



Disciplining Children

As we think about disciplining and training our children in righteousness, four questions come to mind:

1. Why do we need to train and discipline our children?
2. What authority do we have to do this?
3. What should we expect from our children?
4. How do we go about it?

There are two important facts about our children that affect our outlook in raising them. First, our children belong to the Lord. They are not ours; they are gifts from Him, to raise for Him, so that the next generation will be a godly one (Psalm 127:3, 78:1-7). Secondly, it is important to remember that our children are sinners. From the moment they were conceived, they were sinners (Psalm 51:5). So, do not be surprised when they do wrong things. Children, like us, do not need to learn how to sin. They do not need to learn how to be disrespectful, disobedient or self-centred. We and they have inherited all of this from our first parents. But, they do need to be trained in the way of righteousness, to be taught to seek and obey the Lord. God places us in the vital role of training them to do so.

However, we too are sinners, so what authority do we have to discipline and train them? As believers we are people under authority. That authority is the Lord Jesus Christ. He said that if we love Him, we will obey Him (John 14:15). When it comes to disciplining and training our children we do this with His authority. It is He who has commanded us to train our children (Proverbs 22, Deuteronomy 6:7). He requires us to reflect His glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). Just as we experience the discipline, mercy and grace of the Lord, so our children need to experience these things in us. This is a God-given hierarchy of command. God expects our children to respect and obey us as their parents, and we in turn are expected to honour and obey our Lord. Our children should understand that we are not self-appointed dictators, but rather just as they are under orders, so are we. As we teach them to obey us, we are also teaching them to obey the Lord. It is essential in fact that we take on this task of training and disciplining our children, because if we do not it will be far more difficult for them to respect and honour the Lord. Not only that, but we ourselves will be held accountable to God for how we have disciplined and trained them. It is easy to worry about what our children will feel towards us if we are firm with them, but how much more we should fear God if we reject His command to discipline His children.

As we take up this God-given task what should we expect from our children? The Scriptures only give one specific command directly to children: To honour and obey their parents (Exodus 20:12, Ephesians 5:1-3). As we discipline and train them, we require two things only — respect and obedience. It is helpful when thinking through the practical issues to keep this in mind. It will keep us from expecting too much of our children, or on the other hand expecting too little. We need also to think about what is expected of us, as parents. Our purpose in life is to glorify God (Catechism Question 1). This means that all we do, including discipline and training our children, is for His glory. Who is at the centre of your home? Is it self-centred, child-centred or God-centred? Children should always understand that they are not the meaning of life — God is. All that we do as an individual, as a couple, as a child or as a family should be motivated by a desire to please Christ (2 Corinthians 5:9).

Finally, no matter how hard we work at training our children and disciplining as pleases the Lord, if we are not living consistent lives before them it will be to no avail. If we teach, discipline and train them not to tell lies and then we lie to the teacher as to why our child was absent from school or did not do their homework, then we are saying it is okay to lie. If we borrow something from our neighbour and do not

return it, we are saying it is okay to steal. Our message to our children should be that of Paul, follow me as I follow Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Now, let us look at some practical issues in how we carry out this God-given duty to discipline our children.

Consistency

Children need to have the security of very clear boundaries and to understand the results of crossing those boundary lines. However, no method of discipline works immediately. It takes work and often repetition, perseverance and time. Rules and guidelines need to be clear, suitable for their age and well understood. Another simple area of consistency is to expect the same behaviour at home as you would when you are out. For example, if you do not expect your children to jump all over the furniture when visiting relatives and friends, then don't let them do it at home. If you expect them to be polite to others, then expect manners at home, even when they are speaking to their siblings.

Deal with heart issues

A set of rules is important, but not the essence of discipline. The purpose of discipline is to help the child overcome their self-centred and rebellious heart. When you wonder whether to discipline and how, look at the heart of the child rather than the behaviour. Is he being rebellious, or is he physically or socially too immature to do what you ask? Ignoring bad behaviour actually confirms that that behaviour is okay. If your child can break the rules and not suffer the consequences, they have learnt that it is okay to break rules. If they throw a tantrum and you calm them down with a reward, they have learnt that tantrums will get me my own way. It may seem insignificant in a two year old, but a teenager still having tantrums could have dire consequences. However, if a toddler is trying really hard to drink out of a cup and keeps spilling it, this is not rebellion but a desire to learn that new skill.

No negotiation

Let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" be "no". This may mean telling a child to wait for your response until you have thought through or discussed an issue. But once a decision is made, it should be acted upon. How thankful I am for a loving mother who was like the Rock of Gibraltar. She had clear boundaries and none of us could budge her. Again a whining, pleading child needs to look at their heart. Point them to God's Word and His commands.

Think ahead

Many confrontations can be avoided by planning. We have orders not to exasperate our children (Ephesians 6:4) and so our discipline should always be reasonable. Your child may have to sit still at Grandma's for half an hour, so what do you have in place to help her to do that? And have you told her the expectations beforehand? Instead of demanding a tidy room, give your child a written plan with time parameters and help them achieve it.

Love

All discipline, even when it hurts, must incorporate love. Children need to understand that we are imitators of God and that just as He disciplines us for our good so we as godly parents discipline out of love. This means there must be a process worked through — firm discipline, followed by love and forgiveness, repentance on the child's part, prayer and then restitution when necessary.

Soak your child in the Word of God

Take time to remind your children that Christ died for them, that He bore the penalty of their sin on the cross, that through Him there is always mercy, grace and forgiveness. It is only by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit that your children's hearts will be changed. Pray with them and for them.

They must know too, that as parents, we too are sinners, we make mistakes and sometimes it is us that must ask forgiveness of them.

Routines

Routines are very important for children. There will be less discipline problems when daily routines are maintained, e.g. regular bedtime rituals, eating food only at the table.

What a great privilege and responsibility God has given to us when He appointed us to be parents. By his authority we are to train His children in the discipline of the Lord. We are to point them to the Lord Jesus Christ who died for them and can give them the victory to live disciplined, joyful lives in service to Him.

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