

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: Is there a place for punishment in Christian parenting?

ANSWER: Punishment* is arguably the most difficult task of parenting. The problem is not with punishment itself, but with the **motive** of the parent. Punishment is rarely carried out in a godly way. Often, it is administered out of selfish anger, revenge, and frustration. Usually, the parent has an unloving and impatient demand that a child's behavior change. Sadly, such a parent is blind to his own sin while he punishes, and the punishment rarely has the godly effects discussed later in this article.

God himself uses punishment; the Bible is filled with it.** God also allows His children to **endure the consequences of their sin**... this endurance often feels like punishment. Unlike us, God always punishes out of a holy, just, and perfect motive — his incomprehensible love and desire to transform us into the image of Christ. **Godly** punishment is part of loving our children well. Christian parents in many respects “stand in the place of God” in a physical way. Kids need mercy and justice (Gospel and Law). Continuous affirmation without consequences or punishments for wrong behavior will produce self-absorbed children devoid of conscience. Continuous consequences and punishment without affirmation will produce angry and bitter children devoid of love.

Consider the following points:

1. Punishment should be used like the most powerful antibiotic: **as a last resort and sparingly**. Punishment should be an “event” in the life of a child, not a daily occurrence. The punishment should always “fit the crime”, so it can have maximum effect.
2. The child must perceive deep **love** as the parent's motivation **behind** the punishment or there will be a power-struggle. All power-struggles are the fault of the parent. The child perceives the love motive in the following ways:

Parents must have a **consistent history** of undoubted love with their child. The child must have enough love experiences with the parents to carry him through the pain of punishment.

AND

The child must be able to **sense a parent's love** even as the punishment is "delivered." This sensing happens through the tone of the parent's voice, the look in his eyes, and the way the parents touch after the punishment.

3. Punishment must always be done in a mood of **sorrow** (not anger, revenge or frustration). Children can tell the difference. Punishment done in a selfish, demanding motive will cause a huge relational chasm between parent and child. As a result, the child will store up animosity and look for ways to take revenge on the parent. The legitimacy of the parent's authority will be called into question. Punishment done in anger derails learning. Brain impulses skip the cortex and go straight to the amygdala (the "fight or flight" part of the brain).

4. Once punishment is over, it is over. The child must then be **restored in his relationship to his parents** by using gentle touch, soft words, and a reassuring voice. God forgives us, so we must forgive our children.

5. Punishment must always be followed by the **opportunity of grace**. Reconciliation must be the final goal. Love must never be withheld as a component of punishment.

Biblically, punishment always has a two-fold purpose:

REVELATION: Punishment is to **shock** the child into the realization that life is not here just for him... he cannot and should not do whatever he wants. There are painful consequences for sinful behavior... both right and wrong exist. God is just (as well as merciful) ... people are accountable... the soul deserves condemnation...the "wages of sin is death!" (RM 6:23). Repentance and restitution are required.

RESTORATION: Punishment should open the heart of a child to the **surprise of grace**. God gives us what we do not deserve. The heart that is repentant and aware of sin, is appreciative of the costliness of forgiveness and the wonder of the Cross. Godly punishment should open the door to forgiveness and reconciliation.

As parents punish in a godly way, they are revealing an aspect of the character of God himself... God is not just forgiving; he is also holy and just. The Bible consists of two teachings... the Gospel and the Law. Children

need both teachings in order to fully understand and appreciate the heart of God and understand how God acts.

Don't forget that children need the Gospel too. Research shows us that reward and encouragement are the most effective methods for changing behavior. Research shows us that punishment is somewhat effective for curbing behaviors at their onset. Entrenched behaviors don't respond well to punishment. I would argue that reward and encouragement also are effective in changing the heart.

My personal preference is to **use the natural consequences of life as much as possible in disciplining children.** These powerful emotional experiences help "cement" the lesson without damaging the parent/child relationship.

*Some parents like to call punishments "consequences." Although a consequence of disobedience can be punishment, all consequences are not punishments... although it might "feel" like a punishment. (Obviously, some life consequences are good.) A consequence of throwing food at the dinner table might be "dinner is over for you," a punishment might be a spanking. However, I would imagine that both "feel" like punishment to the child. Both are in fact "delivered" or "enforced" by the parent.

**Adam and Eve driven from the Garden, the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Babylonian Captivity, the youths ripped apart by the bear after mocking Elijah, Ananias and Sapphira struck dead, etc.

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