

To turn to the positive side, we may, for example, quite unconsciously show our children what forgiveness is really about simply by the way that we treat others who wrong us (including one another within the family).

These are simple illustrations, but it may well be that the unconscious example we provide for our children actually has a greater influence on their spiritual development than all the things we make a deliberate point of teaching and doing with them.

Peter had this in mind, not in relation to bringing up children, but concerning the conversion of unbelieving spouses. In 1 Peter 3:1,2 he says, "Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, *without a word*, may be won by the conduct

of their wives, *when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear*".

Surely the exhortation for all parents from this is to make sure that the things we do deliberately and consciously to set a good example for our children are complemented by the rest of our daily life. Our example comes through in *everything* we do and say, not just the bits where we make a point of setting a benchmark. And whatever is seen, heard and registered by our children will be copied in their own lives more swiftly than we might ever imagine—the good and the bad.

If we ourselves, therefore, are being "imitators of God as dear children" (Eph. 5:1), then we know that our own dear children in turn will have a good standard to imitate as we bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Discipline

Every parent knows how necessary discipline is, but how best to give it? Chris and Chris Furniss (Redditch, UK), well aware of the current debates in politics and child psychology, walk us through the subject with the Scriptures as the guide. The passages from Proverbs which speak of the rod seem clear enough—but is the rod literal or metaphorical? The authors are wisely careful not to be prescriptive, while showing that there are many different forms of discipline, and that different children need to be handled in different ways. Parents must take personal responsibility for applying the Scriptural principles, and must pray for wisdom to discharge their duties after the pattern of their all-wise Father in heaven.

THE ONLINE etymology dictionary says that the word 'discipline' "comes from the Latin *disciplina*, 'instruction given to a disciple', from *discipulus*". In the Greek it is linked to the word for 'teaching'. If we accept this as our working definition of the word it becomes clear that a follower of Christ, a disciple, needs to be disciplined (taught how) to follow his or her Lord. As parents with the duty to "bring [our children] up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4), we must provide the right sort of discipline too.

The problem comes when we try to decide on what the 'right sort' of discipline is. It becomes even more difficult when we factor in social attitudes and expectations that have changed drastically in the last few decades. Add in the increasing focus on human rights, including the rights of children, and the legislation that has been passed in some countries restricting very carefully the use of physical punishments, and the whole subject can become a real headache.

Looking at the principles

WE will leave aside the issue of legislation for the present and look at the Scriptural principles involved. Let's begin at that passage

in Ephesians quoted above and examine the three key thoughts, "bring up", "nurture" and "admonition". The three words in the Greek are *ektrepō*, *paideia* and *nouthesia*.

"Bring . . . up"

The RV, the Amplified Bible and Young's Literal translations of the Greek *ektrepō* imply a particular kind of upbringing, using words like 'nurture', 'nourish' and 'tenderly'. And that is the starting point; a relationship, as the context makes quite clear. Set against the backdrop of the first

commandment “with promise”, which expects children to respect and obey their parents, fathers in return are expected to care for their children and not to ignore their needs and feelings, not ‘provoking’ or ‘exasperating’ or ‘goaded’ them (depending on the version), but having a real concern for and respect for them and their point of view. If fathers cannot set a caring example it is unreasonable to expect children to follow it.

The Greek word here has already been used in Ephesians 5:29, where Paul again draws a picture of a relationship, that between husband and wife. A man is to love his own wife as he ‘nourishes’ his own body—there’s the word once more. The point is made even more strongly when Paul compares such a relationship with the relationship between Christ and the ecclesia. It is a relationship of love between parents and children that is designed to reflect the relationship between the Father in heaven and His children—us. And that is the starting point of our discipline. Without it the discipline becomes pointless provocation.

“Nurture”

Most versions translate the Greek word *paideia* here as ‘discipline’, the NEB goes for ‘correction’ and the RV has ‘chastening’. The equivalent Greek noun (*paidion*) refers to a young child, and it is this word that is used several times in Matthew 18:1-5, when our Lord uses the small child as an example of discipleship. A small child is willing to accept the need for guidance. A believer is willing to humble himself and accept the guidance of one who knows better. Inherent in this is the acceptance that there may well be correction needed, that sometimes we will be expected to do things that we don’t naturally want to do. The relationship that we seek with our heavenly Father in accepting His discipline is what we try to develop in our children. That is the spirit in which we should discipline our children.

