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University of the Home

It's no longer fashionable to "force" children to do anything. In some countries it is against the law! Yet the Bible insists that parents have a responsibility to discipline their children. *Here's why...and how*

by James McBride

Children, according to the Bible, are a heritage from God - a special treasure in whom lies the future hope of mankind. Yet all is not well in our families. Children are all too often seen as a problem rather than an asset!

Our children can be a delight. They are an extension of our being. They bring joy and excitement and challenge to a home. To watch them grow and mature and succeed fulfills the dreams of every parent.

Yet "children should be seen and not heard" is an ancient adage which almost every adult exposed to children will at some time heartily applaud. The little darlings are responsible for an incredible mountain of destroyed personal property. They disrupt the peace and tranquillity of their homes. They wreck the enjoyment of family parties and social gatherings. Their behavior results in many "accidents" - both in the home and in the street. Sadly, child abuse often results from such disruptive behavior.

But is this just something we must learn to live with? Isn't it just a part of growing up? Won't any attempt to restrict them simply cause deep psychological trauma that will damage delicate adult relationships? Isn't discipline bad?

The blanket answer is "NO"! In fact, your child's life, certainly his or her welfare, could be in jeopardy - unless proper discipline is exercised. And your personal growth as a Christian will be stifled if this area of life isn't properly developed. Here we focus on just one aspect - discipline. But it must not be isolated from other vital aspects of child rearing. For example:

- Love your children - even when you don't approve
- Spend time with them
- Provide adequate physical care
- Set a proper example
- Pay positive attention

- Protect from evil influences
- Be fair, and be flexible.
- Teach respect for God's ways
- Teach independence
- Teach self-discipline

Read and re-read these points until they are firmly embedded in memory - and especially in your daily practice!

Let's now examine child discipline from the view of common sense. And let's also see what the source of Christian behavior - the Bible - has to say.

Common Sense

It's fashionable in some religious circles to deride "human reasoning" as a source of guidance. But often the ideas that are almost universally used by you and me and most others are simply based on just that. We call it common sense. And usually it works!

Is it common sense to allow children to destroy our property or a neighbor's? It is often costly, often embarrassing - and always very annoying to us and to our neighbor. *Is it common sense to tolerate uncontrolled play?* It is disruptive. It has often led to serious injury - even fatalities - in the home or under a vehicle or in a lake. It engenders habits that grow into massive adolescent and adult behavior problems. *Is it common sense to allow a child to dominate the home?* It is at best an irritation. It leads to frustration. It instills a concept in the child of gross self-importance. And it frequently ends in a breakdown of adult behavior - child abuse and family disharmony.

Notice the words used - "permit", "tolerate," "allow." That implies parental authority over the situation. We parents are largely responsible for what our young children do and say, and the habits they develop!

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No, it is common sense that we find some means whereby our children are gently persuaded towards civilized behavior; that we teach them the limits to self-expression; that we teach them others also have equal rights; that we teach respect for constituted authority; that we teach the values of civilized society - concern for others, live and let live, cooperation, team-work, hard work; that we teach our children such personal values as self-discipline, perseverance, good manners and courtesy, *discernment of right and wrong*.

What happens if you simply stand all year and look at your garden? The weeds grow - right up to your knees! And what happens if a young sapling is left to grow unattended - without staking, without pruning, without training? It becomes unshapely, unfruitful, and wild. So, too, poor habits grow in us and in our children unless there is active cultivation!

The burden, then, is fairly and squarely on the shoulders of those of us who are parents. Our children's destiny is to a large extent in our hands!

Let's turn now to hear what the Bible has to say about child discipline.

To Be A King

At first glance there's not a lot in the Scriptures about "child-rearing." There isn't a "child chapter" which spells it out for us. But there's a gold mine of information if we dig deeply!

The foundation of knowledge about children is wrapped in the great mystery of the Bible - that man is destined to become a part of God's own family. This awesome fact illuminates everything we can say about right training for our children!

Consider the British Royal Family. A prime "duty" is to provide an heir of the royal line who is deliberately trained for the highest office. The infant Prince Charles was prepared over a long span of years for the highest office in the land. The Queen and her Consort, from the child's birth, had their eyes firmly fixed on the ultimate goal - kingship, and all that entails. He was nurtured in an atmosphere of royal majesty. He was carefully schooled in the trappings of office - even to how to smile and wave in public! He absorbed the niceties of the Court, learned national history and politics, was instilled with aspirations of national destiny. He was trained for Kingship. How closely this parallels the offspring of true Christians.

