

Leading with *Love*

CHRISTIAN PARENTS OFTEN STRUGGLE to find the best ways to discipline their children and help them learn self-control and positive behavior. But before we can help our children make good behavior choices, we need to understand their needs, we need to create an environment in which they can flourish, and we need to be living examples of God's compassion, gentleness, and forgiveness.

GOALS OF PARENTING

The main goals of good Christian discipline:

- Raising children who have an active experience of God's expectations, love, and forgiveness
- Raising children who are loving, happy, and obedient
- Raising children who know how to behave appropriately

SPARING THE ROD?

Many parents are confused about the role of the "rod" in disciplining their children. It's helpful to remember shepherds don't use their rods to beat their sheep. It would make a shepherd's job so much more difficult if the sheep were terrified of him. Rods were held alongside sheep to guide them on the right path and prevent them from slipping over cliffs. They were used to lift sheep out of ditches when they fell and to kill wild animals that threatened to harm them. The shepherd's rod and staff were used to create safe boundaries and to support, rescue, guide, comfort, and protect the sheep (Ps. 23:4).

DON'T PUNISH IN ANGER!

Punishing children by hitting and yelling can have serious long-term consequences. When parents react to disobedience with anger, or by lashing out physically to harm a child, they model a picture of God that is out of control and ruled by emotions. Jesus was kind and



compassionate, welcoming children even when He was tired. He makes it clear that it's wrong to treat children in any way that misrepresents God's loving character (Matt. 18:6, 10).

Reacting in anger or temper:

- induces fear (1 John 4:8 says perfect love casts out fear)
- builds anger, resentment, and rebellion in a child's heart
- does not model Christlike behavior or self-control, and
- gives a distorted picture of God

DISCERNING YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIOR

Before you discipline your child, pause and think about any unmet needs that might be underlying their behavior, and run through a list that reflects on your responsibility as a parent. These needs, and your child's ability for self-control in response to them, will vary depending on their age and temperament.

Does your child need food, a drink, a nap, some space to burn off energy, or quiet time away from too much noise and stimulation? When a young child needs any of these vital things, it can become very difficult for them to stay calm and obedient. While it is important to help children develop strong character at all ages, punishing children for being hungry, tired, or overwhelmed can create confusion and anger in their hearts.

Also, ask yourself if your child has togetherness-with-you needs, such as these:

- your focused and loving attention
- your acceptance and forgiveness
- your comforting hugs and loving words
- your appreciation and gratitude when they've been helpful

- your encouragement and support when life is challenging
- your respect when they feel shamed
- your protection and reassurance when they feel afraid

BEHAVIOR — COMMUNICATION

Your child's behavior may be giving you an important message that you need to hear. It might be:

- I need your love and attention. Please spend some time with me.
- I'm overwhelmed by difficult feelings and too much stimulation. Please help me calm down because I don't know how to do this on my own.
- I'm confused and don't know what to do. Please guide me.
- I can't handle this situation anymore! Please change something!

You may need to respond to your child's unspoken needs rather than punishing their behavior.

BASIC BOUNDARIES

Set clear boundaries to help children manage their behavior. The amount of explanation will grow as children get older and they are able to comprehend the principles behind the boundary. Very young children need simple, clear instructions without extra information to confuse them. Older children need to have the principles behind the rule explained so that they can take ownership of their behavior and gain tools for making wise life choices. For example:

- Actively demonstrate the desired behavior so they can clearly see what you want them to do.
- Explain why the rule or boundary is important, as appropriate for their age.
- Check to be sure your child clearly understands the boundary (ask them what they think the rule means).



To encourage positive character development, help children notice three things they did well each day, and to think about how they managed to do them so well.

- Help younger children stay inside the rules, and warn them if they are getting close to the edge.
- Enforce the rule or boundary firmly, gently, and consistently.
- Give affirming feedback to your child when they're staying within the rules.
- The most important time to discipline is when a child has intentionally and rebelliously crossed an important boundary.

WISE AND LOVING DISCIPLINE

- Enforcing rules without showing love and compassion leads to resentment. So “connect as you redirect”—show your child warmth, love, and understanding, instead of just dealing with their behavior (Eph. 6:4).
- Soothe their emotions before responding to their behaviors (Prov. 15:1).
- Pray for wisdom to respond well (James 1:5).
- Talk calmly and privately with your child about what went wrong. Don't shame them in front of others.
- Ask “what?” happened instead of “why?” Children find this question clearer and easier to answer.
- Make sure they understand which boundary/rule was broken and why it's important not to do it again.
- Quickly show your love after they have been disciplined (Ps. 103:8-11). Don't leave them to feel alone, unforgiven, or rejected (Gen. 2:18).
- To encourage positive character development, help children notice three things they did well each day, and to think about how they managed to do them so well.
- If you want to encourage positive behavior, time-in (quality caring time with you) is often much better than time-out (leaving a child alone).

EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE

- The best disciplines are often thoughtfully linked to the disobedient act. If they took

a cookie before dinner, they don't get one afterward. If they mess something up, they have to help tidy it. If they hurt someone, they need to do something kind for them.

- Help your child to put things right again—to replace the things they break or apologize to people they've hurt. This gives them a positive self-image that shapes positive behavior.
- Give them special attention when they're behaving well. “You've played happily with your brother for ten minutes. Well done! Choose a book, and I'll read to you.”
- Try one approach to discipline for a few weeks and see what happens. If it works better, and you and your child are happier and closer, then you've made a good choice.
- Keep adjusting your disciplinary methods as your child grows. Older children can help create family rules and decide what to do when the rules have been broken. You can occasionally help them better understand God's grace in a powerful way by making the discipline less than they were expecting.

WHAT NEXT?

- Has this article given you new ideas for disciplining your children with love and grace?
- How will you put your ideas into action?



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