

DISCIPLINING YOUNG CHILDREN

The scriptures command parents to raise children in the training and instruction of the Lord. We begin “training” a child from a very young age by the ways we respond to their actions and attitudes. The primary purpose of discipline is to consistently direct your child toward right relationships with God and others. Several practices contribute to that process.

PRACTICE #1

Establish Your Authority

Children need a clear answer to the question, “Who is the boss?” Mom and Dad embody the security and limits that come from submitting ourselves to a loving heavenly Father. God has delegated oversight of your child’s welfare and development to you, placing you in a position of authority over them.

Starting when children are very young, parents need to model clarity and consistency. Unclear rules and sporadic reinforcement breed insecurity. You must say what you mean, mean what you say, and act upon it. Don’t overlook defiant behavior just because the specific issue seems minor, or because it is a hassle to stop and discipline at the moment. Children are commanded to obey their parents and parents to train their children even when it is inconvenient to do so (Colossians 3:20-21).

PRACTICE #2

Discipline Rather Than Punish

Punishment is negative, making someone pay for what they’ve done. Discipline is positive – training toward a better future. Discipline in childhood helps children avoid “learning the hard way” later in life.

Many of us have heard the phrase, “spare the rod, spoil the child.” This is not a scripture. However, it is based on Proverbs 13:24, *“Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.”* The “rod” is also used in Proverbs 22:15; 23:13-14; and 29:15. These scriptures cause many Christian parents to ask about the use of spanking (the rod) to help shape a child’s will.

At first glance these verses seem to be in strong support of the use of corporal punishment, but the Hebrew word for “rod” can be viewed another way as well. The Hebrew word “shebet” means, a stick used for walking, writing, fighting, ruling, and punishment. It is most frequently used when referring to shepherds tending their flocks. The Shepherd uses his rod (stick) to lead the flock, redirect wandering sheep, defend them from wild animals and rescue them from trouble. The image here is using our “rod” as the shepherd uses his rod. As parents we are to lead and guide our children, correct and protect them, and rescue them by holding them accountable for their choices and actions.

Regardless of which form of discipline you use; the key is consistency. As author Ginger Plowman explains, it is not the severity of punishment but the “certainty of consequence” that makes the difference. Ultimately, the discipline you apply should be used in a way that restores right relationships. It should provide a consequence that leads the child to repentance (sorrow for their wrong behavior) and restoration of their relationship with God, mom, dad and others.

God holds parents accountable for how they use the authority He has given them. The scriptures instruct parents not to “exasperate” or “embitter” their children (Colossians 3:21). Do not treat childish immaturity the same as willful defiance. Parents should never discipline children out of embarrassment, frustration or anger. Accidentally spilling the milk or waking the baby is not an occasion for stern discipline. But ignoring direct disobedience can make a child vulnerable to an ongoing spirit of rebellion.

Parents are called to protect their children from the ruin of an undisciplined life and point them to their need for a Savior (Proverbs 23:14 and Romans 3:22-24). Ultimately, the discipline you apply should be used in a way that restores right relationships. It should provide a consequence that leads the child to repentance (sorrow for their wrong behavior) and restoration of the relationship with God, mom, dad and others.

PRACTICE #3

Lovingly Instruct

Starting in the preschool years discipline and instruction should become a package deal (Ephesians 6:4). We often make the mistake of allowing our desire for changed behavior to replace our desire for a changed heart. Use simple probing questions and share specific scriptures about wrong choices to instruct your child toward repentance. After disciplining a 2-year-old temper tantrum, for example, you might explain that "*God wants us to obey.*" With a 4-year-old you can go further, explaining self-control, reading Titus 2:6 and asking the child "Do you think that you were self-controlled or out-of-control?" Such loving instruction after discipline helps train your son or daughter to think like a follower of Christ rather than merely behave in order to avoid punishment.

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GOING FURTHER

R E S O U R C E S

Shepherding a Child's Heart by Tedd Tripp

Gives parents a biblical perspective on correction.

Don't Make Me Count to Three by Ginger Plowman

Helps parents of younger children handle disobedience.

The New Strong-Willed Child: Birth Through Adolescence

by James Dobson

Helps parents deal with willful defiance.

Have a New Kid by Friday by Kevin Leman

Gives practical tools for redirecting a pre-teen's behaviors and attitudes.
