Iceberg Model trauma-informed guide

Using consequences

Introduction

All children and young people need support to learn about behaviours that are considered safe or unsafe, age-appropriate, or inappropriate, and right or wrong. The use of consequences is one strategy that many caregivers use to discourage undesired behaviour. Traditionally, consequences involved the removal of valued things that are seen as a privilege or reward such as toys, choices, and opportunities (for example, not allowing a child to watch television after they hit their sibling). The idea is that removing the desired thing will teach the child or young person that the undesired behaviour is associated with negative consequences and feelings, and this will lead them to make a different choice and behave well in the future.

Tip of the iceberg (what we can see)

Children and young people who have been harmed often do not respond well to traditional behaviour management practices where something is taken from them, or they are not allowed 'privileges'. Some children or young people who have been harmed can respond to consequences by being physically and verbally aggressive, becoming angry, being withdrawn, showing physical symptoms of anxiety, feeling afraid or becoming very upset. Caregivers might also find that a child or young person ignores the consequence or stops a behaviour temporarily but quickly repeats it. Sometimes behaviour may even escalate instead of getting better.

What is happening underneath the surface?

There are many reasons as to why children and young people react to the use of consequences as explained below:

Internal working models

Internal working models are a set of beliefs that children and young people develop based on their experiences. Relationships with caregivers strongly influence whether a child or young person will develop a positive or negative working model. Children and young people who experience consistently loving and nurturing care develop beliefs that they are good, capable and worthy of love and care. Through their interactions with their caregivers, they learn that relationships are satisfying and dependable, and that the world is generally a safe and predictable place. Given this, children and young people with positive internal working models approach new situations and relationships confident in the knowledge that they are likeable and worthy and that relationships are supportive and worthwhileand worthwhile.

Conversely, children and young people who have been harmed by previous caregivers can develop negative internal working models. It is important to understand that in the absence of other explanations that may be too complex for them to understand, children and young people often blame themselves for the harm they have experienced and begin to feel that they are bad and deserve to be hurt. When caregivers behave in ways that they are unavailable, unpredictable, or frightening in their interactions with the child or young person or if they struggle to understand what the child or young person needs, the child or young person can develop a negative working model where they believe:

I am… bad, not good enough or unworthy

Relationships are… unavailable, undependable, or scary

The world is… unpredictable, unsafe confusing.

Children and young people with negative working models apply these beliefs to relationships and experiences. To be effective, traditional consequences need a child or young person to believe that they can 'be good' or make a 'good choice', that others behave in a fair and predictable way, and that the world makes sense. Unfortunately, children or young people who have experienced adverse childhood events form negative beliefs about themselves and others based on their experiences.

The child or young person does not believe they deserve good things

Children and young people with negative internal working models may not be able to learn from traditional consequences. Many of these children and young people believe that no matter how hard they try, they are doomed to be 'bad' and do the wrong thing. Given this, how effective could a traditional consequence be? Instead of inspiring them to try to do better, it simply confirms what they already believe – that they are doomed to do things that make others dislike them. Because they do not believe that they deserve good things, traditional consequences do not create any motivation or energy for change for children and young people who have been harmed or neglected by their caregivers.

The child or young person has experienced inappropriate punishments

Children and young people who have been harmed have often been exposed to adults whose behaviours are difficult to predict or make sense of. The child or young person's access to things they care about may have been controlled by their caregiver's mood or things that were happening inside or outside the home (such as financial concerns or other relationships). The child or young person's experience may have been that they were given things and then had them taken away without any explanation of why things were happening or opportunity to influence the outcome. Some children and young people have also been repeatedly and seriously punished and harmed by adults. As a result, they may come to believe that adults are 'punishers' and that nothing they do can change this and there is no point in trying to change their behaviour. These children and young people also carry the belief that they are bad and therefore deserve to be punished, which again leads them to believe there is no point trying to change their behaviour.

The child or young person struggles to stop and think before they do something

Traditional consequences require children and young people to stop and think about their behaviour before they do it so that they can imagine what sorts of outcomes each option will create and make a 'good', 'helpful' or 'approved' choice. Unfortunately, this requires a lot of emotion management and impulse control which is something that is often difficult for children and young people who have been harmed to have learned. Instead, children and young people may find that they have completed an action before they have become an action before they have become consciously aware they were going to. They cannot stop themselves because they do not realise what they are going to do until it has already happened. The more stressed or ashamed the child or young person feels about the action, the less likely they are to be able to stop and think before taking it.

