

Discipline

With Young Children

Helping young children learn right from wrong within a loving family context is one of the most important roles of parenthood. 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. Several practices contribute to that process.

Practice #1: Establish Your Authority

Children need a clear answer to the question “Who is the boss?” God has delegated oversight of your child’s welfare and development to you, placing you in a position of authority over them. Children push limits because it is part of their nature, but on a subconscious level they need to know someone is there to guide them when they get out of control.

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. 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 must often evaluate their motive for discipline.

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

Preparing your children for life in the “real world” should start in the preschool years. Effective discipline starting at an early age lays the foundation for most future behavior. Providing suitable choices and empathizing with your child when they fail (rather than showing anger and frustration) will provide a logical pathway for constructing logical consequences that will teach your child about life in the real world. It also provides opportunities for spiritual conversations with your child.

Our Heavenly Father teaches us in a similar way. We have choices to make every day. When we make a poor choice, He empathizes and loves us, but there are still consequences for the choices we make – good and bad. IT is the consequences that teach best, not fear of being punished.

GOING FURTHER – Resources

Recommended Books:

Some books are available for checkout at the Faith@Home Center or for purchase online.

Parenting with Love and Logic (by Foster Cline and Jim Fay) shows parents how to teach children responsibility and grow their children.

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

ScreamFree Parenting: The Revolutionary Approach to Raising Your Kids by Keeping your Cool (by Hal Runkel) You can create and enjoy the types of calm, mutually respectful and loving relationships with your kids that you’ve always craved.