

Should Parents Physically Discipline Their Children?

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The question about whether it is acceptable to physically discipline children is one which is always guaranteed to generate strong opinions on both sides of the argument. The Bible clearly counsels us “Withhold not correction from the child . . .” Proverbs 23:13. God Himself sets the pattern for the disciplining of children by setting limits on us and imposing consequences for disobedience. The key factor in God’s discipline is His motivation. Jesus says, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten (Revelation 3:19).” Ellen White counselled, “Parents, let your children see that you love them and will do all in your power to make them happy. If you do so, your necessary restrictions will have far greater weight in their young minds” (*The Adventist Home*, 193).

Contrary to popular misunderstanding, the traditional “spare the rod, spoil the child” interpretation of Proverbs 13:24 does not give parents the right to physically abuse their children. Rightly understood, the use of the rod should be like that of the Heavenly Shepherd who guides and comforts His flock (Ps. 23:4).

The methods we use in disciplining our children should be guided by our primary purpose. Discipline can be defined as training, which is expected to produce a specific character, or pattern of behaviour, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement. Parental education has traditionally emphasized controlling a child’s behaviour as opposed to influencing character. It is possible to spend too much time forcing our children to be ‘good’ without helping them to develop internal values.

We need to be honest with ourselves as to whether our disciplining is truly an outgrowth of a desire to mould the characters of our children into the likeness of Jesus or simply an outlet for our emotional frustrations. Our children should not have to pay the price for our adult feelings of embarrassment, irritation or stress. Harsh discipline may achieve external compliance but, as in my personal experience, breed internal hostility. In my household growing up, my father knew only one form of discipline and that was administered with a leather belt. Somebody once said that, “If all you have in your toolbox is a hammer, you will treat everything like a nail.” Effective discipline requires that we creatively use every option available to us to guide our children in the right direction.

Before my children were born, I made a decision that I would not physically discipline them, not because I believed that it is wrong per se, but because I did not trust myself to do so with the self-control necessary to avoid overstepping the line between legitimate correction and physical abuse.

The reality is that whatever the form of discipline, be it loss of privileges; verbal correction; time outs; natural & logical consequences; chores etc, any form of discipline can become abusive if carried to extremes and administered outside of the context of a loving, grace-filled relationship.

In addition to our moral responsibility, it is also important to bear in mind that in the UK it is unlawful for a parent or carer to smack their child, except where this amounts to 'reasonable punishment'.

However, physical punishment will be considered "unreasonable" if it leaves a mark on the child or if the child is hit with an implement such as a cane or a belt. Ellen White said it well when she commented, "In order to maintain . . . authority, it is not necessary to resort to harsh measures; a firm, steady hand and a kindness which convinces the child of your love will accomplish the purpose" (Child Guidance, 283).