The child or young person struggles to learn when they are upset

In order to create change in the future, traditional consequences require the child or young person to be able to make sense of what has happened and learn from it. Unfortunately, the logical part of the brain responsible for this type of thinking is not easily accessible when children and young people are upset or triggered (especially if they are experiencing shame). In other words, stress reduces a child or young person's ability to think clearly and process information properly, which means they struggle to learn from their experiences. This is even harder if they are expected to do this thinking on their own (for example, by being told to go to their room to think about their behaviour).

The child or young person has not had a chance to learn about cause and effect

In order for traditional consequences to be effective, the child or young person has to believe that the world is a logical place where A is followed by B. Children and young people who have experienced harm often grow up in a world that is unpredictable and inconsistent, where sometimes A follows B but other times it is Z or N, and there is no way for them to figure out which one it is going to be. This undermines their ability to understand cause and effect and be able to predict what sort of outcomes might result from particular behaviours or choices. Therefore, the child or young person find it difficult to understand why their caregivers are angry or why their behaviour is unsafe, undesirable or inappropriate.

The consequence itself is what they are after

Children and young people sometimes find a connection or sense of safety with some consequences. For example, a child or young person might escalate in their behaviour to the point that they need to be restrained because early in their life they may have learned that, in the absence of any affection from others, this was the only way to get physical connection with people. Other children and young people might have learned that escalating their behaviour until a caregiver tells them to go away (by sending them to 'time out' or walking away to have a break from the child) is the only way to get some quiet time away from unsafe people.

Strategies to promote healing

While there are many reasons that using consequences in the traditional sense is not helpful for children and young people who have been harmed, that does not mean that caregivers need to avoid them altogether.

The following strategies may help caregivers design effective consequences for the child or young person.

Build a relationship with the child or young person

In order for consequences to feel safe (and therefore effectively help the child or young person learn new things), it is important for the child or young person to have a strong relationship with their caregiver. Investing time and energy into building up connection will help the child or young person to see caregivers as safe, available and capable so that they no longer need to resort to their survival behaviours.

Communicate expectations clearly and consistently

Children or young people in care settings are likely to have experienced uncertainty and unpredictability in the past. They need support to understand what is expected of them and to learn that these expectations are fair and will stay consistent over time. Use a variety of strategies to make sure the child or young person understands the household rules (provide explanations, have regular family meetings, and use visual reminders) and be prepared to repeat them many times. It can also be helpful to narrate the ways that others adhere to the expectations (for example, *"your biscuit looks so good that I just want to take a bite, but I won't do that because in our house we don't take other people's food without asking"*).

The more caregivers can be consistent and predictable, the more the child or young person will feel safe and will not need to rely on their survival or maladaptive behaviours to achieve safety. This means caregivers are less likely to need to use consequences to manage behaviour.

Understand the child or young person's behaviour before using consequences

The Iceberg model demonstrates that underneath concerning behaviours displayed by children and young people who have been harmed are unmet needs for safety and connection. To make effective change with the behaviours, it is important to understand the needs that are driving them. If this does not happen, intervention will only be surface level which at best will lead to temporary change but may make the undesired behaviours worse because the child or young person has to manage additional feelings of shame or isolation on top of whatever was driving the behaviour in the first place.

To make long-term change and help the child or young person recover from their early experiences start by asking *"What do I know about this child's history? How do they view the world, particularly given their history? Why did they learn to behave this way? How might this behaviour be keeping them safe?"*

Once an understanding is developed about the need that is driving the behaviour, and a safer and more acceptable way of meeting the need is found, the child or young person will be empowered to learn what caregivers are trying to teach them and modify their behaviour.

Find the right time to deliver consequences

To be effective, consequences need to be responsive, not reactive. Caregivers should avoid giving consequences when they are emotional, especially when they are still angry. It is much better to address an incident later, when caregivers have had time to think and plan an appropriate response, than to set a regrettable consequence that damages the relationship.

