

# How to Properly Discipline Young Children

Bringing Children Up in the Discipline and Instruction of the Lord

Mike Jacobs, December 2014

## Preface

In many homes these days it seems the children are training their parents instead of the parents training their children. Kids dictate what they want and when they want it, and the parents willingly comply. If the child doesn't get what he wants when he wants it, he throws up a fuss of whining, tantrums, withdrawal, rejection, outbursts of anger, et cetera until the parent relents and delivers.

In time, the child has the parent trained to deliver on the kid's schedule. To maintain some sanity and "peace" in the home, the parents are soon all wrapped around each different child's preferences/whims/when they will or won't nap or eat or whatever. The children have won, the parents have surrendered and the kids have become spoiled to the point that parents and children alike are tired and miserable much of the time. Who would want more kids under such exhausting and unhappy circumstances?! Satan has wreaked havoc on these families through undermining parental authority by cleverly sucking the parents into placating their children rather than correcting them, as he does not want behavioral problems *resolved* in homes but left to fester. And he certainly does not want godly character formed in children.

It's not that parents don't mean well and try to discipline. They just don't know how to do it properly, and they are afraid to offend the child, hurt her self-esteem or run afoul of any other secular "emotional damage" or "cruel corporal punishment" propaganda published about raising children. They try all sorts of "no-drama" methods, including time-outs, change of scene, video babysitters (any screen entertainment that will grab the child's attention and stop the fussing), bribing, ignoring, threatening, rewards and more – rather than dealing promptly and lovingly to correctly discipline their children as God has instructed.

However, God tells us in Hebrews 11:12 that, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." It is possible then, despite the seemingly sorrowful moment of discipline, to have harmony and right behavior as the norm in a home, and to thereby truly enjoy God's wonderful blessing of children – even many children, in one's home.

Herein are the principles of discipline Cindy and I learned and applied in raising our own sons. We learned them from God's Word, from Tom and Jeanne Hamilton and from practical experience – as well as from what we found did and did not work in our own parents' discipline of us as we grew up. As young parents and young followers of Jesus, we were eager to learn God's design for raising Godly children and to follow it well.

This paper explains why and how to administer God's primary means for disciplining young children, which is spanking. While everyone may not agree with everything they read here, and there are additional means of discipline, there is no substitute for spanking; it is the *primary* means. Though Cindy and I were not perfect in disciplining our children, we are very pleased with the results in the lives of our sons. I am confident those who embrace this instruction will similarly enjoy wonderful fruit from their labors, as God's design works, and following it not only brings Him honor in our own lives, but bears His intended fruit in the lives of our children.

Before we consider the purpose of discipline, the principles drawn from God's Word or how to administer discipline, it is critical to know what God Himself has said about disciplining and instructing our children. Below are just a few of the many things He has said to direct and encourage us in this important work.

## Scriptures

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all our might, and these words which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. -Deuteronomy 6:4-7

Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him. -Prov. 22:15

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. -Hebrews 12:11

Do not hold back discipline from the child, although you strike him with the rod, he will not die. You shall strike him with the rod and rescue his soul from Sheol. -Proverbs 23:13-14

The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother. -Prov. 29:15

Discipline your son while there is hope, and do not desire his death. -Proverbs 19:18

Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it. -Proverbs 22:6

He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently. -Proverbs 13:24

Correct your son and he will give you comfort; he will also delight your soul. -Proverbs 29:17

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. -Ephesians 6:4

For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? -Hebrews 12:6-8

## Purpose of Discipline

1. Initially, we discipline to drive foolishness from the hearts of our children, for their good. We want to save them much grief in life by having them learn very early on that there are consequences for inappropriate behavior, whether that behavior is sinful or merely foolish. Note that we aren't trying to change our children just to suit our preferences but to form godly behavior. Discipline is sacred, God-directed character formation.
2. We discipline our children to help them learn to submit their lives entirely to God. This journey starts with respect for authority; first parental authority, then that of their elders – to include other adults, church authority and civil authority. A child who is brought up in love and discipline to listen to, respect and respond promptly to the voice of his father and mother can transition well to responding promptly to the voice of God.
3. Ultimately, we discipline to help our children mature to the point where, independent from their parents, they love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and love their neighbor as themselves – to the point where they consistently make good and wise choices, living their lives as happy, healthy, well-balanced, fully-functioning and productive members of society who exhibit the fruits of the Spirit in all they do.

