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 relationship with God and others, and to develop self-control. 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 (see 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. Like touching a hot stove, we learn from the consequences of our actions. Discipline in childhood helps children avoid "learning the hard way" later in life.

Many parents ask about the use of spanking to help shape a child's will. The scriptures teach that "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him" (see Proverbs 22:15, 13:24 and 29:15). Administering "the rod" apart from biblical principles, however, can cause more harm than good. Corporal discipline should only be used within guidelines such as those offered by Christian parenting experts. Several books can help you learn to apply spanking, time-out and other methods of discipline in healthy and productive ways (see "Going Further Resources").

Regardless of which form of discipline you use, however, 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.

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 (see 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 (see Proverbs 23:14 and Romans 3:22-24). Ultimately, the discipline you apply should be used in a way that restores right relationship. It should provide a consequence that leads the child to repentance (sorrow for their wrong behavior) and restoration of the relationship with Mom, Dad and others.

Practice #3: Lovingly Instruct

Starting in the preschool years, discipline and instruction should become a package deal (see Ephesians 6:4). Don't make the mistake of allowing your desire for changed behavior to replace your desire for a changed heart. When appropriate, 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 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. One note of caution, God's Word should be used carefully and lovingly, never as punishment. As parents we should seek to balance truth and grace.

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GOING FURTHER – Resources

Recommended Books:

Shepherding a Child's Heart (by Tedd Tripp) explains the process of shaping a child's heart rather than simply correcting their behavior.

Don't Make Me Count to Three (by Ginger Plowman) provides specific, practical strategies for discipline.

The Strong-Willed Child (by Dr. James Dobson) helps parents who are dealing with a particularly strong-willed child.

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