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Biblical Principles To Guide Parental Discipline Of Children At Home And In Public



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The purpose of this paper is to outline what the Bible says about the attitude parents should take toward child discipline. It is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion of child discipline, nor does it address many other important issues and topics related to parenting. However, we pray that parents reading this paper will examine themselves in the light of the Word to ensure that they are parenting their children in a manner that is pleasing to God.

God's Word makes it clear that children are a gift and blessing from Him (*Psalms 127:3*). With each gift comes the responsibility of stewardship and our duty to be found faithful (*1 Corinthians 4:2*). This blessing is enhanced when parents "are labourers together with God . . ." (*1 Corinthians 3:9*) using the Scripture and the Holy Spirit's guidance to provide strength, direction, and correction for their children (*Proverbs 29:17*).

God expects us as parents to bring up our children in the "nurture and admonition of the Lord" (*Ephesians 6:4*). In this context, nurture includes providing for the child's spiritual, emotional, and physical needs, while admonishment includes verbal and physical correction that is done in a Godly manner. Nurture and admonition must begin at home "when thou sittest in thine house . . ." in order to be effective in public "when thou walkest by the way . . ." (*Deuteronomy 6:7*).

Much advice and many opinions are available today on what type of admonishment or correction should be used with our children. Some of this information can be helpful; however, it spans a very broad spectrum and may be confusing or misleading. We believe in the Word of God as the final authority and as absolute truth (*Psalms 19:7-9*). Consequently, we must use the Holy Scripture as the basis for our relationship with our children and ensure that our personal views of discipline are consistent with the Word. In addition, seeking counsel from the local elder or from older brothers and sisters will provide a valuable resource for parents.

While the majority of admonishment and correction of our children is done privately in our own homes, other times, parents must administer discipline in public. We recognize that within our brotherhood there is diversity of thought in this area. Because of this, public administering of admonition has the potential to cause divisiveness and confusion among our brethren. As we endeavor to raise our children, may each of us, in humility, forbear with one another and follow after the things which make for peace (*Ephesians 4:2; Romans 14:19*).

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BIBLICALLY-BASED GOALS OF DISCIPLINE

Why do we discipline our children? What is our goal? To start, consider this definition of the word “discipline.”

“To instruct or educate; to prepare by instructing in correct principles and habits. To correct, to chastise, to punish” (American Dictionary of the English Language, 1828).

Note the two distinct aspects of discipline. Instruction and training are done at first and are both positive and proactive. Correction and chastisement are seemingly less pleasant but are required in response to disobedience. Parents must actively seek out ways to teach their children through the positive and proactive discipline of instruction, knowledge, and training. Throughout the Scripture God does not simply command His children what not to do. Rather, He goes further and instructs them in what to do. Conversely, at times the less pleasant aspects of discipline, such as admonishment/correction, punishment, and reproof, are required and need to be carried out in love by the parents in ways that honor God (*Hebrews 12:6*).

As believing parents, we have many hopes and goals for our children. When specifically thinking about the Biblical goals of discipline, we hope that through our instruction and correction our children will develop:

- a. Respect for God and His Word, parents, church, church leadership, teachers, law of the land, and authority in general (*Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13*).
- b. The ability to discern right from wrong and to make wise choices as they cope with worldly influences at school, in the community, and in the media (*Proverbs 22:6, 15*). Our children will not always be “under our wing.” Therefore, someday when they are exposed to the world and all it offers, they must have a Biblical foundation to know how to respond.
- c. A healthy, balanced sense of self-worth. This means that children should grow up knowing they have value and significance (*Psalms 139:14*); however, they are keenly aware that selfishness and egotism are not acceptable (*Romans 12:3; Proverbs 27:2*). Parents should be the first to provide deserved praise to their children. Conversely, parents should avoid overindulging their children.

Numerous other goals of discipline could be listed here. It may be of benefit to you as a parent to observe the types of things you discipline your children for and try to identify Biblical goals you are trying to achieve through it. Parents must consider the long-term benefits of deserved correction (*Proverbs 22:6, Genesis 18:19, Proverbs 29:17*).