## Principles of Discipline

**1. Children should be disciplined, not punished.** God doesn't punish His children. Rather, He *disciplines* us because He loves us and wants to transform us into the image of Jesus (Heb. 12:6, Rom. 8:29). Punishment is retribution that looks back and says, "You were bad so I am going to *make you pay* for your behavior by *hurting* you." Discipline is loving teaching that looks to the future and says, "Your behavior indicates that you still have foolishness bound up in you. Left unaddressed, it will cause damage to you and your relationships all your life. Because I love you and want the best future for you, I will correct you now in a memorable way that will help to free you of this damaging behavior." For young children this will primarily be through spanking, though other correctional consequences such as withdrawal of privileges, additional chores, restitution for damages and even natural consequences will sometimes be more appropriate – especially as they get older.

**2. Start early.** When should you start disciplining? Children need disciplinary correction earlier than most people think. The time to start spanking is when you know that your child understands the behavior you expect of him, is capable of obeying, but willfully defies you. This will likely be before he or she is a year old.

It normally takes about 6 years of faithful discipline before a child's behavior will be transformed to the point that he or she will no longer need spanking. The longer you wait to start, the longer it will take to get your child to this delightful point – because you will have already confirmed misbehavior in them and it will take you that much longer to first undo what you've done before you can make meaningful progress. If you wait, expect all the more rebellion, tantrums, etc. against your discipline when you begin. And you certainly don't want to still be spanking your child as they begin to reach puberty. Better for everyone to *start early!*

Also, the earlier you start disciplining, the less your child will remember of it as an adult. I received adequate spankings as a child yet do not remember any of them – only that I was indeed spanked. (I also remember hearing the swats upon the behinds of my younger siblings after I had outgrown the need for them, which was an ongoing and useful reminder of the consequences of misbehavior).

**3. Be certain your child understands you.** It's unfair to spank a child that doesn't know why he's being disciplined. As babies come to be toddlers, spankings should come to them as no surprise; they should be expected when due, as the child will know with certainty he has misbehaved. To ensure your children know what you expect, be sure they hear and understand you. A few tips: Get their attention. Get down on their eye level. Make sure they are looking you in the eyes – ask them to do so. Communicate directives in such a way that there can be no question whether or not the response is obedient. Ask them to tell you what you just said. Ask if they understand or have any question about what you have said. This done, there should be no "But you didn't tell me" or "I didn't hear you" or "I didn't understand you" excuses for disobedience later.

**4. Discipline promptly after the offense.** Discipline is both important and *urgent*. It cannot wait. Will a dog understand you don't want him to chew up your couch if you "wait until his father comes home" to discipline him for it? Not a chance. Will your toddler make the connection two hours later when you get around to spanking her for disobeying your instruction to stop throwing food? Not likely. Rather, it will seem like a random and disconnected act of meanness. If your son is throwing a tantrum over something he wants at the grocery store, stop shopping, leave your cart, take him out to the car, pull the paddle or wooden spoon out of your purse and discipline him right then and there. Driving down the road and Suzie won't stop antagonizing Billy in the back seat? Stop the car, take Suzie out and spank her right then and there.

**5. Be consistent.** Both parents must be on the same page, ready to administer the needed correction at any time and in any place, and with the same method, love and intensity. Leaving discipline primarily up to one parent is unfair to that parent and teaches the child she may misbehave around this one, but must toe the line with that one – begetting deception and manipulation, in addition to lopsided feelings of fear of the disciplinarian and disrespect for the non-disciplinarian. In every case, both parents must handle the discipline in the same prompt, loving and respectful manner. This is critical. Agree to agree on this!

**6. Never discipline in anger.** God is never surprised at our misbehavior, doesn't get angry with us, lose His temper or retaliate. We shouldn't be surprised at our children's misbehavior, either. We should expect it and we shouldn't get angry over it or let it alter our affection for our kids or how we treat or discipline them. If you find you are angry with your child for his misbehavior, excuse yourself for a moment to speak with God and get control of yourself before you discipline. But don't dillydally; it's important to discipline promptly.

**7. Never send your child away from you when he misbehaves.** God does not separate Himself from us when we sin. He is always *with* us, and He lovingly disciplines us to *restore* us to Himself and to healthy behavior. "Time-outs", "go to your room" and "get out of my sight" do just the opposite; they are exercises in separation and isolation which misrepresent our Father and damage your child emotionally. Even the secular world is starting to realize the folly of time-outs. Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D., authors of the recent (and not recommended) book, *No-Drama Discipline*, report scientific findings that,

"In most cases, the primary experience a time-out offers a child is isolation. Even when presented in a patient and loving manner, time-outs teach them that when they make a mistake, or when they are having a hard time, they will be forced to be by themselves—a lesson that is often experienced, particularly by young children, as rejection. Further, it communicates to kids, "I'm only interested in being with you and being there for you when you've got it all together.

"The problem is, children have a profound need for connection. Decades of research in attachment demonstrate that particularly in times of distress, we need to be near and be soothed by the people who care for us. But when children lose emotional control, parents often put them in their room or by themselves in the "naughty chair," meaning that in this moment of emotional distress they have to suffer alone.

