

# The Perfect Way to Train Our Children

*by Bryan Gibson*

The perfect parent doesn't exist, but the perfect pattern does—the one given by our heavenly Father. To better understand how to raise our children, let's look at seven different methods our heavenly Father uses to train us.

1. Obedience—that's what our heavenly Father expects, even demands from us (Matthew 7:21; 28:20). To accomplish that, **He goes to great lengths to make sure that we understand and respect His authority.** “Thus says the LORD”—that's how many of the Old Testament prophets began their message. “I am the LORD”—that phrase is repeated over and over again in Leviticus, as well as other Old Testament books. “Listen and do what I say, because I am the LORD”—that's His message in a nutshell. And the message is the same in the New Testament. Jesus has now been given all authority (Matthew 28:18-20), and that explains phrases like, “we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus”; “you know what commandments we gave through the Lord Jesus”; “we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:1-2; 2 Thessalonians 3:6). The Lord has spoken and we better do what He says (Luke 6:46).

Obedience—that, too, is what we should expect, even demand from our children (Ephesians 6:1-3; Colossians 3:20). To accomplish that, we need to imitate our heavenly Father—**we need to make sure they understand and respect our authority.** “Listen and do what I say, because I am your father (or mother), and the Lord put me in charge.” However we may express it, that's the message we need to get across to our children. If they scream “NO” at us when we tell them to do something, if they roll their eyes or stomp their feet, if they wait to do it when it's convenient for them, or if they just simply refuse to do it—we haven't done a very good job in getting this message across. Disobedience to parents is serious business (Romans 1:30; 2 Timothy 3:2), and they need to know it. Our children will bring us so much more joy, now, and in the future, if we can instill in them this respect for authority at a very early age. And the added bonus is that this respect for our authority will help instill in them respect for other authority figures—like coaches, teachers, administrators, law enforcement, and most importantly, their heavenly Father.

“For I also am a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it” (Luke 7:8). Wouldn't it be great if we had the same understanding of authority that this man had, and wouldn't it be great if we could pass that same understanding on to our children?

2. To reinforce His authority, and to further encourage our obedience, our heavenly Father rewards good behavior and punishes bad behavior. And we're not just talking about heaven and hell. Sure, heaven is the ultimate reward and hell the ultimate punishment, but along the way, our Father uses other forms of reward and punishment, too.

On the reward side, for example, our Father lets us know when we're pleasing Him, with the commendations scattered throughout the New Testament epistles, and with specific phrases like, "for this is well-pleasing to the Lord," or "well-pleasing to God" (Colossians 3:20; Philippians 4:18). Not that He needs to say that for every act of obedience, but it sure helps to hear it from time to time. And He rewards obedience in other ways, too. Pray to me, He says, and "the peace of God...will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). Do what the Father says, and He "will be with you" (Philippians 4:9); He will "supply all your need" (Philippians 4:19); He will give you "grace" (1 Peter 5:5). Read the through the Book of John sometime and just notice all the rewards Jesus offers to those who follow Him (4:14; 6:35, 37; 7:38; 8:12, 36; 10:9-10; 12:26, 46; 14:23, 27; 15:7, 10).

On the punishment side, He also lets us know when we're NOT pleasing Him (see the New Testament letters). Their rebuke is our rebuke—if we're guilty of the same things. And what about the built-in consequences to sin—to lying, envy, sexual immorality, drinking, etc.? Aren't those a form of punishment, too? Disciplinary action by the church, the type commanded in 1 Corinthians 5—that's a form of punishment, too (2 Corinthians 2:6).

More examples of each could be cited, but what we're trying to show is the balanced way in which God trains us. He praises us; He rebukes us. He rewards us; He punishes us. Both sides serve to keep us in line.

So that's what we should strive for in the way we train our own children—this ideal balance between reward and punishment. It's certainly easy to swing to one extreme or the other. Some parents excel in praising their children, but lack the courage to correct them. Others will spank their children, yet offer very little praise and encouragement. Children need both. They need to hear things like, "good job;" "we're really proud of you;" and "keep up the good work." They need to be rewarded for good behavior. But they certainly need correction and punishment, too. They need to hear words of disapproval, and they also need to feel the firm hand of correction, especially in the early years (Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15).

