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### Guarding the Feedback Loop

One of the most important lessons that parents teach their children is that actions lead to consequences. Cooperation is more likely to be followed by a pleasant outcome and refusing to cooperate will lead to an unpleasant outcome. This is the basic feedback loop. Action A leads to Consequence A. Action B leads to Consequence B. It is up to us to guard this feedback loop for our children because this is the key to how they learn, change and grow.

What would happen if instead of guarding the feedback loop we sabotaged it? What if we told our children they could not have a friend over if it was hard to get out of the house in the morning but when it came time to say no, we caved? Or, we explained how they needed to have all As and Bs to remain on their school team but when they brought home three Bs and two Cs we decided that was close enough? And what if life was so hectic that we had trouble remembering the demands, agreements, plans and terms we told our children we were putting into place? When a child is not able to rely on the feedback loop their trajectory through childhood is altered. They might learn to ignore their parents or to invest great effort to manipulate them.

But what about the times when we can anticipate future events much more accurately than our children can? If a project is due a week from Friday and we know this coming weekend is a busy one, we want to encourage them to get an early start. And that is fine and reasonable. But if they ignore our guidance and we nag and remind, lecture and repeat ourselves, we are inserting ourselves into the feedback loop in an unhelpful way. It is possible that all they will learn is that they do not have to be far-sighted and organized, that you are taking care of that for them. They may even come to believe that you are the person responsible for their deadlines.

There is a critical period of time in our children's lives, usually corresponding with grades 4, 5 and 6, when they are ready to learn about responsibility and organization. This does not mean that they are naturally going to be responsible and organized right then, rather that they are developmentally ready to do this work. Parents who "guard the feedback loop" are helping their children do this important work. Granted it is difficult to do this when we want to help them meet their deadlines, be ready for their tests, get the most out of their piano lessons and not let their team down. But if we are not careful we might wear out our welcome by reprimanding and sermonizing instead of guarding the feedback loop.

- "If the grades drop you are off the team."
- "If the chores don't get done, no friends over."
- "If you talk disrespectfully to me, you will lose the privilege of being driven places."

Parents can do this and it is in their children's best interests to do so. And yes, it is hard to see the grades drop when we could have organized them and been the responsible party, but then we would have robbed them of the exact circumstances needed for the responsibility to grow. Perhaps it boils down to whether or not you decide to parent with a short-term view or a long-term view. Yes, you can ensure that the next report card is acceptable and you can ride them until they get their chores done. But if you can muster the personal strength to permit your 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade child to be in charge of whether or not they get their chores, homework and studying done, and then hold them accountable, you will be increasing the likelihood that they will become organized and responsible in the not too distant future.

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Dr. Kahn is the author of *Insightful Parenting: Making Moments Count*, now available for e-readers and as an audio book in addition to paperback.