"When the parental response is to isolate the child, an instinctual psychological need of the child goes unmet. In fact, brain imaging shows that the experience of relational pain—like that caused by rejection—looks very similar to the experience of physical pain in terms of brain activity.

"On top of everything, time-outs are usually ineffective in accomplishing the goals of discipline: to change behavior and build skills. Parents may *think* that time-outs cause children to calm down and reflect on their behavior. But instead, time-outs frequently make children angrier and more dysregulated, leaving them even less able to control themselves or think about what they've done, and more focused on how mean their parents are to have punished them."

**8. Never bribe or allow negotiation.** Some parents attempt behavioral change with bribes like, "If you will do this (or stop doing that), I will give you X treat." The fatal flaw in this approach is that it leaves the decision of whether or not to perform the desired behavior up to the child. The parent may or may not get the desired response, as he/she has left the child in control of the outcome.

Every child needs clear direction on what is expected. He can then either obey, or disobey and be disciplined toward obedience. At times, especially in public settings, it may be tempting to try a bribe rather than issue a clear directive, as your child's disobedience may embarrass you (and you might be further embarrassed either by then having to discipline your child, or by failing to administer the requisite discipline thereby demonstrating that your child is in charge). No good comes to parent or child through bribes, even when "successful," as bribes damage character and beget more and bigger bribes. Never compromise your child's need for clear and direct instruction in order to avoid confrontation or save face in a public situation.

As children age and become more clever, they may attempt to negotiate your instructions down to something more pleasing to them. Don't fall for it. When God gives us instruction, He is clear and He expects full, prompt and cheerful compliance, not negotiation. (After all, His instruction *is* for our own good!) Don't let your child negotiate your instructions lest it become a habit that later compromises his response to God.

## How to Administer Discipline

Discipline should be an event. This is a time of teaching a life lesson. And it is a time when the child will be very emotionally vulnerable to how you treat them. So it is very important to do this well.

For the very young who cannot yet understand speech but have clearly defied your understood will, simply take off their diaper and give them three smarting swats across their bottom with a wooden paddle, then redress and hold them in your arms while speaking reassuringly to them until they have ceased crying. Then treat them normally as the discipline is over, everything is okay and there is nothing between you.

For children who understand your spoken word,

- 1. Discipline in private.** Take the child to a bedroom when possible and close the door, as you'll normally want to administer discipline privately, especially for older children. We never want to publically humiliate our kids. If your older child needs to be disciplined and the setting is public, take him to a private place – a back bedroom, bathroom, car, whatever you can find that will suffice.
- 2. Talk it over.** Sit down with your child face-to-face and calmly discuss his behavior and why he must be disciplined. This may take the form of asking him to explain what he's done and why, or simply reminding him why the behavior is unacceptable. Let him know that because you love him and want the best for him, you must spank him as God has instructed you in order to correct this behavior for his good. Discuss the correct behavior you expect of him going forward. Keep in mind that it is the *behavior* that is not acceptable, not the child that is unacceptable. You love him, and you love him enough to help remove misbehavior and instill appropriate behavior through discipline. You don't have to get theological with your children each time, but they should always understand why they are being disciplined and should be reassured of your love for them.
- 3. Pray.** Pray with your child as you feel led. God is very much interested in this discipline and it is good for your child to know God is with you both through it and that it is His will and way, not just your own.
- 4. Bare the bottom.** Take the child's pants and underwear (or diaper) down and lean him over the end of the bed. If the child is old enough, have him take his own pants and underwear down and lay over the end of the bed. The child should be compliant. Fighting your discipline is disobedience and cause for further discipline.
- 5. Spank.** In a calm and controlled manner, administer three firm swats across both cheeks. *It must hurt!* (This is the reason for the bare bottom.) If it doesn't hurt, the whole exercise will be a farce and there will be no correction of the behavior. There is a wise saying, "The price one pays for his offense must be high enough that he will not be willing to pay it again." This doesn't mean you need to beat the tar out of your child. The point is just that discipline must really smart so that the child will not want to repeat the experience or the behavior that brought it on. A good, corrective spanking will normally bring tears to your child's eyes, but you should never injure him. Three smart swats are sufficient and will not injure your child either physically or emotionally. Much more than that can begin to be punitive rather than corrective. However many you choose, it's best to consistently give the same number of swats for every offense so the child knows what to expect and knows when it's over.
- 6. Restore.** Put the child's clothes back on or have them dress, then hug or hold your child, reminding him that you love him and that it's over; there is nothing between the two of you. Dry the tears and, as soon as your child has regained his composure, immediately and fully restore him to his pre-offense status. There should be no "probation" period or sense of being "in the doghouse." Genuine forgiveness is fully restorative and this should be demonstrated by full and immediate restoration to all relationships and appropriate activities.