THE CHRISTIAN HOME IS WHERE THE FOUNDATION IS LAID

The Christian home is a foundational element in the raising of children. This is because the home provides the most specific opportunities for modeling and teaching key precepts about God, relationships, decision-making, priorities, and how to deal with life. The parents’ attitudes, examples, priorities, and presence provide the most influential aspects of teaching for children. Some building blocks parents should consider include:

- a. Parents whose marriage is honoring to God. God designed marriage to be a representation of Christ’s relationship with the Church (*Ephesians 5:31-32*). Since children learn more from their parent’s actions than from their words, what they observe in the relationship between their father and mother has a profound impact on how the child will view God and in how the child relates and interacts with others.

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- b. Parents who work together to parent the children. Fathers and mothers both have a responsibility to nurture and admonish the children. Having one parent who is an authoritarian and the other who is a “push over” or one who is very involved with the children and the other who is distant or absent is neither healthy nor Godly. Christian parenting is a team effort between the parents.
- c. Parents who provide a Godly, Christ-centered home, free of the many entanglements the world offers. In addition to the obvious spiritual dangers, these activities tend to undermine the authority of the parents. Worldly entertainment in general tends to distort the true meaning of authority. Authority figures (including parents) can be presented as being awkward and ineffective, or as being very sinful, promoting violent or immoral behavior. Parents need to ask themselves the following questions, especially when their children are still young. “If we would not allow our child to actually do a particular activity, is it wrong to allow them to watch it (on TV, DVD’s, videos, the internet, etc.)?” If we would not allow them to actually say a particular thing, is it wrong to allow them to listen to it (worldly music, etc.) (*Psalms 101:3; Romans 1:32*)?
- d. Parents who show an interest in the lives of their children and the problems they face. They don’t forget to share their accomplishments and life’s enjoyable moments (*Romans 12:15; 1 Corinthians 12:26*).
- e. Parents who pray often for God’s guidance to administer nurture and admonition according to Biblical precepts and the direction of the Holy Spirit (*Luke 11:13; Job 1:5*). Also, they pray that their children are willing to accept and benefit from the chastening.
- f. Parents who show respect for each other and the other siblings in the house (*Philippians 2:3*). Doing unto others as we would have them do unto us (*Luke 6:31*) is important; thus providing an example of respect for others, honesty, and a desire to live a quiet and peaceable life (*1 Timothy 2:2*). For example, if we want our children to say “I’m sorry” to us and to others, then the parent needs to make sure they say “I’m sorry” when appropriate. We have all observed how children will copy the parents in how they act or speak.
- g. Parents who strive to be like-minded in scriptural guidelines used in nurturing and admonishing their children (*1 Corinthians 1:10*). Avoid the “how I was raised” vs. “how the spouse was raised” issue. While there may be very large differences in your families, working together to establish a new family (i.e., “leave and cleave”) is essential. This means that parents must communicate together well and work together for the good of their children.

BIBLICALLY-BASED INSTRUCTION STRENGTHENS THE FOUNDATION

Instruction is a process of providing a lesson, precept, or information that will help children understand their world and their place in it in relation to themselves, others, and God. Parents should not allow the pressures of life or the changing values of society to disturb the opportunity to nurture and admonish the child. Biblical truth is the foundation of the family and must always be given its proper place in our families.

Providing instruction to children is an ongoing process (*Proverbs 22:6; Isaiah 28:9*) that needs to be consistent and based on Scripture. Parents need to ensure that they have good communication and a solid relationship with their children. Children who feel secure in their parents’ love are more able to receive instruction from them. Parents should be proactive in teaching appropriate behavior rather than simply reacting to a child’s behavior at the moment of error. Reacting in the moment increases the likelihood that you may deal with the child in an inappropriate way.

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The child's age and developmental level must be taken into consideration when instructing children. Instructing our children is our privilege and responsibility: it is not optional (*Deuteronomy 6:6-7*). Parents have the responsibility of knowing the strengths, weaknesses, personality, and needs of each of their children. When parents know these things about their children, the parents are more likely to be effective in instructing them.