Our children are born into a royal dynasty of the spirit. Or they are adopted into it at our baptism. And we can have expectation that they all will be "kings and priests unto God." This is the goal that we as parents must constantly bear in

mind for them. This is the goal we ought to have as we muse over that seven pound newborn bundle of squalling flesh and blood! This is what we consider as we read the Bible injunction to "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Our children are to be trained for kingship!

We might here ask ourselves the question: Do my children represent Jesus Christ? That means, are they typical of what he would desire? As our "fruit," they must be on the way to becoming so! In listing the qualities needed in any mature leader in the church of God, the apostle Paul wrote: "He must have a well-behaved family, with children who obey quickly and quietly. For if a man can't make his own little family behave, how can he help the whole church?" (I Timothy 3:4-5, *The Living Bible*). Your response to child-rearing determines and limits your qualification to serve your brethren!

In practical terms this means *you can take your children anywhere without embarrassment*. They will sit quietly in a restaurant. When you visit they won't rampage through the host's home like marauding vandals. Nor will they even touch ornaments or curtains or tableware. In church services they will sit quietly - listening, or playing in silence; they will learn to exercise restraint in confined areas. When shopping they will not be demanding or rude. They will speak respectfully, won't pull faces and won't interrupt adult conversation.

If Jesus were to call your child to him and try to lift him or her in his arms - what sort of response would he get? Exactly the response your child now gives to you, to friends, to relations! All too often he would wriggle, squirm, squeal! But for your child to become one whom Jesus Christ would delight to take up into his arms means hard work, persistent effort, failures - and successes. It's a tall order, a heavy responsibility. But it can be done!

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The million dollar question is - how do we achieve these goals? Let's be clear that given current societal norms and peer pressure there is no easy or simple solution. Nor is there an instant solution. *But there are many success stories to witness that it can be done!*

Let me repeat here that all aspects of child-rearing - not simply discipline - are essential. It's a complete package. And the essence is that it's our responsibility as parents to move steadily towards these goals. They are not just "pie in the sky" but definite achievable ends! You can do it!

However, *it requires discipline*. It requires, first, that parents discipline themselves. If you want a tranquil home and all the other benefits listed - plus our heavenly Father's commendation - then the training of our family must be top

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of our agenda. As Christians, the “nurture and admonition” of our children must be a prime consideration. Our homes must become a “university of kingship.” And we parents must become skilled teachers. Here are some suggested training goals - for parents:

- Agree an agenda with your spouse. Results come from working together
- Make an intensive study of the Scriptures to see what God expects you to do for your children (for example: Deuteronomy 6:7; Hebrews 12:15, 17). Write your observations in a notebook
- List important behavioral goals for each child. Each is an individual and what is good for Bill may not be so for Debbie. And they learn at different speeds. It's important to write our these goals, and to update them regularly
- Explore your own behavior for weaknesses (Psalms 139:23,24), for children learn mostly by mimicking their parents! They copy our often faulty reactions to life situations (which we probably learned as children!) - anger, resentment, hatred, expletives, negativism, complaining
- Discipline yourself to overcome your personal weaknesses, calling on divine power for help
- Counsel with those who have successfully raised a family, and with your spiritual elders
- Set an example of positive hope in all life situations

This “Foundation Course” of our *University of the Home* can be quite demanding and time-consuming. Success in child-rearing is greatly enhanced, however, if we parents first look in the mirror, and take the necessary basic steps for success.

Discipline Your Child

If all these steps were adequately followed, would we then avoid any necessity for child discipline? Most unlikely! It's an essential part of growing up that parents or guardians must correct and indeed punish their children. In fact, let's be quite clear that exercising discipline is an act of loving concern for our children!

Too often we feel that to take a disciplinary measure represents a failure on our part. Not so. Well-considered and properly administered discipline is the first choice. *It's the best course!* A neglected garden reverts to the wild!

Notice God's attitude to it: “*Have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you, His child? He said, 'My son, don't be angry when the Lord punished you. Don't be discouraged when He has to show you where you are wrong'. For when He punished you, it proves that He loves you. When He whips you it proves you are really His child. Let God train you, for He is doing what any loving father does for his children. Whoever heard of a son who was*

never corrected?... Our earthly fathers trained us for a few brief years, doing the best for us that they knew how... Being punished isn't enjoyable while it is happening - it hurts! But afterwards we can see the result, a quiet growth in grace and character” (Hebrews 12:5-11 *The Living Bible*).