**7. Tidy up any loose ends.** If the child's offense calls for asking forgiveness of a sibling or another offended party, or making restitution, have them ask for that forgiveness or make that restitution immediately following the discipline. (A note on apologies: Merely blurting out the word "Sorry." is not an apology. A genuine apology will always include admission of the offense and a request for forgiveness, such as: "Sarah, I am sorry I punched you in the nose. Will you please forgive me?" The offended sibling should correspondingly be taught to always and immediately grant forgiveness and restoration, and the guilty party should then thank the offended party for forgiving them.)

## Key Things to Discipline For

**Disobedience** – That is not following your instructions, whether it's not doing what you told them to do or doing what you told them not to do. It may be tempting to think that your child does not need discipline in a given situation because what you asked of him wasn't very important or urgent in the scheme of things, like "put your shoes on," but failure to put the shoes on is not at all the issue here. The issue is *disobedience*; it's whether the child is responding to your voice, and that is very serious. Is it important for your child to promptly respond in obedience to your voice when you tell him not to run out into a busy street? Yes! And it is no less important for him to promptly respond in obedience to your voice in any other matter.

Also note that delayed obedience is *disobedience*. Do not allow your child to take his sweet time to obey your voice, and do not contribute to his problem of delayed obedience by delaying to correct it! If you find yourself saying things like, "I'm going to count to three", "Do it before I have to make you do it", "If you haven't obeyed me before..." etc., you are teaching your child that it is not important to obey promptly.

Always remember that an important goal of discipline is to help our children mature to the point where they will immediately respond to God's voice, to His instruction. Failure to be consistent in disciplining for disobedience teaches children they do not have to respect you and they may not need to respect God, as there may not be any consequence for disobedience. However, there is *always* a consequence to disobeying God, and we will have done our child a great disservice to model a different story. "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, this he will also reap." -Galatians 6:7

**Lying** – The Scriptures enumerate several things that God *hates*, and a lying tongue is the second one listed in Proverbs 6:16, just before "hands that shed innocent blood." Lying is representative of numerous awful traits – deceit, dishonesty, unfaithfulness, treachery, cheating, betrayal and more. Our children must know lying is never acceptable, and it must be driven from them as early as possible. In the teaching process, it's especially productive to reward a child for telling the truth when it costs them something. The more we can teach by reinforcing positive behavior, the less we must teach by corrective discipline.

Note: At times when a parent is investigating a matter that may result in discipline, a child will lie to the parent about the circumstances in hopes of avoiding a spanking. This is always incontrovertible cause for a spanking for lying, in addition to any other spanking that may be due on the conclusion of the investigation.

**Intentionally injuring another person** – This can be physical or emotional injury. Intentional injury cannot be tolerated. This would include hitting, biting, pushing down, striking with an object, verbal abuse and more. Even the attempt to so injure another should be disciplined for, whether the attempt is successful or not. Tolerating such behavior teaches children that it's okay to be a bully, to force their will on others. However, we are trying to raise up patient, self-sacrificing, magnanimous and godly men and women here, not bullies.

**Working the parents against each other** – This is asking permission from one parent when the other has already said, "No." This is a form of rebellion and dishonesty that cannot be tolerated. A first offense is good occasion for explanation of why such behavior is unacceptable and will be disciplined for thereafter.

## Summary

You and your children will both live happier, more harmonious lives if you communicate clearly what you expect of them and then discipline promptly, faithfully and lovingly for disobedience. Your children will grow up knowing you love them and that you cared enough to drive foolishness out of them, to form godly character in them, and to set boundaries for their own well-being and protection. And they will appreciate it!

Discipline is a critical part of good parenting. Done well in conjunction with good spiritual instruction, godly example, healthy family life and good education, your sons and daughters will ultimately rise up to bless you and to honor God. They will have successfully become independent of you and will be well on their way to loving the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and their neighbor as themselves. Though they will be flawed and sinful humans living out God's instructions imperfectly, they will normally be making good and wise choices, and will be happy, healthy and productive members of society who exhibit the fruits of the Spirit in all they do.

Take time to meet with your spouse to come to agreement on disciplining your children as God has modeled and instructed. The sooner you come to agreement and the earlier you start disciplining together as one, the sooner you will see the sweet fruit of good character forming in your children. God's design works.

## Recommended Reading (in order of recommendation)

1. *The Bible* by God. Recommended translation: New American Standard Bible
2. *Discipline Them, Love Them: 26 Practical Projects for Parents* by Betty N. Chase
3. *Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson
4. *Shepherding a Child's Heart* by Tedd Tripp
5. *The Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson