

Beautiful Consequences

Written by Sarah MacLaughlin, L.S.W.

Tuesday, 01 March 2016 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 07:34

A broken clock highlights the value of non-punitive parenting.

I knew it was a mistake. He didn't mean to break the clock.



[Appearing in Issue #49. Order A Copy Today](#)

When he slammed the door, it fell off the wall and smashed onto the floor. It was a couple

Beautiful Consequences

Written by Sarah MacLaughlin, L.S.W.

Tuesday, 01 March 2016 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 07:34

years ago; I don't remember what the dispute had been. Some 5-year-old thing had ignited his anger—a typical upset—but one we would have ordinarily resolved without broken glass.

He had followed me up from the basement; we were arguing. I stepped into the kitchen as he stood at the top of the stairs shouting. I was doing my thing, staying calm in the face of upset. I turned to continue our squabble just in time to see him grab the door, pull it back a few inches, and slam it shut. I could tell the retro, sea-green wall clock was going to fall, but there was no way to stop it. I sucked in my breath, a high-pitched gasp that felt overly dramatic as soon as I heard it. I stepped backward, pulling my son along with me. The pieces scattered.

We stood next to each other, staring at the mess. My heart and mind both raced.

I told myself the most important thing was that no one was bleeding. This is not a real emergency; it's just a clock, I stated firmly to myself.

My boy surprised me by stepping closer, pressing himself into the side of my body. I put my arm around him and could feel his heart beating like a jackrabbit's in his little chest. He was scared, terrified even.

I thought about his fear, and what it might mean.

Since our home had always been punishment-free, I knew he was not afraid of “getting in trouble.” I thought of myself at 5 years old, and how petrified I would have been. I certainly would have feared retribution—anger, a stern lecture or even a spanking. I knew he wasn't scared of that. He didn't even know the concept.

The thought came abruptly: He scared himself.

Beautiful Consequences

Written by Sarah MacLaughlin, L.S.W.

Tuesday, 01 March 2016 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 07:34

We stood together, pulses slowing.

“That was scary,” I said quietly, like it was a just a fact.

He stayed silent.

“Are you OK?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“You slammed the door so hard the clock fell and broke.”

I waited a beat.

“That was scary,” I repeated.

“Yeah, but we didn’t really need that clock anyway.” He was flippant and shrugged out of my embrace, stepping backward.

Annoyance rushed through me. I took a deep breath and looked at his determined face. We stared at each other. It occurred to me that this was a defense, his desire to diminish.

I wanted to neither minimize nor dramatize the situation, but simply hold up the reality of what had happened, and walk him through it. The statement about not needing the clock was a desire to lessen—if only in his own mind—his destruction of it. I didn’t want that. He had scared himself.

Beautiful Consequences

Written by Sarah MacLaughlin, L.S.W.

Tuesday, 01 March 2016 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 07:34

“Actually,” I said, “I looked at that clock every day. Daddy bought it for us a long time ago. I’m sad it’s broken now.”

Even though I offered this information neutrally, and without shame, he stayed quiet and stared at his feet. “But we don’t really need it, Mom,” he said, lifting his chin. “There’s another clock right there.” He pointed at the digital face on the stove.

I was irritated again. Of course we didn’t need the clock. That was beside the point. I took another slow breath— in, and out.

He shuffled farther away until his back was against the refrigerator. He shifted his weight back and forth on his skinny legs. He toyed with his T-shirt collar, sticking the crewneck in his mouth and chewing on it. I didn’t say anything, even though I was irritated by this nervous habit. Instead, I used my narration trick again to reiterate my view.

“I liked the clock. Now we need a new one to replace it.”

Unable to think of anything else to say, I asked him to stay back so I could safely pick up the glass. He stood and watched for a while, then walked into the other room, presumably to play. I let him. Maybe that was all the input he could take for the moment. I thought of my own oft-given advice: Wait until everyone is calm and regulated to deliver information you want your child to learn. Remember that when anyone is upset or defensive, it’s not a “teachable moment.”

I decided to wait a couple of hours to tell him: “It is not safe to slam doors. Staying in charge of your body when you’re mad is something to keep practicing. I know you can do it.”

I threw away the painted metal portion of the clock, grabbed the broom, and started on the big pieces. I thought about further “consequences” as I swept the glass. I ticked through the ways parents typically respond to an incident like this. I could have asked him to help me

Beautiful Consequences

Written by Sarah MacLaughlin, L.S.W.

Tuesday, 01 March 2016 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 07:34

clean up, but I was worried he'd get cut. Plus, the task would have taken longer—a consequence that would have mostly inconvenienced me. I could have made him accountable for the cost of a new clock. But for a child his age, with hardly a concept of money, that didn't make much sense.

He had scared himself. Maybe that was enough.

I dumped the dustpan of glass into the trash and grabbed the small brush for the tiny shards.

I insisted there had been consequences to his actions, ones I'd already made clear. I recommitted to non-punitive parenting and my disapproval of required apologies. Though a voice in my head still nagged quietly: He didn't show any remorse. You let him off too easy.

I was on my knees getting the last flecks of glass with a soggy paper towel when he came back into the kitchen. I stopped wiping, sat back on my knees, and looked at him.

"I didn't mean to break the clock," he said quietly.

"I know you didn't."

"I'm sorry I slammed the door, Mama."

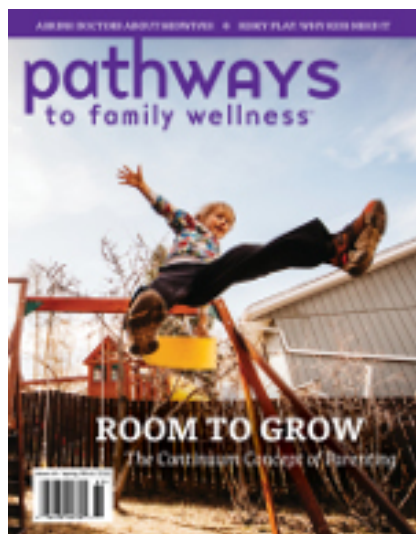
"Thank you for saying that, I really appreciate it." He walked over and threw his arms around my neck, burying his face on my shoulder. I felt him heave tears, and with them, the release of his fear, anger and stress.

He couldn't see my face, but I was smiling as I held him close.

Beautiful Consequences

Written by Sarah MacLaughlin, L.S.W.

Tuesday, 01 March 2016 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 07:34



This article appeared in [Pathways to Family Wellness](#) magazine, Issue #49.

View [Article Resources](#) .

View [Author Bio](#) .

To purchase this issue, [Order Here](#) .