

HABIT TEN

Raise Obedient Children

*“A wise son brings joy to his father,
but a foolish son grief to his mother.”*

Proverbs 10:1

This chapter deals with training and disciplining children and complements the previous chapter on raising confident children. The two features of the balanced parent-child relationship — affirmation and discipline — work in tandem. The strong friendship formed by affirmation supports our program of training them in the ways of the Lord. While lack of affirmation may produce children who lack confidence, when it comes to discipline and obedience, there is an even more direct relationship between the parent’s consistent, loving, fair, and firm discipline and their children’s cheerful obedience. Char and I are still benefiting from having respected, enjoyed, loved, and spent time with each child. The strong friendships and respect created between us during those years is still growing now that the obedient children in our home have become obedient adult citizens in society.

While the previous chapter was pleasurable, bear in mind that the “medicine” of this chapter contributes significantly to the “health” of that one. The results of the lessons in this chapter, still evident today in our boy’s lives, give me the courage to share them. Small doses of consistent, loving, and firm training produce years of long-range benefits. It is comparable to training

a young sapling to grow in a certain way — after it becomes a large and strong tree, it remains firmly in the desired position.

The term “punishment” is used deliberately. Whether prison for criminals or spanking for children, punishment is a matter of justice being done. Certainly, there is a role for mercy, but mercy without justice becomes not only unjust, but also unmerciful. Departments of “correction” have failed massively at correcting because they have made the violator into the victim. When we punish our children, we teach them those actions and choices carry consequences and that God’s standards must be taken seriously. You can find a fuller discussion of this issue in “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment” in *God in the Dock* by C.S. Lewis.

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Obedience and Confidence

From the beginning of our parenting experience, Char and I assumed the responsibility for our children’s disobedience. Observing different parents’ discipline policies — or lack of them — over the years confirms that our early hypothesis was right. Though there may be some unique exceptions, if children are not generally obedient, it is their parent’s responsibility. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Ephesians 6:1). “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord” (Colossians 3:20). It is true that these verses address children, but isn’t it the responsibility of the parent to teach them? Interestingly, teaching obedience contributes to a child’s confidence.

I have seen parents scold their disobedient children in the supermarket with heated accusation in the tone of their voice asking, “Why are you so disobedient? Why don’t you listen to me? Why don’t you do what I say?” Publicly scolding disobedient children does not contribute much to their obedience and even less to their confidence. Sometimes there is a bit of a rascal in me. If I had the nerve, cooperation of the child, and were a good ventriloquist, I would put these words in the mouth of the accused child to say to the parent, “Because you never

taught me obedience. You never required it of me consistently.” When children know where the behavioral boundaries are and that they will be enforced, they learn how to function confidently within them. If they do not know where the boundaries are, they feel the constant need to conduct tests to find the boundaries. They are therefore often tentative — not confident.

Well-defined, consistent, and firmly enforced perimeters for acceptable behavior greatly contribute to a child’s confidence and character development. If these future adults do not learn obedience early, it becomes a life-long handicap. Moms and dads have a tremendous privilege and responsibility to bring up obedient, responsible, caring, and mature citizens.

The ways of the Lord include both behavior and attitudes. In our training program and discipline policy, we tried to teach good behavior *and* good attitudes. We wanted our children to not only behave correctly but also think correctly. This does not mean they had to share our opinions. Nevertheless, they were required to have the correct attitudes. For example, we insisted on not only obedience, but also willing, cheerful, and prompt obedience. To encourage this, we expected them to respond with, “Okay, Daddy,” or “Okay, Mommy.” If they were whining, we would say, “Now say that same thing over again, but take the whine out of your voice.” We would then wait until they got it right. We wanted our children to grow up knowing how to cheerfully obey and relate to us. It would prepare them to cheerfully obey and relate to their heavenly Father when they were on their own.

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Neither of our sons was a pushover. We did not want them to be. Nonetheless, we wanted the power of their personalities to remain under control. For example, we never allowed our sons to hit each other. They were required to express their views persuasively with the force of their ideas, not the volume of their voice or superior physical strength. Taking the time to walk them through this helped them develop self-confidence. In debating ideas with them, I still take great delight when one of them, with good reasons, successfully challenges an idea of mine.

A God of Order

The responsibility and authority parents have over their children comes from a God of order. God wants order in family, church, and society even in this present temporary state on earth. The family is the arena wherein God's order is first taught and enforced. Children leave home for a day to go to school, or for months or years later in life. When they do, they carry with them the behaviors and attitudes they learned at home. In spite of this, there is another more far-reaching reason for learning obedience and order.

Awesome privileges and responsibilities accompany being created in the image of God. To comprehend them, think beyond mere earthly life to our eternal life. Becoming highly effective Christians goes far beyond the question of spending eternity in either heaven or hell. God is producing a royal group of priests and kings who will be His worshippers and vice-regents in His universe for eternity. For the eternal scheme to work correctly, we need to learn obedience in this lifetime. Our experience in this life allows us to learn obedience well and prove we are responsible. If we learn well, there are eternal rewards of privilege, dominion, and self-fulfillment available in the next life. Preparing to fulfill God's dream for each of us to become highly effective Christians — our best possible selves — begins with parents training children. Free will with a capacity for dominion makes mankind unique from all other animals. It also makes learning obedience necessary, and parents possess the responsibility to begin it.

Friendship with Children

It is not contradictory to be both a friend of your child and a disciplinarian. We cultivated affirming relationships of strong friendship with our sons as discussed in Chapter 9 (Raise Confident Children). In this chapter, I share the practical ways we implemented our disciplinary program. As far as I can tell, the two roles were never confused in our son's minds. They never felt we were being inconsistent. They knew that our posture towards them was supportive. Still, when their behavior merited it, our role would automatically change. Their "friend" became God's law enforcement officer — both in one person. Let me explain further.