

## **MoxieTopic: Backing Down When You've Gotten Yourself Into an Untenable Position With Your Child**

It happens to everyone at one time or another. You make a decision (or say something in the heat of the moment) and then have to dig in and continue it, even when you realize it's not going the way you wanted it to, or you've reconsidered, or have more information. It can be as simple as trying to enforce a one-book-at-bedtime rule or saying "If you say that one more time we're going home" to as complicated as "I'm taking your phone away for six weeks because you lied." But at some point after you make that decision you realize that it's not serving you in some way, and you have to decide whether to continue with the decision or not. Do you reverse course and admit you were wrong? Or double down on something you don't feel good about?

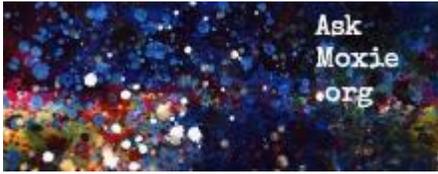
How do you decide whether or not to continue? And how do you know if the decision is serving you or not?

Here are some questions you can ask yourself to determine if a planned course of action or system of punishments is working for you or not:

Is the decision you've made or punishment you've set aligned with one of the primary things you're trying to teach your child or with your main family and personal values?

If it isn't, then consider whether you want to be sending this message to your child or not. It's easy to get caught up into creating rules or situations that are based on things other people think are important but you don't care about. Some examples of things some people care about but you might not are sleeping in a certain location, pacifier use, screen time limits, food restrictions, and wearing certain items of clothing. If it's important to you, consider sticking with the rule you've made, but if it's just someone else's idea of a priority but doesn't mean anything to you, don't enforce it. You have bigger fish to fry.

If it is, then consider sticking with the rule you've made, but first ask yourself if this is the best way to teach your child this lesson or value. Will they learn what you want them to learn from it, or will they take something out of the experience that you don't intend? My mother used to make me sit at the table until I finished a meal, even if I hated what she'd put on my plate. I can remember sitting there for hours because I couldn't stand to chew and swallow whatever the food was. I'm sure she was trying to teach me not to waste food or to try new things or something like that, but I'm still angry that she didn't



respect my right not to put something disgusting in my mouth and have to eat it. Her punishment didn't teach me the lesson she thought she was teaching, and it made me trust her judgment less than I would have otherwise. I bet if she'd known that's what I'd take out of it, she wouldn't have made me sit there for hours in front of cold Brussels sprouts, since I wasn't even getting the lesson she thought she was teaching me.

Consider whether the principle you're sticking to might get totally lost by continuing the punishment, or if it is actually teaching what you want to teach. If the message is getting lost, then stop the punishment, and come up with a different, non-punitive way to teach that lesson.

What are some good ways to teach kids lessons you want them to learn?

1. Focus on the positive instead of the negative. It's likely that you want them to stop doing something, like being ungrateful or kicking you in the head while you're sleeping. It'll be easier to teach them something TO DO, though, instead of not to do. So think about how to teach them to value what they have, or to sleep in their own bed where they can kick all night.

2. Create experiences that require their decisionmaking instead of just observation. When kids have to make choices, they become more engaged in the lesson than if they just watch something happening. So if you're teaching them to help people who have fewer resources than you do, ask them to make decisions about what you give people and how you give it, instead of just watching you give. If you're getting them to sleep in their own beds, give them any choices you can, such as bedding style, nightlight on or off, which lullaby, etc.

3. Build in aspects of protecting their own boundaries and respecting others' boundaries. It's really hard to learn anything when you're being pushed past what you're comfortable with, physically or emotionally. You retreat into fear and anger. So if you can keep kids in a place that feels safe to them, and focus them on helping other feel safe and respected, they'll learn more easily.

Now that you've considered whether the punishment or course of action is serving you and if it's the best way to teach what you want to teach, make your decision. Do you want to keep going? Or switch to something different? Here are some other factors to consider:

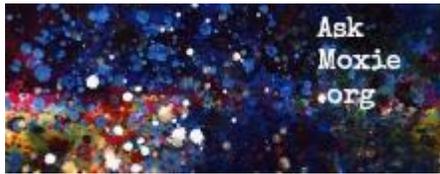


Figure out which hills you're willing to die on. There are some things that just really don't matter, and if you've only made a decision on principle, it's really not worth fighting for (or about). You aren't going to win everything. And part of parenting is teaching your child how to prioritize, which they can only learn if you practice prioritizing. Decide if this specific thing is a priority or not.