3. Our heavenly Father is concerned about our physical well-being, but He puts far more emphasis on our spiritual well-being. While most of us have been blessed far beyond our needs, that's really all He promises—the basic necessities of life (Matthew 6:11, 25; 1 Timothy 6:8). Spiritual blessings—that's a completely different matter. He lavishes those upon us (Ephesians 1:3-14), and included among those is a vast storehouse of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:1-3). He's far more concerned with preparing us for eternal life than making us comfortable in this life. So when it comes to our own children, let's not get so caught up in providing them things, that we neglect their spiritual training. If we don't bring our children up in the "training and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4), we have failed, no matter how much we may give them materially.

4. Our heavenly Father is approachable—He encourages us to talk to Him, to bring our problems to Him. He's sympathetic to our weaknesses, our problems, and He very much wants to help us (Hebrews 2:16-18; 4:14-16; Philippians 4:6-7; 1 Peter 5:6-7). And so, first, we should teach our children to pray, teach them that their heavenly Father does indeed answer prayer and that He wants to help them. But shouldn't we be approachable, too? It's

awful hard to give them the specific help they need if we don't listen. We go to our heavenly Father in prayer because we have confidence in His willingness and ability to help us. Granted, we don't have the same wisdom and power of the heavenly Father, but our children do need our help and they need to be confident that we're both willing and able to provide it. If we don't listen, they may stop coming, and they may seek answers in all the wrong places, and from all the wrong people.

5. Our heavenly Father doesn't just teach us how to live; He shows us—through the perfect example of His Son (1 Peter 2:21), and many other fine examples in the Scriptures (Philippians 3:17). The application to parents couldn't be more obvious. We need to be living examples of everything we want them to be, or more importantly, what God wants them to be. If we want them to have virtues like kindness, forgiveness, self-control, modesty, discretion, etc., they need to see them in us. If we want them to study the Bible, they need to see us doing it. And the same goes for faithful attendance, prayer, showing hospitality, and a number of other things that faithful Christians ought to be busy doing. Of this we can be certain—children will remember much longer what we did than what we said.

6. Our heavenly Father expects a lot from us (Ephesians 4:11-13; Colossians 1:9-12, 28), but He does allow room for growth. This doesn't mean that He excuses sin or treats it lightly, but it does mean that He shows patience while we strive diligently to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Think about Christ's work with the apostles, and how often they fell short of His expectations. James and John wanted to call fire down from heaven on the Samaritans (Luke 9:51-56). These two, along with the other apostles, argued about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Luke 22:24-30). Peter vehemently denied any association with Jesus (Luke 22:54-62). Jesus did rebuke them, sometimes very strongly (Matthew 16:23), but He stuck with them, and look at the results—especially with Peter, James, and John. Read the Book of Acts, and you'll see what fine men they turned out to be. So it's fine to have high expectations for our children (Ephesians 6:4), but let's do realize that it's a long training process and that it takes time for them to develop some of the qualities we want them to have (Hebrews 12:11). Obedience can be established at a very early age, but other qualities like unselfishness and meekness—these will take some time. Of course, if we're not careful, we can show too much patience. The time may come when they ought to be doing certain things, when maybe they should have advanced more, and we need to let them know about it (see Hebrews 5:11-14).

7. Most every parent would claim that they love their children, but is it the kind of love the heavenly Father shows His children—a love that loves righteousness and hates sin (Hebrews 1:9); a love that's willing to rebuke and chasten (Revelation 3:19); a love that acts in harmony with truth, or with knowledge and discernment (Philippians 1:9)? Does our love willingly sacrifice for the good of others, and in particular our children (John 10:11, 15, 17-18; 1 John 3:16-18)? Does it love even the undeserving (Romans 5:6-8)? Does it exhibit the following characteristics: suffers long and is kind; does not envy; does not parade itself; is not puffed up; does not behave rudely; does not seek its own; is not provoked; thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)? Our heavenly Father regards His children

as the “apple of His eye” (Zechariah 2:8)—do we feel the same way, and do we treat our children accordingly? Do we sometimes put more on our children than they can possibly bear? Our heavenly Father doesn’t (Matthew 11:28-30; 1 Corinthians 10:13). Do we ever show partiality among our children, like Isaac and Jacob did (Genesis 25:27-28; 37:3-4)? That’s not the way our Father treats us (Acts 10:34-35; 1 Peter 1:17), and aren’t we glad for that? Can you imagine the impact it would make on the hearts and lives of our children if we could learn to love the way our heavenly Father does?