Set consequences for behaviours not the child or young person's needs

Caregivers should be mindful that the consequence they design to address a challenging behaviour target what the child or young person did, not their underlying emotional need. It is important to teach the child or young person that caregivers accept and are ready to meet their needs so that they will feel more confident to ask for help rather than using unhelpful strategies to try to manage alone. For example, if the caregiver finds a squashed chocolate bar in the side of the couch because the child or young person eats for comfort when they are upset, the response will need to make it clear that their need for comfort is normal and understandable even though the damage to the couch needs to be addressed. A caregiver might say *"Oh wow! I just found a squashed chocolate bar in here. I wonder if you were feeling sad yesterday and had a bit of chocolate to try to feel better. I can understand that. We all look for ways to feel better when we are sad. This couch is chocolatey though. You will need to help me clean it up, so the dog doesn't lick it up".*

Design consequences that are naturally related to the behaviour

To help children and young people learn the connection between cause and effect, it is important for consequences to be directly related to the behaviour that is being managed. For example, if the child or young person refuses to wear their bike helmet, a natural consequence would be not allowing them to ride until they change their mind. An unnatural, unrelated consequence would be taking away the child or young person's pocket money or turning off the modem so that they cannot access the internet. Sometimes it can be tricky to identify a natural consequence especially if the behaviour caregivers want to address is something like swearing or saying hurtful things. Here it might be useful to take a step back and consider whether a consequence is likely to be helpful or whether there are bigger issues (such as self-esteem, the strength of your relationship, or developmental needs) driving the behaviour.

Keep consequences brief and purposeful

As natural consequences are about teaching connections rather than punishment or shame, there is no benefit in making them longer than necessary. For instance, using the previous example about the helmet, the moment the child or young person agrees to wear it, the consequence should be stopped, and they should be allowed to ride their bike. There is no need to prolong the consequence to make a statement or prove a point as it may reinforce negative beliefs about themselves or caregivers for children and young people.

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' consequence

Consequences should be developed and implemented on the basis of what caregivers know about the child or young person, and what they think would be the most helpful strategy for them. Sometimes, this means that there may be different consequences for different children in the family. This needs to be openly discussed and repeatedly explained so everyone in the household understands why there are different rules for different children and young people.

Never withhold basic needs as a consequence

Caregivers should never withhold the child or young person's basic needs as a consequence. This includes access to food, water, shelter, warmth, or connection with the caregiver. Doing this would re-create past traumatic experiences for the child or young person and are highly likely to cause a significant decline in their mental health and wellbeing. In particular, withdrawing connection with caregivers should never be a consequence. This is because relationship withdrawal creates shame as well as intense fear of abandonment for children and young people who have experienced harm. Not

only are these emotions likely to lead to difficult survival behaviours, but they also cause harm to the child or young person and undermine relationships. Sometimes caregivers need to take a moment to ensure they are calm and be able to respond safely and constructively. This needs to be explained as something a caregiver needs to do to meet their own needs rather than something that the child or young person has caused through their behaviour. For example, *"I'm feeling pretty overwhelmed right now so I'm not going to answer until I calm down"* rather than *"I am not speaking to you until you apologise for what you've done."*

Increase physical and emotional safety for the child or young person when using consequences

There are many ways that caregivers can help children or young people to feel safe when consequences are being applied. This can be done by clearly and confidently explaining the decision about the use of consequences so that the child or young person can understand what is happening. Caregivers should reassure the child or young person that they are still loved and that they will continue to look after them and keep them safe. Show compassion about any frustration that the child or young person is likely to experience about the consequence. When the number of consequences being used increases, the level of nurturing towards the child or young person should also increase to maintain their sense of physical and emotional safety.

Offer relationship repair after consequences are applied

Children and young people need to be taught that they can trust in their caregivers who will stay safe and available regardless of their behaviour. This means that once a caregiver has set a consequence, it is important for them to take a breath and let go of any frustration, anger, or other negative feelings that they may be holding onto. Imposing consequences causes a rupture in a child or young person's relationship with their caregiver, so it is important that the relationship is repaired as quickly as possible after a consequence has been applied. This shows the child or young person that their relationship with their caregiver is unconditional and that they can rely on them to be there for them even when they have done things which are unhelpful. This is particularly important on those difficult days when caregivers may need to set many consequences.

Offer alternative strategies (with no expectations)

If the child or young person is engaging in undesired behaviours to meet an underlying need, the caregiver can start to offer them different ways to get what they want. For example, if the child or young person wants to be sent to their room at dinner time, caregivers can name this for them and work together to understand what they really need. Caregivers could wonder whether dinner is too loud, busy, or overwhelming for the child or young person and offer different strategies such as wearing headphones, not being expected to engage in conversation or being able to eat in a different space. This process may take some time as it is often difficult for children and young people who have not experienced a safe and responsive caregiving relationship to learn how to lean on their caregivers for support.