We must be willing to discipline our children, even though they will not like it (nor sometimes will we, for that matter). It will involve censure, reproof and the imposition of restrictions and punishment, as our Father’s discipline does for us. This is clearly shown in Hebrews 12:1-11, where the same basic word as in Ephesians 6:4 occurs several times. The context is the outworking of our faith, which builds on the wonderful examples given in the previous chapter.

Thus we should “lay aside [NIV, throw off]” everything that hinders us from living our faith, and to do this we look to the example of Jesus

(vv. 1,2). He accepted the discipline that the Father set on him to the point of shedding his blood (v. 4). As Isaiah 53:5 tells us, “the chastisement of our peace was upon him”, and in the Septuagint version the word is *paideia*. The NIV has, “the punishment that brought us peace was upon him”. It may be that in the course of our wayward lives our Father brings chastisement and correction on us out of His love for us (Heb. 12:5,6). We may have to endure hardship as a discipline (v. 7), and submit to the discipline of our Father, Who does it because He loves us (vv. 8-10).

It is not an enjoyable experience, it can even be “grievous [NIV, painful]”, but it leads ultimately to “the peaceable fruit of righteousness” (v. 11). But we shouldn’t stop there, because verses 12 and 13 set the picture in perspective. “Wherefore” (that is, because of all this) we must seek to support the weak and feeble and lame. Discipline in the Brotherhood should be designed to bring healing and help, not weaken that which is already feeble.

If this principle applies in our relationships with one another in Christ, then it must surely apply in our relationships with our children. So when we, as ‘earthly’ parents, decide to punish our wayward children, it is with an awareness that, although we are just as recalcitrant as they, and need to be chastised, the main burden of our punishment has been laid upon another. It is done out of love, and should not be a reaction to hurt or anger, or a desire to bring retribution.

“Admonition”

The word *nouthesia* means ‘admonition’ or ‘instruction’. In a recent exhortation that we heard, the speaker explained that the English word ‘admonish’ carries with it the idea of a ‘firm, but never harsh’ warning.

We quite often hear writers, entertainers, filmmakers, musicians, etc., use phrases like ‘pushing the envelope’ and ‘exploring the boundaries’, as though referring to a whole new phenomenon. Yet it’s what mankind has always done, and it’s what children do. It is an attitude which says, ‘Let’s see how far we can go and what we can get away with’. And sadly, in this age of moral relativism, where few people accept any concept of Divine and revealed authority, there are no clear boundaries and the envelope is pushed out a little more each time.

Children (of all ages!) need clear parameters, and will often see how far they can go. In our responsibilities as parents we have to set those

boundaries and make it clear why they are there and what the consequences of going beyond them will be. That is exactly what God did with Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:16,17), with Israel (Deut. 30:15-20), and what He does with us (Mk. 16:16).

The three principles summarised

In sum, the three principles seem to be:

- 1 A loving relationship and mutual respect must form the basis of any disciplinary code. This is modelled on, and seeks to reflect, the relationship the ecclesia has with the Lord, which is itself a reflection of our Lord's relationship with his Father. It arises out of a desire to 'nourish' our children and see them grow strong and healthy, spiritually as well as physically and emotionally.
- 2 Arising from this godly relationship, there is a need to set clear parameters, just as God did, and does with us. Children need to know what is expected of them and why, and it should be reasonable and realistic.
- 3 We must be prepared to enforce the discipline, but this should be done (and should be seen to be done) in love and in a way that encourages and strengthens rather than weakens and discourages. When we enforce a matter, we should do so with a full awareness of our own weaknesses.

It is not for us, or any other uninspired authors, to set out what other parents may or may not do, as though we had all the answers. Our own (now grown up) children would soon put us right on that! But in this age of uncertainty we need to know that discipline—godly discipline—is not only acceptable, it is essential. One set of parents might decide that there will be no television because of its (admittedly) pernicious influence. Others may decide that this is a bit like babies and bath water and choose instead to limit the type and amount of television. We could argue for hours which of these views is right or best, but both are preferable to the attitude that sets virtually no limits and no guidance. That is not love, it is weakness. What is more likely to "provoke" our children to "wrath" is not the fact that we have discipline and rules, but having rules which are seen to be arbitrary, inconsistent, meaningless and hypocritical.

