punishment are not meant to do what parents want them to do - change or deter future unwanted behaviors. However, they both medicate a parent's fear. What is missing is discipline which is intended to teach internal controls. Proverbs 13:24 (New International Version): "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." Proverbs 22:6 (The Message): "Point your kids in the right direction - when they're old they won't be lost."

A week later Melinda came into my office and she was dys-regulated but in a different way. Her face said she was emotionally distraught, but not angry like last week when she was needing an elixir for her fear. Melinda told me that she had become very cold and shut down around Kris. She knew that this was not helpful and only precipitated more aggression and a need for control from Kris. Melinda's desperation was that she did not want to be or to stay cold and shut down, but was afraid to come out

because that had become a refuge for her. She was beating herself up over it. I said “we need to just breathe through this for a minute” and she allowed me to help her regulate. “What you’re telling me, is that you have basically gotten worn out, burnt out and so for your own self preservation you have gone to a cold place.” She murmured “yes” as the tears welled up in her eyes and said, “That’s not a good place for me, but that is the only place I could be.” She went on to say she was not sure of what she needed to do. I said, she needed to just be. Moving forward comes after she honors where she was. I asked if I could help her do that at that moment. She was able to process through that emotional state. I suggested that when she was regulated and felt like she can be vulnerable with Kris, to go to her and tell her, “Kris, I’m really sorry that the last week. I was not a safe person for you to come to. I have not been able to provide you with a safe place. I apologize for that, and I am sorry you had to experience that. I was very emotional and I wasn’t in a safe place myself. I want you to know that I am working hard so we can get back to a place where you feel safe with me.” Even though it took Melinda about a week or so to get through her process, she was then able to go re-connect with Kris in love.

Another week went by. Now was the time to do an educational piece with Melinda. I told her, “Melinda, let me help you to understand why Kris felt so rejected when you went to that cold place. I did a womb narrative with Kris - I told Kris some of her story when she was in the womb. As Kris allowed me to be in her process, I talked to her about how rejecting and cold her womb experience was and how coming into the world felt very unsafe and scary for her. That she must have felt that the world was not safe, and that she felt rejected by it. Kris was able to process that quite well.” I then explained to Melinda that when she was in her cold place, it reminded Kris’s unconscious of Kris’s cold and rejecting womb experience. Melinda was able to understand the process Kris experienced as well as Kris’s reaction to her. I then told her not to pile on herself anymore shame or guilt, but to embrace her own humanity and celebrate that she and Kris were able to heal. Melinda was now better equipped to discipline in love and facilitate healing. What beautiful consequences of our counseling.

Quotes and bio

“If you give a consequence to make yourself feel better, you need to explore the situation to find what moved you out of a state love into a state of anger or fear. If a consequence does not teach a cognitive or behavioral skill then it is a punishment.”
“Until you allow yourself to be where you are you will never get where you’re going.”

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