

10 Principles for Healthy Discipline of Your Children

As a pastor, I'm consistently asked about disciplining children. I am not an expert—and every family is unique, with different parents and different children—but I have learned some things personally and from watching others. Plus, I know some things I would do differently if I had the early years of parenting to do again.

There is always special interest in the subject of spanking—whether it was appropriate or not and whether I believe in it or not. While I believe discipline is a personal topic for parents to decide where they land, I do believe there are some helpful principles for all parents to follow. I am probably less inclined in this area to talk about what I did and more inclined to talk about the principles I believe are even more helpful.

I have written my basic overall plan for parenting in an earlier post. You can read it [HERE](#). Since I believe the most important thing is you have a plan for your parenting and where you are trying to steer children as they mature, I decided to share 10 principles I believe can help the discipline part of your plan.

1. Goal set first. Proverbs 29:17 says, “Correct your son, and he will give you rest; yes, he will give delight to your soul.” You should understand the reason behind discipline. You are taking your children somewhere they need to go. There is great value then in discipline. Just as you have to discipline yourself to do anything of value—or just as they have to be disciplined to master an activity in which they are involved—your parenting needs to include healthy discipline.

2. Never discipline in anger. When you act in anger you will

say things you do not mean and do things you should not do. Discipline done in anger is rarely productive and usually harmful long-term.

3. Discipline yourself first. At the time of need for discipline, remember this 3-step process: Stop/Think/Proceed. This takes practice on your part, but keep in mind, you're supposed to be the more mature one. This also means you'll do less yelling in the moment and take more decisive actions when you administer discipline. Obviously, when they are younger, you have to make quick decisions. If your 2-year-old is about to stick their finger in a socket—react fast. Decisions regarding discipline get more difficult as the child gets older, however, so you may need to take longer with each of these steps.

4. Be consistent in your discipline plan. It will mean nothing to the child otherwise. You must help them learn how you will respond. The discipline may not be the same, but your attitude towards them and your follow-through should be. As they get older, they will test this one.

5. Pre-think principles, rather than pre-planning specifics. You should have some value-centered, character-based goals you want discipline to promote in your child. But be careful declaring what you will do when your child does something specific. Avoid saying things like, for example, "My son will never wear his hair long—and if he tries, I will..." You may regret those words someday. It should go without saying, but I believe Biblical principles are always best—and should come first.

6. Differentiate discipline for each child. To spank or not to spank should not be as big a deal as what works best for the child. Every child is unique and what works for one won't necessarily work for the other. The more you individualize your approach, the more successful your plan will be.

7. Do not make edicts with which you are unwilling to follow through. Your children will catch on quickly when you do. It's probably best not to make threats at all. Again, be goal-driven and value-centered. Threats usually cause more harm than good. Either they push you in a corner to respond—or, depending on the will of the child—encourage them to test your threat.

8. Use age-appropriate and action-appropriate discipline. As a child matures, the discipline should mature with them. Be careful not to overkill a minor incident or ignore a major occurrence. Remember a 3-year-old is 3. They are learning—and sometimes they can be so cute doing things the first time. But if it's a character issue—such as lying—treat it seriously. (Usually you don't have to do a whole lot to convince a 3-year-old it's serious, either.) It becomes a lot more serious when a 13-year-old is still lying to parents—especially if they were never disciplined about it at 3.

9. Always discipline the child for results, not your comfort level. Discipline in its concept is not necessarily pleasant, but it reaps a reward if done right. Hebrews 12:11 says, "Now no discipline seems to be joyful at the time, but grievous. Yet afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness in those who have been trained by it." Many parents refuse to discipline in the name of love. All parents love their children. And punishing people we love—even when needed—is difficult. Don't discipline in a way that is comfortable for you—discipline in a way which is productive in producing maturity in your child.

10. Discipline should never teach a child he or she is unloved. Actually, if done right, discipline should reinforce the love a parent has for the child (Heb. 12:7-10). This is especially true as they get older. They should be able to look back and see—while you may not have done everything right—you always disciplined in love; you always cared for their best interest, even ahead of your own.

The discipline part of parenting is the hardest—and we all make mistakes. Keep this thought in mind: we parent our children to eventually be adults. Begin with the end in mind.

What characteristics, values and morals do we want them to have when they are grown? This thought helped me many times when deciding which discipline to use—and certainly the severity of which I should view a matter needing discipline.
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