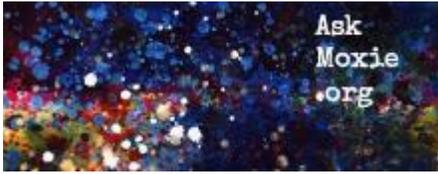
Take the aspects of control out of it. You are never ever ever ever going to win against your kid. And if you're trying to "break" a child, you're looking at raising children through the wrong lens and are going to create an enemy out of your child. So setting up a situation in which there's a fight for control won't end well, and will only end up teaching you both something neither of you might want to know. Instead, set it up as a way to teach your child something, with plenty of room for their participation and input. Pull all control aspects onto an external source ("it's time for bed" or "the rule is" instead of "I want you to") so the interaction between you and your child is about learning.

Use it to learn something more about yourself. It is entirely possible that there are behaviors that you think you should care about but that you actually don't. Or that there are things that are just always going to bother you. It's really, really ok if what bothers you and doesn't bother you doesn't align with what you think you're supposed to care about. You're a unique person, and you'll have a better relationship with your child if you can be yourself, preferences and all, with them.

Reserve your right to integrate new information. You know how when you're using the GPS and you make a wrong turn it says "recalibrating" because it's got new information it has to process? You're allowed to do that, too. In fact, it's better if you model to your kid the whole process of researching and taking in new information, and using everything available to inform your decision. Sometimes that means that you decide one thing, but then when you get new information you change your mind. It's an important part of life, learning to adjust to new information.

Now, you've decided it's not worth it to continue with the plan or punishment. How do you actually get out of it? If your child is really young, you can just switch to something else. If they're too young to understand an explanation, then you can just switch to the other plan you came up with instead.

If they're older, though, you're going to have to introduce the change somehow. To do that, think about what you want to teach your kids about making decisions, and use that as your explanation for the change. Any of these would work:



“I thought about what this punishment would teach you, and realized that there’s a better way to teach you this skill. So I’m changing the punishment from x to y. Let’s talk about how this is going to work.”

“After I told you x, I found out new information, and knowing that new information, this doesn’t seem fair to you. I’d like to do the thing that’s best for all of us, so let’s change what I decided and do y instead.”

“I’ve been thinking about how we’re doing x, and I came up with a way to teach you about it that might make more sense to all of us.”

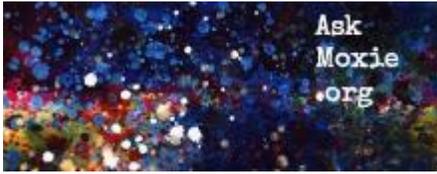
Note that you’re not giving the child the control over the decision in any of these cases. You’re saying that you’re deliberately changing course based on rethinking the decision. This is easy to do if you stick to what you say the majority of the time. If you let your kids argue you into changing your mind routinely, it’s harder to announce your own change of decision (because it feels like giving in to your kids).

It will also help if you can avoid ending up in situations in which you feel like punishments or plans you make in the moment don’t work out once you reflect on them. Being conscious of what situations trigger you will help you avoid making decisions you don’t want to have to carry out. So will the following ideas:

Buy yourself some time. You don’t have to issue a punishment or course of action as soon as you realize something needs to change. You can buy yourself time to think about what to do by saying something like, “This is not ok. I need to think carefully about how to fix this situation and will tell you what we’ll be doing about it later.” That lets the child know that the behavior is noticed, it needs to stop, and it will be addressed. but it doesn’t commit you to anything until you have time to consider it.

Don’t back yourself into a corner. As soon as you feel that defensive, cornered feeling that’s the cue not to make any decisions or pronouncements. Teaching your kids to be good, competent people is the layer right underneath that cornered feeling, so hold tight until you can get past the jumping-out-of-your-skin feeling to the teaching feeling.

Routinely give your kids an out. Get in the habit of giving your kids the benefit of the doubt and a way to backtrack (even if you know for sure they did what they did on purpose). Consider the following two conversations:



You discover that your kid ate all the cookies you were saving for dessert. You: “You ate all the cookies I was saving for dessert! Go to your room! You’re going to bed without dinner!”

vs.

You discover that your kid ate all the cookies you were saving for dessert. You: “You ate all the cookies! Did you know I was saving them for dessert with your aunt and uncle?” (The question gives your kid an out.)

Kid: “No. I didn’t know. I’m sorry.” (Can apologize without losing face.)

You: “Can you help me figure out what to serve for dessert instead? And let’s figure out a place so you know what food you shouldn’t eat because I’m saving it for something special.”

Now you’re back on the same team.

Create a testing orientation in your household. If you create an atmosphere in which you’re all testing things out to see what works best, then there’s no failure. Wrong decisions don’t get punished, but instead you review to see how they went wrong and how to improve the next time. Kindness and good intentions are prioritized, and everyone gives everyone the benefit of the doubt as you all test things together.

Realizing you’ve made a wrong decision about punishments or courses of action can be demoralizing and cause you to feel insecure in your parenting. But you can use the process of reevaluating your decision and altering or changing it to move to a teaching and testing orientation for your entire family. More through the discomfort to find competence for everyone.

Courage.