

Punishment or Discipline? What Christian Parents Need to Know About the Difference

Maybe you can relate to this: You've been on your cell for exactly 30 seconds when your 6-year-old starts acting up. He's loud, cranky and going out of his way to ensure your phone conversation is both miserable and impossible. You try to ignore the ruckus for a few minutes but lose your cool and bark out, "Go to your room right now! And sit there until you learn some manners!"

Afterward, you're angry, but you also feel guilty because you lashed out at your kid. Worse, you can hear him kicking the door in his bedroom. Not only will you have to handle a resentful child, but you'll have door dings to deal with as well.

There's a big difference between disciplining a child with love and punishing a child. Like reward, *punishment* focuses on the child: "You're such a bad boy." And like encouragement, *discipline* focuses on the behavior of the child: "I don't like what you're doing right now."

Let's go back to the minute your son first disturbs your phone conversation. That moment is the one where you need to act swiftly and decisively.

You say to your girlfriend, "Excuse me a minute. I have to talk to Tyler."

You take Tyler firmly by the arm and lead him to his bedroom. This action conveys to him that, sure, he can continue his behavior, but he doesn't have the right to do it where he's going to bother anyone else.

"I don't want to be interrupted when I'm on the phone," you say calmly. "You can play by yourself here. As soon as I'm done, I'll come and tell you. If you need anything then, I'd be happy to listen to what you have to say."

Notice that with reality discipline, you're in charge of your emotions.

One thing I've learned about 6-year-olds is that they don't like to be isolated. They want to hear everything that's going on. And like children of all ages, they don't perform well without you as an audience. For the attention-getting child who just has to keep bugging Mom or Dad while they're on the phone, isolation is an excellent disciplinary measure.

Does this really work, you ask?

Putting Reality Discipline Into Play in Real Life

Recently I heard this story from a mother who had been at one of my events, she was talking on her cell to a girlfriend she hadn't seen for ages when her two kids started their dog-and-pony show. It's amazing how kids always know when their parents are over a barrel, so they kept trying to interrupt their mom.

At first she put her hand over the phone and said, "Kids, would you please be quiet? Can't you see I'm on the phone?"

But when she had to do it a second time, the lightbulb in her head went on.

"Excuse me for a minute," she told her girlfriend and put her cell on the table. Taking her two kids by the arm, she marched them out the door to the deck. Then, after closing and locking the door, she returned to her call.

"Here comes the embarrassing part," she told me. "I forgot about them! Several minutes later, when I looked through the family room into the kitchen area, I saw a little hand on the

window from the patio. 'Hang on a second,' I told my girlfriend. 'I forgot something.'"

When she opened the door, the kids delivered a note to her, written with a pencil stub found in their dad's golf bag and a piece of brown paper from a grocery bag that had been on the garage floor. It said, "Mommy, we love you. Can we come in now?"

I doubt that mom will have to put up with any more dog-and-pony shows when she's on the phone. All because she chose to act and followed through.

Just like encouragement trumps reward, discipline trumps punishment every time. If punishment worked, it wouldn't be necessary to punish a child more than once for any infraction of the rules. She would learn her lesson the first time around.

Punishment may seem to work—for the moment. Punishment only accomplishes the purpose of teaching our kids, "Because we're bigger and stronger, we can push you around. We can force our will on you."

If your relationship is not based on respect for each other and unconditional love, your child will have no reason to accept any discipline from you or to consider you in her decisions.

As a Person of Faith

As a person of faith there is even more reason to act in a way that enhances your child's ability to respect and honor you. You represent a supreme authority in life, and that is God. Also, how you parent not only builds your family and strengthens the fabric of society but also adheres to the Bible's wisdom. As Saint Paul said, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother," which is the first commandment with a promise, "so

that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth'" (Eph. 6:1-3).

Those words set up parents with a practical, sound system. With authoritative parenting and reality discipline, everyone lives a longer, happier life. When that system is neglected or ignored through extremes like authoritarianism or permissiveness, things don't go well.

Proverbs 22:6 gives another guarantee that sets a parent's heart at ease: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." The original-language translation is, "Train up a child in his own way." You should never train down a child; you train up a child. That means you put time and energy into teaching him acceptable behavior in a variety of social situations. Letting a child "go his own way" doesn't mean you let him do whatever he wants. But it does mean that you recognize each child is different—in personality, in the way he reacts to situations, and in how he views the world through his particular lens.

That means you need to adjust your reality discipline appropriately. Some children are more strong-willed and have a higher activity level, so they will need one kind of discipline in a given setting, while more passive children can be disciplined in a totally different way. Reality discipline gives you the latitude to train each child in the way that's best for them.

The Bottom Line—Your Child's Conscience

The bottom line with discipline is what a child does when the parents aren't there. What makes a child obey when Mom and Dad aren't around to crack down? Is it conscience? A fear of punishment? Or the solidly rooted belief that you love them unconditionally, you believe in them, and they are a part of your family and thus model certain values to the world?

As you train up a child with loving discipline, his conscience

develops in such a way that he's more likely to behave properly when you aren't there. That's why I never worried about my kids when they were away from home. Did it mean they were perfect and never made mistakes? Of course not. They're kids, and every kid will do dumb things. (I did more than my share.) But did that mean I loved my children any less? Absolutely not.

Reward and punishment, as motivators of good behavior, don't help children develop a healthy conscience. Instead the kids learn, "I'll be good when Mom and Dad are around, but as soon as they're out of sight, I'll do what I want."

Using reality discipline in a loving way won't guarantee that your child will always be a perfect little angel. In fact, right now that kid might be causing you lots of grief. But I guarantee that consistently practicing such discipline will breed more honesty and communication between the two of you.

So how do you help to develop a sound conscience in your child?

The best way is to teach your child *accountability*. You do so by setting guidelines that fit your family values. Those rules set the limits. But limits themselves aren't enough, if your children don't understand what they are or why they're there. Without that understanding, your children won't learn *responsibility*—the ability to follow through. That's why disciplining children consistently, swiftly and calmly is important. So is matching the discipline to the event and being open to discuss the whys and details of that particular situation.

Another important way to help develop your child's conscience is the concept of remorse and forgiveness. How often do you say, "I'm sorry. I blew it. Will you forgive me?" Remember, you're the best role model for your child. If those words don't come from your lips first, your children won't have the

opportunity to express their remorse for violating family guidelines and to experience forgiveness.

Surprise Expectations

What I'm going to say next will surprise many of you. Your kids expect you to discipline them. If you don't, you invite rebellion and give your children license to hold you in contempt. That might sound harsh, but it's true. Children actually develop hatred toward their parents if the parents don't take a stand and discipline them.

Your children want you to discipline them, because they want to know you care. {eoa}

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