

## Child Rearing & Discipline

Even Christian families can find raising and disciplining children difficult. But Christian parents have the authority of the Word of God to give guidance to their efforts at child rearing and discipline.

Today, I'd like for us to review a few biblical principles of child discipline.

Most of us here today either have children in the household or will have children in the household. Some of you are grandparents, and you still have influence on how children are raised and disciplined. So I trust that our review of what the Bible says on this issue will be helpful to most everyone.

So let's consider several things the Bible says about this critical topic.

### I. The goals of parenting

Parents sometimes fail to think in the long term when it comes to their children. They just want the kids to behave themselves now. "Our goal in parenting is to prevent the children from killing one another." Christian parents should be thinking about the goals they have for their children, not just now but in the long term.

What are the proper, biblical goals that Christian parents should have for their children?

#### A. To raise children who will serve and honor God

Deut 6:1-7; Eph 6:1-4

1. We want them to be saved.
2. We want them to be baptized members of a good church.
3. We want them to be fully-devoted disciples of Christ and live out the values of the Christian life. We want them to adopt a Christian world view.

**Quote:** The goal of parenting is not behavior control. It is not merely to produce well-mannered children. ... The ultimate goal and proper focus of biblical parenting is redemptive. Parents are responsible to lead their children to Christ. ... [P]arents are in the role of evangelists, constantly pointing and urging their children toward Christ.<sup>1</sup>

The main, primary biblical goal for parents is to pass on their faith to the next generation. That's really the highest goal.

We can't guarantee that our children will accept Jesus and live for him, but we can do whatever is possible to make it most likely that they will.

- B. To raise children who will successfully fulfill their God-given vocations in life. We want our kids to fulfill their responsibilities.

Typically, we think of four biblical vocations that we must prepare our children to fulfill: family, church, citizen, career

1. Family
  - a) Child—obey, honor, learn
  - b) Spouse
  - c) Parent
2. Church
  - a) Membership
  - b) Service
3. Citizen
4. Employee/employer/career/job

Christian families want to see their children fulfilling their obligations in all these vocations.

- C. Ultimately, Christian parents want for their children what God wants for their children. Christian parents hope and pray that their children will fulfill God's will for them. That's the highest goal.

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<sup>1</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *What the Bible Says about Parenting: Biblical Principles for Raising Godly Children* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 149.

- D. I hope that your aspirations for your children are not merely physical. Many parents want their children to be “happy,” and by that, they mean that they want their children to enjoy all the earthly things this life can provide—good health, good education, a nice house, a good career, a nice family, good friends, good times. They want their kids to enjoy the American dream. That’s the extent of the hope that many parents have for their children.
- E. Christian parents should have *spiritual* aspirations for their children. Their ultimate hope is that they would love and serve God. We don’t want our children to gain the world and lose their souls.

We of course want the best for our kids, but our highest concern is that they know God and serve Him—that is what is best for them. All those other things are secondary—or they should be. Many parents stress those other things to the extent that the kids grow up with little or no spiritual aspirations. I hope that that is not true of your family.

**Trans:** The highest goals for Christian parents are spiritual. We want to see our children saved and serving the Lord faithfully. We want to prepare them to fulfill their God-given responsibilities and to enjoy the blessings of the Christian life. I hope those are your goals for your children. If they are not, they should be.

## II. Foundational principles of Christian child discipline

One way to insure that our children fulfill our biblical goals for them is to raise our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. And that requires that we impose discipline on our children.

Before we get into some of the nuts-and-bolts practical suggestions for child discipline, we should consider several broad principles that should guide or control how we do child discipline.

- A. Discipline your children.

Pr 23:13 *Withhold not correction from the child: ...*

Pr 13:24 *He who spares his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him promptly.*

Parents are obligated to discipline their children. We show our love for our children through discipline. If there’s no discipline, there’s no love.

Some parents are exceedingly tolerant and permissive. They allow their kids to get away with almost anything. On the other hand, some parents are exceedingly strict and harsh. They impose harsh discipline even for minor offenses. Obviously, we must avoid both extremes.

