

Parenting in an Anti-Spanking Culture

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:6-7; Proverbs 10:13; Proverbs 13:24; Proverbs 19:18; Proverbs 22:15; Proverbs 23:14; Ephesians 6:4

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The subject of spanking is baffling to many parents. Part of the problem is the confusion of the times in which we live. It has been popular for more than half a century to decry corporal punishment as inherently inappropriate, counterproductive, and detrimental to the child. Psychologist, mother, and well-known anti-spanking activist Penelope Leach distills the typical humanist perspective on corporal punishment: "I believe that spanking—or tapping, or slapping, or cuffing, or shaking, or beating, or whipping—children is actually wrong. I also believe . . . that far from producing better disciplined people, spanking makes it much more difficult to teach children how to behave" ([Online Source](#)). Notice how she equates spanking with slapping, cuffing, shaking, beating, whipping, and "tapping." But those are not all the same thing, and they should not be likened to the rod of discipline administered in love.

Opponents of corporal punishment will often cite surveys and statistics that seem to support their findings, but precisely because they *begin* by equating brutal acts of violence against children with properly administered corporal discipline, their results are skewed. *Of course* cruel punishment and brute violence against children is wrong, counterproductive, and unbiblical.

But, Scripture does nonetheless prescribe the rod of discipline as a *necessary* aspect of parenting. In fact, Scripture flatly contradicts modern opponents of corporal punishment: "He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly" (Proverbs 13:24). "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him" (Proverbs 22:15). "You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell" (Proverbs 23:14; see also 10:13; 19:18).

Moreover, according to a 1998 article in *U.S. News and World Report*, "parenting experts" have based all their findings against corporal punishment "on a body of research that is at best inconclusive and at worst badly flawed" ([Online Source](#)). According to the article, some recent studies indicate that spanking, when used appropriately, does indeed make children "less likely to fight with others and more likely to obey their parents." In fact, in one very thorough study, Psychologist Robert E. Larzelere, director of residential research at Boys Town in Nebraska, found that no other discipline technique, including timeout and withdrawal of privileges, had more beneficial results for children under thirteen than non-abusive spanking, in terms of getting children to comply with their parents' wishes.

Many who oppose corporal punishment simply are not willing to look at the facts and statistics rationally. One critic of spanking bluntly states that as far as he is concerned, "Hitting children is not a subject to which rational debate applies. It is another manifestation of American's unique exploitation of children as models for absolutist behavior standards and austere punishments that grown adults would not impose on themselves" (Mike A. Males, *The Scapegoat Generation*, 116).

Christian parents should not be duped by such "experts." Scripture itself *prescribes* corporal

discipline and cautions parents not to abandon the use of the rod. In the end, the facts will be found to agree with the Word of God. And in that vein, the *U.S. News* article actually offers some tidbits of very sound advice: "One lesson of the spanking controversy is that whether parents spank or not matters less than *how* they spank. . . . A single disapproving word can bring a sensitive child to tears, while a more spirited youngster might need stronger measures. Finally, spankings should be done in private to spare children humiliation and without anger" ([Online Source](#)).

It might be worthwhile to reiterate the fact that parental discipline should never injure the child. It is never necessary to bruise your children in order to spank them hard enough to make your point. Spanking should always be administered with love and never when the *parent* is in a fit of rage. That sort of discipline is indeed abusive, wrong, and detrimental to the child, because it shatters the environment of loving nurture and instruction Ephesians 6:4 describes.

Furthermore, spanking is by no means the *only* kind of discipline parents should administer. There are many other viable forms of punishing children that, on occasion, can be used in addition to the rod. If the child responds immediately to a verbal rebuke in a given situation, a spanking is probably not necessary. Other punishments, such as withdrawing privileges, can also be used as occasional alternatives to spanking if the situation warrants it.

Much of our parental discipline should be totally positive. Parents can and should provide guidance for their children by rewarding them for positive behavior, as well as by punishing them for wrong behavior. Both sides of the equation are important. Positive motivation is entirely legitimate and can often be an effective means of getting children to obey. Notice, in fact, that the promise God Himself attached to the Fifth Commandment is a positive motivation. The commandment was reinforced with a promise, not a threat. It is often appropriate to say to your child, "If you do this, I will reward you in this way."

Balanced discipline involves both negative and positive reinforcements. In fact, we might sum up all discipline by saying it means *giving the appropriate reward for the conduct*. When the conduct (including both attitudes and actions) is good, a positive reward is warranted. When the conduct is bad, a negative reward is in order. It's really that simple.

Yet parents seem incurably confused about these issues. Even many Christian parents I know are practically paralyzed with fear about whether, when, how, and how much to discipline their children. But what Scripture says is straightforward: You have a depraved and foolish child, and if you want him not to be so foolish, spank him (Proverbs 22:15). You have a solemn responsibility before God to provide an environment of nurture and instruction where your child will constantly be exposed to God's truth (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). In short, you need to be careful not to provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

*Today's article was adapted from John's book, **Successful Christian Parenting**, (Thomas Nelson, 1998).*

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