Let's not fear, then, to properly discipline our own children.

Finally, a few guidelines on how to set about it:

- **Begin early** - The first months of a baby's life is not a time for physical discipline! A distress cry at an inconvenient time is not a call to “punish.” However, once a child begins to show signs of gross misbehavior, tantrums, destructive or dangerous activity (e.g., pulling curtains, chewing furniture, playing with switches or gas taps or food, *etc*) - a measure of correction is called for. Such activities aren't cure!
- **Be consistent** - A child will be confused if allowed to “play” with an ornament today, and tomorrow corrected for doing so. Or if he similarly “gets away” even occasionally with a tantrum or with demanding sweets or toys in a supermarket. Keep note of your decisions to correct, and how you correct
- **Be clear** - Every corrections must be understood by the child - he must be able to link the offence and the correction. This applies at any age, but the younger the child the closer to the event must be the correction. An instant “slap on the hand” is ideal for a toddler reaching for a hot stove!
- **Be selective** - Ensure your list of behavioral goals isn't a game of trivial pursuits! Within a disciplinary frame, leave space for self-expression
- **Be concise** - Teach “NO!” The younger the child, the more vital is this coded message, for they can't understand rational argument! Lives have literally been saved where children have learned to respond immediately to this simple command. Use the word sparingly - and consistently
- **Be calm** - Don't correct a child in anger, but count to the proverbial ten. Better still - aim to correct before you are driven to irritation and anger!
- **Be fair** - The world certainly isn't f'fair.” But if our children are to break this pattern they must see our example of even-handed correction - no favorites. And make the punishment appropriate to the offence!
- **Be loving** - It's wrong to correct a child outside a loving relationship, freely expressed through hugs and kisses

Effective Correction

How you discipline is a matter you must determine for yourself. Some nations have become so devoid of wisdom that they have legislated against any form of corporal punishment - not only in school but also in the home! You

must take account of our national situation.

The teaching God gives us on child-rearing, however, focuses on the positive, on *prevention*.

Children are not automaton. They will, whatever training and discipline they receive, in the end make their own choices. Perfect upbringing won't always have the desired outcome - a child can 'turn out bad', perhaps affected by the lottery of their genetic inheritance! Parents can but do their best.

Pre-adult misbehavior is not unique to the twenty-first century. Some children have always brought shame to the family and to the community, formed aggressive and violent gangs, been foolish. Cain, the first naturally born human, killed his own brother!

Wise King Solomon gives us a good maxim: "The rod and reproof give wisdom; but a child left to himself brings his mother to shame" (Proverbs 29:15). Applied appropriately - and in the right fleshy part of the anatomy - the 'rod' is a helpful and necessary measure of discipline. It is not always needed - nor should it be 'the fires (or last) resort'. But *reproof* - guidance, instruction - is equally vital.

Know Your Children

Each child is different - there are no 'one fits all' disciplines! There are, of course, support measures we can take alongside physical correction. One to *avoid* is isolation - sent to the bedroom or ordered to a cupboard or kept in the dark! Nor should they be deprived of meals *etc.*

Learn what is most appropriate for each child. Being deprived of 'a walk in the park' may not faze the 'swot' but be just the ticket for the sporty child. Tailor extra chores effectively and according to age and ability.

Parental Guidance

The Biblical pattern, however, is *prevention*. Given that exciting purpose for which mankind is created it is criminal to neglect our children, to let them grow up as they please, as 'wild olives'. They must be taught.

Solomon said "He who keeps the law [of God] is a discerning son" (Proverbs 28:7). That implies the child has been *taught* the Law! It teaches respect for God and for parent, non-violent behavior, honesty, self-discipline, contentment - all ignored by so many of today's parents and by their children.

Moses, in his final guidance to the children of Israel, passed on this message from God: "*Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds... Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up...so that your days and the days of your children may be many...*" (Deuteronomy 11:18-21).

So - apply diligently the ten points listed at the beginning of the article, use wisdom and common sense - and do not neglect loving discipline of your precious little ones.

This vital subject is by no means exhausted. However, if each of us can apply these simple principles in our own 'university of the home', there will be a dramatic improvement in relationships. The "generation gap" should shrink to a mere crack - or disappear. Your family - and the world - will be a more stable place!

But start, parents, by first taking a long and careful look at your own behavior!

[If you have any doubts about your ability to correct without abusing your precious little ones, then seek sound Biblical counsel. Our children are a precious gift from God, and heirs to a divine destiny. Let's not neglect such treasure!]