I think it's better to be stern than to be overly permissive.

Whatever your style of parenting may be, you must impose discipline on your children.

As I've mentioned before, the words "nurture and admonition" seem to imply both physical and verbal discipline. Many parents are very verbal in imposing discipline, but not so much with the physical side.

*Pr 22:15 Foolishness [is] bound in the heart of a child; [but] the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.*

Physical correction is sometimes needed to drive foolishness out of a child.

And of course, we know that parents must never abuse their children through physical discipline, but they should use physical discipline when appropriate.

B. Discipline out of love.

*Prov 3:11-12 My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD Or loathe His reproof, For whom the LORD loves He reproofs, Even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.*

Following that model, we know that discipline is an expression of love. The Lord chastens those he loves, and so do parents.

**Quote:** If the children are doing something wrong and consequently self-destructive, they must be stopped. If the parents refuse to make them stop, for whatever reason, they are treating their children with contempt and hatred.<sup>2</sup>

C. Discipline is *not* done for the benefit of the parents but for the benefit of the child. We should not discipline out of an emotional reaction to the child. In fact, it's probably best to wait until we are not angry to discipline, if possible. The discipline is not an opportunity for the parent to vent his/her rage/frustration/embarrassment. Don't discipline the child because he got on your nerves. Discipline the child because he has violated a rule and his behavior must be changed.

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Wilson, *Standing on the Promises*, 142.

- D. Don't discipline for childish immaturity, things like clumsiness or true accidents. E.g., a spilled glass of milk, dropping a book, wetting the bed. You don't impose discipline for being childish and immature.

But if a parent tells a child not to throw the ball around in the living room, and he does it anyways and breaks a lamp, then discipline is probably called for. It's not because of the loss of the lamp; it's because the child disobeyed. It's not to vent your anger; it's to deal with the child's disobedience.

- E. Discipline should change the child's behavior. If the behavior is not changed, the discipline has not been effective. If the kid keeps doing the same things, then the discipline is not working.

The purpose of discipline is to drive foolish behavior out of your child.

- F. Of course, some discipline is judgmental; you discipline a child because he has done something worthy of punishment. You are seeking to alter the child's behavior as well as impose a just punishment on the child for what he did.

Punishment should be the result when the child fails to obey promptly and completely. The children should know that parents expect them to obey quickly and completely. When children fail to obey, they should expect discipline to follow quickly. Parents must enforce this standard.

It's remarkable to me how often parents tolerate disobedience and bad behavior from little children, as if there is nothing they can do about it. Children will learn how to behave if their parents impose discipline for disobedience.

- G. Parents should see themselves as partners in discipline. They should both agree regarding discipline; both should be of the same mind on these things. The kids should not be able to play one parent against another. "Dad is tolerant and mom is strict." Mom and dad should back up and support one another in imposing discipline. They should not contradict each other.

- H. Parents should be consistent in their discipline. Impose the same set of standards in every situation. You won't get good results if you discipline inconsistently or sporadically. Kids should not be led to believe that the punishment they get will vary depending on mom or dad's mood. Kids should know that if they do this behavior, this will be the result. You want to be consistent, not arbitrary or erratic, in your discipline.

- I. Discipline should be based on biblical principles, not on personal feelings. Parents have the right to impose rules for their own households, but those rules should reflect Christian values. And the rules should be relatively simple and easy to understand.

E.g., rules like be honest; don't lie. Obey your parents and respect them. Don't hurt one another or break things of value. You don't need a list of 100 rules to govern every detail of your child's life. Probably 10 or so general rules will do.

- J. Discipline should be proportional to the offense. The punishment must fit the crime. One way to provoke a child to wrath or discouragement is unreasonable discipline. Defiance, disrespect, and stubborn rebellion are larger offenses than failing to make the bed. There's a difference between mischief and mutiny. Make sure the punishment fits the crime. Don't impose harsh penalties for minor offenses.

