

Consistency in Discipline

Children are the greatest gift.

Behold, children are a gift of the Lord;

The fruit of the womb is a reward.

Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,

So are the children of one's youth.

How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them (Psalm 127:3)!

They are also the greatest responsibility. Most animals simply deposit their offspring and walk away. Humans have the task of training kids, not just to survive, but to behave and to seek God. "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Pv. 22:6).

They are such a responsibility, that God has created a world in which it takes a mom and a dad to bring a child into the world; a mom and dad that, ideally, can help one another in the great task of raising the children that they brought into the world.

Hear, my son, your father's instruction,

And do not forsake your mother's teaching;

Indeed they are a graceful wreath to your head,

And ornaments about your neck (Prov. 1:8).

Consistency is one key to successfully bringing up children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4).

First of all, discipline must be consistent from occasion to occasion. Everyone knows that if the family dog is not allowed to beg at the table, but gets fed from the table every great once in a while, then he will always beg at the table, in hopes that this will be the one time he gets lucky. When parents set forth a principle for a child, it should be maintained consistently, so as not to create confusion.

If, for example, mom says "no" to the expensive candy in the checkout line, but the child is able, through begging, pleading, reasoning, or whining get mom to give in and buy the candy, then the lesson becomes "I can get my way through begging, pleading, reasoning, and whining." In other words, mom reinforces the very behaviors she despises. No must mean no, without wavering.

Now, this doesn't mean that mom and dad must be unreasonable and inflexible trolls. Mom might provide a reason occasionally, such as, "I don't want you to get in the habit of buying candy every time we go to the store, because it will rot your teeth." This is a good lesson, and important to communicate.

But, children often interpret reasons as an invitation for cajoling: "OK, Mom, then I'll brush my teeth as soon as we get home!" This game, if mom plays it, has no end. When the games start, an uncompromising "because I said so," is a good enough reason.

Mom might also change her mind from time to time, or to offer a special reward. Or she might say, “You can use your allowance money to buy that, if you’d like.” Just beware inconsistency.

Discipline must be consistent from child to child. Playing favorites is a dangerous practice which children notice almost immediately. You might overhear siblings complain to each other, “You were always Dad’s favorite.” They should never have evidence that this is true! This shouldn’t be true!

One of the ugliest fights between siblings happened when Joseph’s ten brothers decided to sell him into slavery. But this fight was precipitated because of their father’s favoritism, as Gen. 37:3–4 says, Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. And his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.

Children are different; they have different abilities, different problems, different qualities. They may not all get good grades, they may not all have green eyes, they may not all be stars on the track team. But they are all gifts of God, with many promising and praiseworthy talents. Mom and dad must be sure to love them equally, reward them equally in accordance to their ability, give them equal tasks in accordance to their ability, and punish them equally.

And discipline must be consistent from parent to parent. Mom and dad must speak with one voice. If one spouse undermines the authority of the other, the children—who are perceptive in this respect—will quickly learn to use this to their advantage. They will learn that they don’t have to listen to one parent. They will love one and despise the other.

Both mother and father have equal authority from God. Deuteronomy 21:18–19 says, If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him he will not even listen to them, then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city...

Now, we won’t get into the punishment that happens next, or how old this kid likely was, but we do see that God was displeased with children who disobeyed either father or mother, and that God expected both father and mother to seize the child and participate in his punishment.

Now, parents sometimes disagree on whether or not to grant permission for certain things, and whether or not a behavior is worthy of punishment, and when and how to administer that punishment. But children must not witness this disagreement. Moms and dads, when you begin to realize that the two of you are not unified on a particular issue, put your kid on hold and say, “Let Mom and I talk about this first, and then we’ll get back to you.” Never allow it to become an argument in front of the kids. Never, ever, ever contradict the rulings already handed down by your spouse in front of the children.

Never allow your children to circumvent the other spouse. Never allow your children to play you off each other. The first time a child hears “No” from one parent, then sneakily asks the other parent to obtain a “Yes,” he should be met with immediate and thunderous punishment from both parents. I can still remember the first time I tried that, in third grade. My parents made sure it was the last time.

It would also be best if Mom and Dad would both include each other in decisions, lest any hint

of division be detected. For example, rather than this:

- “Mom, why can’t I wear this?”
- “Because your dad thinks it’s too revealing.”

Try this subtle but meaningful shift:

- “Mom, why can’t I wear this?”
- “Because your father and I think it’s too revealing.”

The first leaves open the possibility of leverage, and the child will begin to strategize. The second presents a smooth wall of clarity, with no footholds, no chinks, no keyholes. Obviously, consistency in discipline is yet another reason why good communication between spouses is essential to a successful marriage.