Corporal punishment

THERE are many passages in Proverbs that outline the importance of discipline, and most

of them simply reinforce what we have already been thinking of. For example, look at Proverbs 12:1; 13:1,18; 15:5,10,32; 19:18, which all refer to the necessity and usefulness of discipline (again, the Septuagint in most cases has *paideia*) and the foolishness of not having any. But consider these passages (all from the NIV):

"He who spares the rod hates his son" (13:24);

"Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him" (22:15);

"Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death" (23:13,14).

These have long been used to argue the necessity of physical punishment.

Balancing the views

Brother Brian Luke, writing in *Family Life in the Lord* under the theme, "The beauty of discipline", has a well-balanced overall view on the subject, and is far from advocating cruelty or unrestrained violence. He interprets "rod" in the above passages as referring to corporal punishment, making his understanding of them quite clear when he says:

"The power and value of the beating is in the fact that it hurts! . . . There are many children who would never learn unless the rod was employed from time to time" (p. 178).

In pointing out the danger of not using the rod, Brother Luke goes on to quote Brother Islip Collyer, in his wonderful book, *Principles and Proverbs*, who, in response to the tendency amongst some to avoid what he terms "the cramping effect of correction either by word or rod", says:

"The result is often a personal monstrosity as hideous as the creations of modern artists who with a similar disregard of the old rules try to express themselves in their art" (*Ibid.*).

But on the same page of his book Brother Collyer wrote something else, which puts another perspective on the matter:

"Why then insist on nothing but an actual rod and physical pain . . . ? Correction may be made by word and look and in a hundred different [ways], some of which may be more effective than the rod, although even that may sometimes be necessary" (p. 157).

This changes the emphasis. We have moved with Brother Collyer away from the necessity of a literal rod and actual beatings to a wider

interpretation of the use of a rod, of which actual beating is only one aspect, that “may sometimes” be needed. Brother Collyer expands this thought, saying:

“In all cases the rod of correction is needed but many different kinds of rod can be used” (p. 160).

He actually uses the term “criminal folly” concerning failure to discern that the type of discipline depends upon the child being disciplined. As another proverb puts it, “A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool” (17:10, NIV).

Arguments against corporal punishment

So, to continue to develop the approach favoured by those more inclined to see the Proverbs references as applying to a metaphorical ‘rod’, what are the arguments against physical punishment? Most of them are to do with human rights and the rise of a humanist philosophy over the last several decades. That does not of itself make them wrong or invalid, it merely means that we should be aware of the philosophy underlying them. Ten of the arguments are outlined in *The Discipline Book* by Dr William Sears and Martha Sears, and can be summarised as follows:

- 1 Spanking just shows that it’s OK to hit people.
- 2 It devalues the child.
- 3 It devalues the parent.
- 4 It may lead to abuse.
- 5 It doesn’t improve behaviour.
- 6 Hitting is not Biblical; a shepherd’s rod was traditionally used to fight off prey and the staff was used gently to guide sheep (Ps. 23:4) not to hit the sheep.
- 7 Hitting just promotes and encourages anger in both parties.
- 8 It scars childhood memories.
- 9 Research shows corporal punishment produces more psychological problems.
- 10 It doesn’t work as a disciplinary approach.

It is quite true that the Hebrew word for ‘rod’ can mean different things according to context, and that a (good) shepherd would not routinely use his rod to hit the sheep. Nevertheless the context of the verses from Proverbs quoted above is clearly one of punishment and correction, not protection. Many of the claims (like the first three) are opinions rather than facts, and it could equally be argued that a physical punishment (such as a slap) is no more likely to create a bully or devalue a relationship than any other form of sanction,

such as taking away a privilege. There is research that shows the dangers and ineffectiveness of physical punishment, but these are related to excessive violence rather than a judicious, loving and godly application of an occasional slap where necessary. Many would argue that the increase of violence and the lack of discipline in society are proof enough that the move away from physical punishment is ineffective. In other words, one can argue either way.

Nevertheless there are very real dangers associated with the use of physical force that would seem to suggest that, if it is used, it should be used very sparingly and only when other forms of correction have failed. Paul makes a relevant point in writing to the Corinthian ecclesia. There were horrendous issues to be dealt with there, but Paul does not speak of going in brandishing a stick, but rather, “in love and with a gentle spirit” (1 Cor. 4:21, NIV).

With regard to the law (and here we mean laws which outlaw corporal punishment), we are told to obey it except when it conflicts with a clear injunction of Christ or God. Compare 1 Peter 2:13 with Peter’s own words (with John) to the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:19,20. Whether the advice given in Proverbs constitutes such a clear commandment must be for the individual to judge. If it doesn’t, then even if we do not agree with the law we should keep it. At the very least we need to look at alternatives, and we must always be aware of the line between discipline and abuse.