**Illus.:** John MacArthur tells the story of how his toddler son once flushed a watch down the toilet. He asked his son why he did that, and his son responded, ““I just wanted to see what it would look like going down,” he said. Did I punish him severely? No. *I'd* like to have seen what it looked like going down, too. I remember being that age.<sup>3</sup>

- K. We can minimize discipline by showing our children love, grace, and forgiveness. Children often misbehave because they don't feel loved. They act out because their parents aren't paying any attention to them. Children may misbehave simply to see if their parents care about them. If the home is full of grace, love, and warm affection, it will minimize the amount of discipline needed.
- L. We discipline our children because we are trying to teach them that there are consequences to sinful living. When children disobey or dishonor their parents, they must learn that there will be significant consequences.

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<sup>3</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *What the Bible Says about Parenting: Biblical Principles for Raising Godly Children* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 143.

And this is an example of a larger truth: there are eternal consequences for sin. If the child continues a pattern of stubborn rebellion, disobedience, and disrespect, he cannot hope to have a home in heaven. He cannot hope to have a happy life. In a certain sense, discipline helps the child understand God's wrath against sin.

Proverbs 23:13–14 *Do not withhold correction from a child, For if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. 14 You shall beat him with a rod, And deliver his soul from hell.*

So in a certain sense, discipline is redemptive; it shows the child the benefits of salvation and the disadvantages of sin. Discipline in the home may help save your children from hell.

**Trans:** These are all general principles regarding discipline that we should understand even before we impose discipline. Now let's look at some of the more practical...

### III. The methods of disciplining children

Child discipline is a huge topic, and many books have been written about it. I don't claim to have any original thoughts about it, but here are a few things that I've gleaned from my reading of the Bible and from other sources.

So just a few practical thoughts about child discipline:<sup>4</sup>

- A. Set a good example. "More is caught than is taught." Your kids will learn far more from your *life* than from your *lectures*, especially if your lectures don't line up with your life.<sup>5</sup>

As Paul said, "Follow me as I follow Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). Your children should see you actively following Jesus, living the Christian life day in and day out. A sincere, consistent example of Christian living is one of the most powerful tools in raising children.

- B. Be clear in rules and expectations. You can't discipline a child over a rule he didn't know about or understand. Children don't have to *agree* with the rules, but they should know them and understand them. So make the rules clear and don't have too many of them.
- C. Insist that children obey and honor their parents.

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<sup>4</sup> Some of this material from Douglas Wilson, *Standing on the Promises: A Handbook of Biblical Childrearing* (Canon Press, 1997), chapter 8.

<sup>5</sup> Steven J. Cole, *The Christian Family*, n.d.

1. The primary roles for children are obedience and respect. As Eph 6:1-2 tell us, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother.” The parents must teach children obedience and respect.
2. One of the major errors that parents often make is that they put up with disobedience and disrespect. They allow their kids to do things that are wrong or inappropriate. It’s only when things get really out of control or when the parents get fed up that they impose discipline.
3. Instead, parents should discipline every time the behavior is wrong/bad. Kids will learn quite quickly what is expected, and behavior will change when the parents are consistent in their discipline.
4. It often takes only 2-3 days of consistent discipline to force a change of behavior.

E.g., if a child whines and complains, discipline him/her every time that happens. Usually, within 2-3 days, the behavior will change. If you want the behavior to change, you must be consistent in your discipline.

D. Discipline must cause some discomfort if not pain. Hebrews 12:11 says that discipline is not joyful but painful. In the short-term, it’s painful; but we trust that in the long-term, the result will be beneficial. We want the discipline to be memorable; we want it to change behavior. For that to happen, the guilty party must sense some pain or discomfort.

1. We are not trying to inflict damage on the child, but we are trying to get the child’s attention. A little pain can focus the mind in a remarkable way. Abuse is never appropriate, but some discomfort can be very helpful. The discipline should be memorable but never abusive. It should be painful enough so that the child does not want to experience it again.
2. Some parents go through the motions and issue the kind of discipline that has no teeth, no pain, no discomfort. “You are grounded to your room” – where there’s a TV, internet access, video games, books, a phone and a comfortable bed. That’s not imposing much pain or discomfort. Instead, try taking all of that away (except the bed, maybe).