When children see their parents living out Biblical principles (i.e., their walk matches their talk), it gives substance to the instruction that the parents have taught their children (*Proverbs 4:11-13*). Biblical truths are modeled to children as parents esteem each other, show kindness to others, exhibit honesty, patience, etc. Parents should also give recognition or reward for obedience when teachings are followed. The reinforcement of good behavior strengthens and confirms the instruction that has been given.

Biblical discipline is not achieved when parents release their pent up frustrations with a child, when they try to control a child's behavior by using harsh methods, or when they use increasing levels of anger. Conversely, allowing a child to escape the consequences of his or her behavior teaches the child an ungodly and unhealthy pattern that the child is "above" limits. Therefore, parents must be aware that undeserved leniency or harsh punishment is harmful to children and can have far-reaching effects (*Proverbs 29:15*). We trust that Biblically-based training will help to keep our children on the right path when they are old. Let us rejoice in the opportunity to do God's work and will while raising our children.

BIBLICALLY-BASED CORRECTION REFINES THE CHILD

When a child needs to be brought into conformity with a standard, correction remedies something that is wrong by showing what is wrong and what needs to be done to make it right. Chastening is not easy for any of us, but it is a responsibility and exemplifies our love for our children (*Hebrews 12:7*).

Correction is more effective when parents have discussed and developed a discipline plan. Just as parents need a plan for biblical financial stewardship, they should also have a plan for purposefully parenting their children. Parents should not try to avoid correction as an unpleasant duty but, when required, use it in conjunction with example and instruction. Remember that the purpose of correction is to help a child grow in character (*Proverbs 19:18*). Correction should never cause a child to be harmed, humiliated, or abused.

One area the Holy Spirit will guide us is in the matter of keeping the punishment appropriate to the offense. Parents need to avoid being unnecessarily harsh. John the Baptist instructed soldiers to "do violence to no man . . ." (*Luke 3:14*). The Apostle Paul instructed us to "put off all these; anger, wrath . . ." (*Colossians 3:8*). The prophet Ezekiel (*34:4-5*) condemned the shepherds who treated their flocks cruelly and with force. The result was that the flocks became scattered and vulnerable to additional harm. *Colossians 3:21* teaches, "Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged." The wise man Solomon instructed us that, "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger" (*Proverbs 15:1*).

Our discipline should not be so severe as to cause children to be afraid of their parents. Again, we have God as our example. We fear Him out of reverence and awe, but not with a "shaking in our boots" fear. Solomon tells us that, "In the fear of the LORD is strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge." (*Proverbs 14:26*). The Apostle John said, "There is no fear in love . . ." (*1 John 4:18*). We should deal with our children as God has dealt with us. We must know the difference between disciplining the child's self-willed, disobedience versus breaking the child's spirit. Breaking a child's spirit is damaging to them and indicates that the parent has gone too far. Each child is different (e.g., age, personality, etc.) and requires that you tailor correction to best suit him or her.

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When using scripture, considering “. . . all the counsel of God” (*Act 20:27*) is crucial to make decisions about discipline. When taken alone, some scriptures could be misinterpreted to condone the harsh physical punishment of our children. For example, *Proverbs 23:13-14* says, “*Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.*” In this example, an extreme adherence to a single scripture, while ignoring others on this topic, could harm a child. Many other scriptures promote gentler treatment of children (i.e., *Matthew 7:11; Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21; 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 11; Titus 2:4*). When considering the whole Word of God, clearly the purpose of this scripture in Proverbs is to say that parents have a scriptural responsibility to apply discipline. The Proverb is not intended to precisely specify what form of discipline is to be used.

A rod does not need to be a switch or a paddle. Besides its use in the direct application of punishment or correction, the rod has other meanings in the Bible. It can be used to gain someone’s attention as God intended when Moses repeatedly used the rod to perform miracles before Pharaoh in Egypt (*Exodus 7:9, 10*). Later Moses was instructed by God to “*Take the rod . . . and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes;*” (*Numbers 20:8*). A rod can simply be verbal correction, a swat on the seat, removal of a privilege, or separation from others (i.e., “time-out”). The punishment needs to be appropriate to the offense.

