

## On Raising Children

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Of all the challenges we face in life, the greatest is raising our children to be responsible adults. Following a few simple guidelines can make the task easier.

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*“Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him” (Prov. 22:15).*

*“The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother” (Prov. 29:15).*



Comedian Jim Gaffigan—the father of five children—once observed, “I don’t know what’s more exhausting about parenting: the getting up early, or acting like you know what you’re doing.” Every parent can relate to that sentiment. We know that how our kids turn out in adulthood will be determined largely by what kind of parents we are now; yet we are painfully aware of our struggles to do the job well.

After raising my own children and watching other parents raise theirs (successfully or otherwise), I’ve come to the conclusion that child-rearing can be boiled down to one simple principle: *Children need boundaries that are enforced consistently with love.* Let’s examine the four key elements in this formula.

First, *children require boundaries.* “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child” is another way of saying that kids, especially younger ones, are ignorant of how life works. They are a bundle of appetites and passions but without the wisdom to know how to

channel those impulses appropriately. They’re not evil; they just don’t know any better. It’s the role of parents to set limits that will teach the kids the difference between right and wrong behavior. Kids who grow up in the absence of restrictions or rules usually end up as out-of-control adults—much more dangerous, and not nearly as cute. The child who is “left to himself” will someday shame the parents who were too busy or too tired to bother.

But setting boundaries is worthless if those boundaries are not *enforced*. “The rod of correction” is much more than a swat on the bottom. It is a network of predictable consequences built into a child’s life by parents who strive to make the rules stick. Reacting to misbehavior with a weak comment like “that’s not nice,” with no further consequence, teaches a child that the rules really don’t exist and can be ignored with impunity. (As a side note, efforts to enforce the rules on children are negated by parents who do not follow the rules themselves. Parental hypocrisy is enormously destructive in teaching kids respect for authority.)

Taking this a step further, a child will learn that the boundaries are meaningful only when they are enforced *consistently*. If there is one area where most parents struggle, it is on this point. Uttering rash threats in a moment of frustration—threats that we have no real intention of carrying out—or throwing up our hands and giving up after repeated acts of defiance, teaches the kids that the system can be manipulated to their advantage. And trust me, children are quite good at spotting those weaknesses. However hard it may be, we must be firm and consistent in enforcing our standards.

Finally, parental discipline must be administered in *a spirit of love*. Everything said above about discipline does not give parents a license to become control freaks. Children need to know that their parents love them intensely, even when they are being disciplined. Parents should actively encourage their kids to explore their world—within reasonable limits—and to express their individual interests in a way that will allow them to grow and become confident. Smothering our kids under a mountain of stifling regulations designed to “show them who’s boss” crushes their spirit and sets them up for depression or rebellion in adulthood.

Raising children is a challenge, no doubt, but it need not be a nightmare. Trust God, hold your kids close, and enjoy the journey!

— David King