3. Some parents are way too timid in their discipline. They don't want to abuse the child, so they don't inflict any pain or discomfort. Some parents are worried that the child will rebel or no longer be friendly under discipline. The discipline won't have much effect if it doesn't cause the child some kind of discomfort.
- E. Avoid threats and nagging. "I'm warning you,..." Wait until your father gets home." Issue the command once, make sure the child heard and understood, and then expect prompt obedience. If the obedience does not come, impose an appropriate penalty that is relatively sharp and uncomfortable.
- F. Impose discipline quickly. For young kids, you need to directly associate the bad behavior with the discipline. If too much time goes by, the child won't understand why you are disciplining him. Discipline should be prompt, quickly applied, and quickly over with.
- E.g., disciplining a child for whining or complaining; the child quickly learns to associate the bad behavior with the painful discipline. Even very young children can figure that out.
- They've figured out that whining and complaining can get them what they want, and they'll figure out just as quickly that whining and complaining will cause them pain.
- G. That implies that discipline should not be drawn out or prolonged. You want to impose the discipline and get past it as soon as possible. You want to return to peaceful conditions in the home and not draw out the tension and the conflict. You want joy and peace to prevail most of the time. So if there's going to be some unpleasantness, make it quick and get over it ASAP.

Some parents use grounding as discipline for their older children, but I think that's a mistake. Why extend unpleasantness in your home for hours, days or weeks? You are asking for a bad attitude for the length of the grounding. You are asking for an extension of disrupted relationships in the home.

If the kids are too old for spanking, then impose discomfort in another way. Take away privileges. Take away the phone, the Internet, the video games, the keys to the car. Make them do some kind of job as a punishment. Make them replace the thing they broke. Make them pay a fine/fee. Impose some kind of discipline that will not extend the discomfort too long.

- H. And once the punishment has been applied, the desire should be that the relationship is restored. Discipline should restore fellowship between the parent and the child. The parent might want to hug the child and assure him/her of your love and forgiveness.
- I. Parents should impose discipline on their children early. Ideally, as the child gains maturity, parents should be able to lift restrictions. So you want to get that little plant growing in the right direction early. It's much harder to bend a tree to your will when it's halfway grown. So start discipline early.

Pr 19:18 *Chasten your son while there is hope...*

It's a mistake to indulge a child when he is young and then expect to impose rules when he is old. E.g., let a toddler run wild, and impose rules when he turns 13. Instead, it's best to be most strict when he is young and then gradually reduce restrictions as he gets older. You give greater and greater freedom as the child matures and shows that he/she has internalized the correct value system and has a degree of self-control.

But when they are young, especially when they are toddlers, insist that the child obeys. In Henry's case, the mother should have walked over and grabbed Henry by the hand. Perhaps she should have given Henry a little reminder of who is the parent and who is the child. Perhaps a little momentary discomfort would have done Henry a world of good. Next time that his mother called him, perhaps Henry would remember that it's best to come when mother calls.

If the child does not come when called, and especially if the child runs away, the parents should address that little act of rebellion very quickly and intentionally. If you are strict when the child is young, you can be more permissive when the child gets older and gains self-control.

*Deuteronomy 7:9 Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy **for a thousand generations** with those who love Him and keep His commandments;*

Christian parents are raising the next generation to know the Lord, to love him, and keep his commandments. This is the highest goal. We can't force our children to do that, and we can't guarantee that they will. But we can follow the biblical model and raise our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. We can take steps that make it most likely that the children will be saved and will serve God throughout their lives. And we do that through proper discipline.

Lack of discipline reflects a lack of love. Withhold not discipline from the child. He who loves his child disciplines him promptly (Prov 13:24).

If we want a pleasant, happy, joyful home, and if we want our children to turn out right, we will be careful to discipline our children appropriately.