While parents must make their own decision about the form of discipline to be used, Scripture should not be interpreted to mean that a child should be beaten. Also, parents will need to decide how to apply this Scripture in light of the fact that some parents do abuse their children and that our society is very sensitive to this. In addition, legal ramifications vary by state and need to be considered. As Christians, we should be dedicated to the protection and well-being of children as shepherds “which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking . . .” (*Jeremiah 23:4*).

On the opposite spectrum, parents can be overly indulgent. A child “*left to himself bringeth . . . shame*” (*Proverbs 29:15*). The scripture provides several specific examples of times when parents did not correct their children and should have. The Bible records that David did not correct his son, Adonijah, to the extent that David “*had not displeased him at any time in saying, Why hast thou done so?*” (*1 Kings 1:6*). Eli the priest was also guilty of over indulgence, “*because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not.*” (*1 Samuel 3:13*). In each case, the resulting disobedience and rebellion of these children brought death upon themselves and sorrow to their parents.

The “Golden Rule” certainly applies in regard to child discipline (*Matthew 7:12*). In addition, numerous Scriptures point out that believers should exhibit qualities that reflect God’s character. Review the following scriptures, identify the characteristics God exhibits and desires, and think about how they apply to how you relate to your children: *Psalms 103:13; 2 Corinthians 10:1; Matthew 11:29-30; Ephesians 4:32; 1 Thessalonians 2:11*.

BIBLICALLY-BASED INSTRUCTION AND CORRECTION BRINGS FORTH FRUIT

The ways of our Heavenly Father in teaching and admonishing His children can be a model for parents. Jesus’ teachings always sought to change a person’s heart and not simply his or her behavior alone. While certainly we want our children to be well-behaved, as Christian parents, we must think about how our parenting helps to shape or mold a child’s heart and not simply gain external compliance. Below are some precepts that the Saviour modeled to us:

- a. He communicated His expectations clearly (both what to do and not to do) and offered His support in helping us live by his commandments (see *Mark 12:28-31* for an example).

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- b. Instruction and correction are carried out in memorable, persuasive ways. For example, when Jesus was confronted with the situation of the woman caught in adultery (*John 8:6-11*), His response causes the woman's accusers to examine their own hearts. This self-examination led them to the conclusion that Jesus wanted them to learn.
- c. Instruction and correction are carried out consistently with His children (see *Mark 10:1* for an example). He is not changing from moment to moment. Rather, He is same yesterday, today, and forever (*Hebrews 13:8*).
- d. Instruction and correction are carried out with Authority, but not in an authoritarian style. They are accomplished by Servant leadership, but not expecting servitude (*John 13:12-14*).

INSTRUCTION AND CORRECTION OF CHILDREN IN PUBLIC REQUIRES EXTRA GRACE

If we follow the above precepts, clearly the majority of instruction and correction should be administered in a private setting rather than in a public venue. However, correction will need to be carried out in public from time to time. Parents should have an established parenting plan for how to handle public situations. Most children operate much better when they have been reminded of the plan or expectations of their behavior at a certain location (store, church, grandma's house, etc.) beforehand rather than waiting until a behavior occurs and then reacting to it. Don't assume that just because you have an expectation, that your child will read your mind. This is especially true for young children as they will need to receive more frequent reminders of how they should and shouldn't behave.

For example, if a child is unruly and disruptive during the worship service, he or she should be removed from the sanctuary and taken to a more private location to be corrected (*1 Corinthians 14:40*). The congregation, minister, and the child will appreciate this. Remember the goal of the instruction is to build respect and to bring the child into accord with Biblical principles. We must not humiliate children in front of others.

The Bible tells us we should be, "*swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath*" (*James 1:19*). It has been said that we should count to ten before speaking and correcting. Perhaps it would be better for Christian parents to say ten words, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name." This can help us be of the frame of mind to "nurture and admonish" in truth.

Expect obedience within reasonable guidelines, remembering the merciful chastening God extends to His children. Remember to take the age and developmental level of the child into consideration. Parents need to follow through with consequences for continued disobedience. Children must be forewarned of these consequences. Consequences of disobedience should not be idle threats that cannot or will not be carried out. We should say what we mean and mean what we say. Avoid the use of "never," "forever," "always," or like terms. Be firm, but kind. Balance firmness with tenderness (*Ephesians 4:32*).