So what can we do?

THERE is no ‘magic’ formula we can give, but we can offer some guidelines for consideration.

- 1 **Consistency.** We all have our own pressures, moods and weaknesses that make it difficult to show consistency, but children need to know where they stand. If one day we say ‘No’ but then let them ‘get away with it’, but the next day we drop on them like the proverbial ‘ton of bricks’, what lesson are we giving? Consistency also means consistency between parents, so that we do not have a ‘Mum doesn’t let us do it but Dad does’ situation. What is that situation teaching? And what does that do for the relationships? In speaking of consistency, this does not mean that there may not be room for discussion or allowances over some things and on certain occasions; for instance, some flexibility of bedtimes or extension of coming

home times during holidays or when appropriate. But this should be through discussion and agreement, and the children should know that there is a reason for the relaxing of the rule.

- 2 **Reasonable.** Rules, restrictions, prohibitions, expectations, guidelines—whatever we call them—should be for a reason and we should be able to give that reason. Just saying, ‘Because I say so!’, is not adequate unless we are setting ourselves up as dictators. Our explanation will depend upon the child’s age, etc., but if we involve them as far as possible in the discussion, and show them why it is necessary, it is much more likely to be effective. Remember the point that the word ‘discipline’ comes from a Greek word meaning ‘to teach’. If our ‘discipline’ is limited to punishing wrong-doing it is not godly discipline, it doesn’t teach anything. We should allow the child the right to express himself and ask why, treating him or her with respect and expecting courtesy and respect in return. It is a two-way process in that sense.
- 3 **Relevant.** This covers both relevance to the occasion and relevance to the child. Although there are universal principles set out by God in His Word, those principles are applied to individuals. Each child has his or her own strengths and weaknesses, and what will work for one may not work for another. Be prepared to be flexible in the way the principle is applied, without compromising the important principle. There is no ‘one size fits all’ solution. Do not set one child against another by invidious comparisons.
- 4 **Example.** If our children see that we try to keep our own high standards they will respect our discipline more. If we have the Word of God at the centre of our daily life, and the

precepts of Christ as our daily guides, they in turn will be more likely to embrace them. If our study of God’s Word, attendance at the ecclesia, fellowship with other believers and genuine love and concern for each other is a natural part of our family life then it is more likely to become a natural part of theirs too. If children eat a steady diet of junk food they become obese. A steady diet of spiritual junk food will result in spiritual obesity. A spiritually healthy child is likely to grow in a spiritually healthy family. Even when a child is punished he must see that he is loved.

- 5 **Positive.** So often, discipline is seen as a series of ‘don’ts’, and as soon as we are told we cannot do something we perversely tend to want to do it, even if we hadn’t wanted to before. So if our discipline is just seen as a phalanx of restrictions we are actually making it harder for our children. True discipline not only warns (that’s the admonishment) of the ill that comes from harmful acts, it shows the good effects that come from good acts and attitudes. Carrots really are often more effective than sticks! Give rewards as well as (and more often than) punishments. Instead of weighing the child down with negative ‘don’ts’, fill their lives up with enjoyable, positive and beneficial experiences.

Our children are a precious gift from God, a gift that brings responsibility to raise them with godly standards (Deut. 6:6-9). Child discipline is not so much about punishing them; it is more about trying, as a family, to live well-balanced, spiritually fulfilling lives. It is about showing our children the way.

*“Train a child in the way he should go,
and when he is old he will not turn from it”
(Prov. 22:6, NIV).*

“The establishment of parental authority and the maintenance of a proper respect will be mainly through the wise handling of the little events of life. Ordinary human experience is made up of small incidents which are of little importance in themselves but which can have great effects for good or ill in the development of character and in the establishment of right conditions for greater issues . . . It should go without saying that if parents desire to have well behaved and well trained children, they must not be like petulant children themselves. If they desire a reasonable and consistent recognition of parental authority, they must be reasonable and consistent in framing their rules. If parents give way to temper and temperament, if rules depend upon the mood of the moment so that a transgression may be a crime or a joke according to the condition of the parental liver, they cannot reasonably expect that the children will feel any genuine respect for them”.

Taken from *Principles and Proverbs*, Islip Collyer, pp. 160-162