

How to Provoke Your Children

Scripture: Proverbs 13:24; Ephesians 6:4

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Have you experienced the paralysis of finding a good book on Christian parenting? Visiting your local Christian bookstore these days can be a frustrating venture. You might leave more confused than when you arrived—conflicting instructions, questionable authors, and so many options. What's the *best* book, and why are there so many titles in the first place? The experience is overwhelming to many parents.

You won't face those problems in the Bible. In fact, you may find yourself on the opposite end of the equation—tempted to think Scripture doesn't devote *enough* space to the subject of parenting.

With all the timeless issues facing parents, we might expect an entire book, or at least a complete chapter of instruction from the New Testament. But God, who is infinitely wise, gave *one* verse to parents—that's it. Care to know the concise instructions God gives to you, moms and dads? It's all packed into Ephesians 6:4.

Paul's command to parents includes two parts. The first is negative. He said, "Do not provoke your children to wrath." Don't thoughtlessly aggravate them. Don't unnecessarily goad them. Don't deliberately exasperate them. Don't foolishly discourage them. But express your love to them by treating them with gentleness, kindness, consideration, and respect. After all, that's an essential part of being a good example to them.

Paul was not suggesting that every time a child becomes angry, it is the parent who has sinned. Obviously, children can and do become angry apart from any sinful provocation on the parent's part.

Nor was he excusing children who get angry, regardless of the circumstances. Children have a duty to honor their parents and obey them from the heart, even when the parents are aggravating.

Nonetheless, it does suggest that parents who sin this way are doubly guilty. Not only do they violate their duty as parents, but they also cause their own children to stumble.

The expression, "provoke . . . to wrath" is one word in the Greek: *parorgiz*. It applies to every kind of anger, from silent fuming, to indignant outbursts, to full-fledged rebellious rage. Children express their wrath in different ways.

Parents provoke their children to wrath by various means too. Over my years as a pastor, I have observed many different ways parents have done this. Avoid all of them. Here are just a few examples:

1) Excessive Discipline

Some parents crush their children with *excessive discipline*. I have known parents who seemed to think that if discipline is good for a child, extra discipline must be even better. They constantly waved the threat of corporal punishment as if they loved it. No parent should ever be eager to punish. And no punishment should ever be brutal or bullying. Parents should always administer discipline with the good of the child in mind, never more than necessary, and always with love.

2) Inconsistent Discipline

Other parents provoke their children by *inconsistent discipline*. If you overlook an infraction three times and punish the child severely the fourth time, you will confuse and exasperate your child. Parental discipline must be consistent. That's one of the main reasons parenting requires full-time diligence.

3) Unkindness

Some parents provoke their children with *unkindness*. I cringe when I hear parents deliberately saying mean-spirited things to their children. But many parents do, it seems—and to compound the problem, they often seem to do it in public. I've overheard parents saying things to their own children they would never say to anyone else. That's a sure way to crush a child's heart and provoke him to resentment.

4) Favoritism

Another way parents provoke their kids is by showing *favoritism*. Isaac favored Esau over Jacob, and Rebekah preferred Jacob over Esau (Genesis 25:28). The resentment their favoritism provoked caused a permanent split in the family (Genesis 27). But Jacob made the same mistake with his own children, showing such favoritism to his youngest, Joseph, that Joseph's brothers plotted to do away with him (Genesis 37). Although God sovereignly brought about much good from what happened to Joseph (Genesis 50:20), that doesn't change the fact that Jacob and his family had to endure much sorrow, heartache, and evil because of the chain of events that began with Jacob's favoritism.

5) Overindulgence

Some parents actually goad their children to exasperation through *overindulgence*. They are too permissive. Research from many different sources show that children who are given too much autonomy feel insecure and unloved. No wonder. After all, Scripture says parents who let their children misbehave with no consequences are actually showing contempt for the child (Proverbs 13:24). Children know that instinctively, and it exasperates them.

6) Overprotection

On the other hand, some parents frustrate their children by *overprotection*. They fence them in, suffocate them, deny them any measure of freedom or trust. That's a sure way to provoke a child to frustration: make your child despair of ever having any liberty at all unless he or she rebels.

7) Pressure to Achieve

Plenty of parents arouse their children's anger through constant *pressure to achieve*. If you never praise your kids when they succeed but always drive them to do even better next time; if you neglect to comfort and encourage them when they fail; or worst of all, if you force your children to try to fulfill goals you never accomplished, they will certainly resent it. It's fine to encourage our children to excel. In fact, that is a natural and normal part of parenting (1 Thessalonians 2:11). But don't forget to balance your desire to see them realize their full potential with a little patience and understanding, or you will provoke the bitterest kind of resentment.

Other ways parents provoke their children are through neglect, constant criticism, condescension, indifference, detachment, cruelty, hypocrisy, a lack of fairness, or deliberate humiliation. All of those things provoke children to exasperation by *discouragement*. And that's precisely what Paul said in the parallel passage, Colossians 3:21: "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged."

Don't provoke your children to wrath. That's the *negative* side of Ephesians 6:4. The second part of Paul's command to parents is *positive*. He says, "Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." We'll take a look at that command in our next post.

Until then, here are a couple questions to discuss in the comment thread:

- (1) In what ways do you see children in our generation express anger provoked by their parents?
- (2) Which one (or two) of the above errors are you most prone to in *your* parenting—and why?

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