

How to Raise Self-Righteous, Selfish Christian Kids

When we emphasize rewards to change a child's behavior, we enter some dangerous territory in the child's heart. Behavior modification works because it takes advantage of a child's selfishness. Too much behavior modification in a child's life actually increases that selfishness. Kids might do what we ask but there's a deeper price we're paying that must be considered.

Let's step back a minute and see the science of behavior modification developed. In the early 1900s, Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov made an exciting discovery as he worked with dogs. If he consistently rang a bell just before he fed the dogs, he could eventually train the dogs to salivate by simply ringing the bell even without the food. And over the next few years a complete system of behavior modification was born.

In the 1920s, John B. Watson began using the same strategies on people. In fact, it wasn't long before behavior modification became a primary way to help people stop smoking, lose weight, and deal with a host of other behavioral issues. In time, behavior modification influenced the public-school classroom as well, and teachers used it to help children learn. By the 1950s behavior modification had also become the primary tool for parenting. Giving rewards and punishment to children worked quite well to modify their behavior.

Unknowingly to many, however, a problem began to develop in the way people think. Attitudes of selfishness and entitlement often increase in the hearts of kids who are raised on heavy doses of behavior modification. Many of those kids take longer to grow up today because, in the end, behavior modification may get kids to jump through short-term hoops, but it does

little to build in kids life skills to handle the adult world. It's time to re-evaluate the heavy use of behavior modification throughout our culture because of its negative impact. Here's why.

A continual reliance on external motivators enhances a person's selfishness as it exchanges a little gratification for a desired behavior. Children raised in homes where external motivation dominated the leadership strategy ask different questions about life such as, "Are you going to pay me for this?" Not only does behavior modification encourage selfishness, but it also removes the moral motivations necessary for healthy and mature decision-making. Kids then tend to ask the question, "What's in it for me?" instead of "What's the right thing to do?"

Of course these children grow up to be leaders in the culture, both inside the church and out. It may be time for a paradigm shift similar to the one experienced by Samuel when God said to him, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

The problem is that behavior modification embraces humanistic thinking, the belief that people are just a higher form of animals. If you're going to train dogs to salivate, then behavior modification works well. If you're trying to train a child to make right choices, then a whole different approach is far more effective. A biblical worldview leads to different conclusions.

God created people different than animals. He gave each person a spiritual "heart," and that heart affects the learning process. The heart contains things such as emotions, desires, convictions and passion. In short, the heart is a wrestling place where decisions are made. A person's tendencies come from the heart. When a child lies to get out of trouble, that's a heart issue. If a man reacts with anger each time his

co-worker is annoying, that's a heart issue too. Simply focusing on behavior may provide some quick change, but lasting change takes place in the heart.

Behavior modification isn't wrong, it's just incomplete, and in the end, lacks the depth for long-term and lasting change. Even God uses reward and punishment to motivate people to follow him. However, He calls us to greater motivations than the fear of hell or the reward of heaven. Love, gratitude and a sense of mission are inner motivations God gave to people in a different way than he does with other forms of animal life.

Moving toward a heart-based approach to change in children and adults instead of relying heavily on behavior modification has several practical implications. For example, some people believe that the key to good parenting is consistency. The more consistent you are, the faster you'll see change.

The emphasis is on performance and can easily result in kids who look good on the outside while having significant problems on the inside. Consistency can teach kids to appear good, clean, and nice, but to help them change their hearts, other strategies must be employed. In fact, consistency isn't as important for heart change as is life experience, dialogue and creativity.

As a home-schooling parent, Karla found a heart-based approach in parenting particularly helpful. "I used to feel guilty all the time because I couldn't be consistent. I have four kids to educate and a house to run. Invariably I'd have to sacrifice consistency in an area with one or more of my kids to accomplish my other tasks. When I realized that there's more to parenting than just being consistent, it freed me up to work on bigger goals with my kids. The consistency trap produced a lot of guilt in me. Now I'm feel freed up to use other tools as well. I'm continually asking questions about my children's hearts, and I'm learning a lot about how to mold and influence them to go in the right direction. I'm seeing

more change in my kids with this new approach.”

If you’re training dogs in a laboratory, then consistency is essential. But if you’re trying to raise children, then you want to build character, develop moral strength, and foster a heart that follows after God. Simply threatening children or offering rewards misses the mark.

The heart is where people hold their convictions. It’s where they develop operating principles about life. Kids already have convictions, but many of those convictions are incomplete or erroneous.

For example, a child may believe that if my brother is annoying then I have the right to punch him. Or, if I’m unhappy with the situation then my bad attitude is justified. An attitude is fueled by beliefs. If a child believes that his job description of life is to have fun, then work of any kind can be annoying.

Simply rewarding kids for positive behavior may get them to perform for a time, but giving them a vision so that they understand right and wrong produces greater results. Kids are then more willing to put their hearts into their work and aren’t dependent on the latest gimmick.

Too much emphasis on behavior modification encourages young people to become modern day Pharisees. Jesus brought a new message that spirituality is about the heart. We must get that message into our parenting and into our homeschool classrooms. We must become more interested in our own hearts as well, not just our actions. It’s not about looking organized and orderly. It’s about having a heart that follows after Jesus.

*By **Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN** are the authors of the new book entitled, The Christian Parenting Handbook: 50 Heart-Based Strategies for All the Stages of Your Child’s Life. Both the Millers and the Turanskys homeschooled*

their children who are all grown now.

*They are offering a **free download** of their Family Toolbox to the readers of Spirit Led Woman eMagazine. [Click here to download!](#)*