Parents should be good listeners and guard against favoritism among children. Also, pray for wisdom to recognize the different natures of your children and for wisdom to know what kind of correction will work for each one. The same admonishment (in private or in public) does not work for each child.

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BIBLICAL EXPECTATION OF THOSE OBSERVING ANOTHER PARENT ADMONISHING A CHILD

We must be careful not to compare the behavior of a child with his or her siblings or with children in other families. Parents' expectations of children's behavior vary, and so does their way of dealing with poor behavior. We should feel neither inferior nor superior to other parents based on our children's behavior. Each parent needs to do things as they think best, and not be too critical of parents who use procedures that differ from their convictions, because we are all responsible for our own children. However, parents should consider whether their methods of correcting children could cause offence with anyone (*Romans 14:12; 1 Corinthians 10:32*).

If we feel that a parent is admonishing or correcting their children inappropriately, we have Scriptures to go to for guidance. After prayerful self-examination, we should go alone to the parents and lovingly tell them of our concern (*Matthew 7:3-5; 18:15-17*). Gossiping about others or being critical of other parents is sinful, counter-productive, and can easily cause hurt feelings (*Proverbs 18:8*).

Sometimes what we might consider "poor parenting" can be a result of a parent being emotionally overdrawn, not having enough support, or dealing with other life stressors. Therefore, looking at another parent lovingly, praying for him or her, and thinking about how we can bear each other's burdens (*Galatians 6:2*) is appropriate. Consider if there are positive, proactive ways that you can encourage and support a parent. See if there are ways you can help them with their children. For example, you could offer to sit with them in church or at lunchtime. Thinking the worst about someone is neither helpful nor Godly.

Consider whether you can encourage younger parents through developing mentoring relationship with them. For example, *Titus 2:3-5* specifically directs the older women to teach the younger how to love their children: "*The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.*"

ADMONISHMENT AND CORRECTION OF SOMEONE ELSE'S CHILDREN

For many of us, this topic represents a sensitive area. None of us want to be perceived as interfering in someone else's business. Obviously, if a parent is present, that parent should be allowed to correct his own children in almost every case. However, if a parent is not in the immediate area, it might be appropriate to correct someone else's children if the misbehavior is blatant or if someone's safety is involved.

There are biblical principles to support the concept of admonishing or instructing one another's children. We are to have a fervent and genuine love for one another (*1 Peter 1:22*), and our Savior has prayed for a united church (*John 17:21*). These Godly principles will develop a sense of being members one of another as a church family (*Romans 12:5*). We will have a genuine concern for all the brethren and a sincere desire to help one another. Surely our children are not exempt.

As an example, many of us can remember the behavior that was expected of children in church a generation or so ago. If a young child were seen running through church, he would not have gotten far before a brother (and not necessarily the father!) would have stopped the youngster and lovingly but firmly reminded him that this was not what was done in church. The parent would not have resented this action as an intrusion, but rather would have thanked the brother for his help. Children are quick to detect such unity of heart and will respond to it favorably.

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SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

We should understand that a number of different circumstances can affect parenting and child-rearing. These include single parent's homes, blended families, and situations in which a child has a particularly difficult temperament or an emotional disorder. Parents in these situations often have special burdens in having to provide the nurture and admonition for children. Having a Christ-like attitude toward them will lead us to pray for them, to not be judgmental of them, and to look for ways to support them.

IN SUMMARY

We have many scripture verses to guide us in the nurture and admonition of our children. Instruction and correction must begin in a Godly, Christ-centered home where parents lead by example. Punishment, when necessary, should be equal with the offense and neither too lenient nor too harsh. We should strive to deal with our children as God has dealt with us. Instruction and correction done in public requires extra grace. We should remove ourselves to a private setting when possible and temper firmness with tenderness. Parents' number one goal should be the long-term benefits of instruction and correction. Our wish and prayer is that our child will learn "the way he should go" at a young age and remain on the right pathway when he is old.

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

Matthew 7:14, "Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."