



The Westminister Schools

School Motto:

And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. Luke 2:52

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Learning Through Consequences

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IN THE PAST, I have responded to specific questions from parents on a variety of topics. However, this month, I would like to offer more of an opinion on a topic which may address a variety of questions that I often receive. The topic is personal responsibility and consequences.

I have been involved in many incidents involving a teenager's poor choices and the significant consequences that may follow. Examples at Westminister include losing leadership positions following a violation of the school policy and having honor offenses listed on a student's record. However, this issue is common outside of the Westminister campus. At times, it involves legal charges that a teenager may face.

In many cases, the teenager and parents exhibit outstanding character as they "step up" and own their responsibility for the infraction and accept the consequences that follow. However, I am disturbed by a more common response that involves the teenagers trying to explain why they are not *really* responsible for their behavior and by parents who seem more concerned with protecting their child from painful consequences than understanding why the student behaved in a manner that got them into such trouble.

I am called frequently to consult with a teenager who has gotten into trouble; however, I am called just as often to see if I know the name of a good attorney who can get their child out of trouble. My response is usually, "Are you sure that's what you want to do?" We're all familiar with some of the more publicized cases. For example, there was the case of the athletes at a local high school a few years ago who were suspected of vandalizing numerous mailboxes. The parents appeared more concerned that the boys may miss playing in the football playoffs than why their sons were implicated in such a serious crime. There are also the non-publicized cases I am familiar with. An example includes the case of the parent who put more energy into making sure that the drug charges against her daughter didn't stick because they were found after "an improper search" rather than assessing the extent of her daughter's drug use problem. Another example involves the case of the father who seemed more concerned that violating the school's alcohol policy may somehow jeopardize his son's chance of being admitted to a top university than the fact that his son probably had an alcohol abuse problem.

I think it is inherent in all parents to feel the need to protect their children. However, I am concerned when parents feel the need to protect their children from the natural consequences of their child's misbehavior and poor choices. It is only through these consequences that most teenagers learn to re-think their choices and modify their behavior. When parents shield their teen from experiencing the natural and logical consequences of their misbehavior, they are contributing to a delusional belief that these actions have no consequences to be feared. This is a dangerous belief that results in

continued poor decision making. I often use the analogy of climbing a ladder to illustrate this concept: Imagine that your child needs to climb a ladder 50 feet tall in order to reach a goal. You can only stand at the bottom and offer advice. Your most important advice is to "hold on securely as you climb." However, your child ignores your warning and climbs carelessly. He falls after reaching only the second rung of the ladder. Rather than allowing him to hit the ground and learn from the pain of a slight fall, you catch him and repeat your warning. If you continue to catch him, he soon learns that it is not really important to hang on. After all, you will always be there to catch him. Unfortunately, the farther he climbs, the more difficult it will be to catch him. After a while, the fall is not just painful, it can be lethal. Wouldn't it be better to allow a little scrape or bruise early in the process than to continue to prevent the learning experience until the fall could be lethal? You won't always be there to catch him.

I have often said that the lucky ones are the ones who get caught for misbehavior. In my experience, teens who get caught early suffer less severe consequences and are able to make modifications in their choices. I have worked with many teens who received a "wake-up call" in high school through some painful consequences and who were able to correct their course beautifully. Conversely, I have seen far too many kids who were buffered by well-meaning parents from the consequences of their choices through high school, only to continue the same patterns of behavior into college where the stakes for poor choices are often higher, and the consequences are more severe.

It is my belief that if you are not making mistakes, you are not making progress. Everyone makes a poor choice now and then. However, these experiences (including the painful consequences that follow) are usually the most memorable and often most valuable learning experiences in life. As a parent, I know how difficult it can be to allow your child to suffer adversity or painful consequences. Let me encourage you to strongly resist the urge to interfere with this process. You may be interrupting a valuable and life-changing learning experience.

Finally, if you have younger children, it is never too early to apply this principle. Recently, my first grade son came home and shared how he had to sit out during recess because he forgot to take his homework folder to school. I felt sad as I thought of him sitting there watching his friends play. I said to my wife, "You know, I saw his homework folder on the table this morning. I should have put it in his bookbag." My wife wisely responded, "Oh, then when you do think *he* would ever learn to put *his* homework folder in *his* bookbag?" She was absolutely correct. He hasn't forgotten to get his homework to school since that day. ■