Avoid conditional rewards

Sometimes caregivers might wish to offer rewards for good behaviour rather than setting consequences when undesired behaviours occur. These are called conditional rewards because a child or young person only get them on the condition that they can produce a certain behaviour – for example, *"If you stay at school all day today, I'll let you play on the iPad tonight"*. Conditional rewards are tricky for children and young people in care because they often lack impulse control, forward

planning and insight into their own actions to make effective choices about their behaviour. This means that conditional rewards can accidentally set them up to fail. Failure feels uncomfortable and may lead o feelings of shame or rejection for the child or young person which will actually lead to more escalated behaviour instead of less. Instead, offer the child or young person favourite activities when they are able to be engaged.

Additional considerations when providing care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people need to be understood within the context of historical, political and systematic disadvantages and the ongoing overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection system. When caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, caregivers should ensure that they have received appropriate training and support from their caregiver support agency or the relevant departmental staff. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are cared for by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caregivers, children are likely to experience culture shock which impacts on their ability to form and maintain relationships and this subsequently affects how they respond to the use of consequences. Therefore, caregivers should develop an understanding of the child or young person's cultural background to strive to create a culturally safe and inclusive environment to strengthen their relationship with the child or young person and use appropriate and responsive consequences, when needed.

When caring for and thinking about the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, additional factors that may contribute to their needs and behaviour need to be considered. These include cultural and intergenerational trauma caused by harmful practices associated with colonisation such as forced dispossession of land and Country, forced suppression of culture, the Stolen Generations, assimilation policies, and systemic racism and oppression. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families may also hold broader notions of wellbeing that include spirituality, community, and interconnectedness with land that must be recognised and supported.

Caregivers should also understand that connection to culture, Country, kin and family are highly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and therefore assisting the child or young person to maintain these relationships may help strengthen their own relationship with the child or young person. This can also enhance the caregivers' understanding of use of consequences within the cultural context of the child or young person they are providing care for.

Additional considerations when providing care for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background also have cultural templates and concepts of relationships and consequences which may differ from the caregiver's own understanding of these concepts. Therefore, it is important for caregivers to receive additional information, training and support from their caregiver support agency or relevant departmental staff when caring for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Caregivers can connect with local CALD organisations to continue to enhance their understanding of the child or young person's cultural background and the impact of it on their worldview.

Iceberg model in action

Sarah in family based care

3-year-old Sarah struggles to play with other children. She becomes very upset if the other children in her house try to play with her toys. One afternoon, she snatches a block away from another child and then throws it at them, causing them to develop a big bump on their head.

Sarah's caregiver listens to the messages underneath the behaviour – *"I don't understand what is happening when the other kids come over. I'm afraid they will take all my toys away and keep them. I need your help!"*

Sarah's caregiver responds by setting a natural consequence for Sarah and explaining that she will not be able to play with her blocks for a while because she is unable to be safe with them. Sarah's caregiver offers her comfort and gives her a cuddle while she calms down. They also offer Sarah a narrative so that she can understand her behaviour and needs. Once Sarah is calm again, her caregiver assesses that she is ready to try again and offers her the chance to play with the blocks again. Her caregiver also increases supervision so that they can intervene if the behaviour looks likely to repeat.

Jayden in residential care

9-year-old Jayden is known for becoming aggressive and getting into other people's personal space when he is escalated. His residential care workers often have to physically step in between Jayden and his siblings and use their body to support and contain him until he is calm again. Jayden's workers know that his family struggled with aggressive behaviour and that he has seen adults engaging in violence many times. Despite many conversations about staying safe and not hurting others, Jayden's behaviour has not changed.

Jayden's residential care workers listens to the messages underneath the behaviour – *"I'm scared, and I need your help. I can't just ask for your attention because that would make me look weak and weak people are not safe. I want to be close to you right now but I don't know how to do that without a fight".*

Jayden's residential care workers responds by using 'I wonder' statements to try to help Jayden make sense of his behaviour (*"I wonder if you're trying to ask for my help right now buddy, I'm right here for you"*) and continue to intervene to keep him and his siblings safe. They wait for calm moments to reinforce the household rules about safety and physical violence and have a conversation about meaningful consequences for Jayden when he does these behaviours. Together, Jayden and his residential care workers agree that he needs to repair his relationships with people after these incidents and Jayden designs unique ways to show his siblings that they are important to him. Jayden's workers also start to introduce other ways Jayden can ask for closeness or a hug without having to say it by using a hand signal or 'code word'.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact your case worker for further support.