

# Faithfully Disciplining Our Children

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*“Those who spare the rod hate their children,  
but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.”*

Proverbs 13:24 (NRSV)

This verse from Proverbs is one of those challenging texts in the Bible that has sadly been used to justify spanking and other forms of corporal punishment. One of the most popular supporters of corporal punishment is Dr. James Dobson of the Focus on the Family. His *Dare to Discipline* book (more than 3 million copies sold) was featured in *100 Christian Books that Changed the Century* by William Peterson and Randy Peterson (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2002, pp. 161-162). The Focus on the Family’s “syndicated radio programs [are] heard daily on more than 3,000 radio facilities in 12 languages in more than 95 other countries.” (<http://www.family.org/welcome>) He claims that over 200 million people every day hear his radio commentaries (<http://www.family.org/welcome/bios/A0022947.cfm>) While he is very popular and influential, Dobson is not a good biblical interpreter nor supported by the most recent psychological studies.

John J. Collins, the Holmes Professor of Old Testament Criticism & Interpretation at Yale University Divinity School, is an outstanding biblical scholar who has served as the president of both the Society for Biblical Literature (starting in 2002) and the Catholic Biblical Association (1996). His commentary on Proverbs 13:24 is a helpful one:

“We need hardly warn any modern parent that scripture should not be read as inspired child psychology. The proverb is only repeating the accepted cliché of its time. It is typical of all ancient wisdom that learning and education was thought to involve suffering. It is probably true that we learn more from the harder experiences of life than from the easier. However, discipline is only commended for the results it can achieve; it is not a value in itself. The severe parent or teacher, or the scolding preacher, is not necessarily the better one. Wisdom requires that we take account of the best methods of training and communication in our own time and place.” (*Proverbs & Ecclesiastes* by John J. Collins, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980, p. 40)

What are the “best methods of training and communication in our own time and place”? Modern human sciences can help us to understand human behavior, as well as to be better parents. People of faith are called to use the best of modern psychology, sociology and other sciences, for these can offer us new insights about ourselves and how we interact with others. The Holy Spirit can work through “secular” sciences to help Christians. John Calvin made this point in the 16th century in his most famous work:

"If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit himself. But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic and mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect

God's gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths." (*Institutes*, 11.2.15-16). So Christians have an opportunity and even an obligation to learn from disciplines such as psychology, when reflecting on issues such as the spanking of children.

The July 2002 (Vol. 128, No. 4, pp. 539-579) issue of the *Psychological Bulletin*, published by the American Psychological Association (APA) featured a major study by psychologist Elizabeth Thompson Gershoff, PhD, of the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University: "Corporal Punishment by Parents and Associated Child Behaviors and Experiences: A Meta-Analytic and Theoretical Review". Dr. Gershoff did a careful analysis of 88 previous studies with collected data done over 62 years that examined both the positive and negative behaviors in children in relationship to corporal punishment. APA has her complete report available online as well as critiques by others and her responses to those critiques at [http://www.apa.org/journals/bul/press\\_releases/july\\_2002/](http://www.apa.org/journals/bul/press_releases/july_2002/)

Dr. Gershoff looked at a number of behaviors and experiences including immediate compliance, the parent/child relationship, physical abuse from the parent, mental health and aggression. She found "strong associations between corporal punishment and all eleven child behaviors and experiences. Ten of the associations were negative such as with increased child aggression and antisocial behavior. The single desirable association was between corporal punishment and increased immediate compliance on the part of the child." In other words, corporal punishment may make a child obey, but it does so in the context of negative psychological consequences for the child, which may even include child abuse.

The study by Dr. Gershoff states that not all children who are punished with a spanking will necessarily suffer in the long term. One problem, though, is that it is difficult for parents to "draw the line;" most believe they are punishing a child moderately even when the punishment is more severe. Further, greater physical punishment is more likely to lead to aggression and mental health problems. One of the biggest problems with corporal punishment is that it doesn't lead to moral growth in the child; the child simply obeys out of fear. George W. Holden, PhD, of the University of Texas at Austin, concurs with Gershoff's findings and writes that they "reflect the growing body of evidence indicating that corporal punishment does no good and may even cause harm." Holden believes that psychologists [and churches!] should be recommending methods other than spanking, for parents who are seeking to discipline their children.

The best parenting program for churches currently available was developed by Dr. Michael H. Popkin, a psychologist who served as the Director of Child and Family Services at an Atlanta hospital. In 1980, he founded Active Parenting with the purpose of providing parenting programs using the new innovation of educational videotapes. Freda A. Gardner, professor of Christian Education at Princeton Seminary (and later Moderator of the PCUSA General Assembly), wrote the first church guide to this Active Parenting program. Professor Gardner is a gifted teacher who brings a true depth of understanding to her subject as well as practical insights; she was later recognized by her fellow Christian educators in the Association of Presbyterian Christian Educators (APCE) as the "Educator of the Year." The basic Active Parenting programs for parents of elementary school age children have been revised and updated twice, with the most recent edition (*Active Parenting Now*) coming out in 2002.

Popkin gives parents creative, non-violent ways to discipline children. The parent's guide includes a chart showing the difference between logical consequences vs. punishment:

### Logical Consequences Vs. Punishment

#### Logical Consequences:

Are logically connected to the misbehavior

Are intended to teach responsible behavior

Are administered in a firm and calm manner

Are respectful

Allow the child to participate

#### Punishment:

is an arbitrary retaliation for misbehavior

is intended to teach blindly obedient behavior

is often delivered in an atmosphere of anger and resentment

is disrespectful

is dictated by the authority

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(Michael H. Popkin, Ph.D., *Active Parenting Now, Parents' Guide*, Active Parenting Publishers, 2002, p. 84)

Discipline is only one part of parenting. Churches can help parents in other aspects of their important calling as well. Whenever our churches have joyful celebrations of baptisms, a congregation promises to help the parents nurture their children in the faith. Churches need to be involved in family ministries because of the promises we make at each child's baptism, because of Jesus' call for us to love our neighbors, and because families enrich the lives of congregations.

A recent Presbyterian Panel survey of pastors found that resources for the spiritual formation of children were what they wanted most (August 2002). The Directory for Worship in the *Book of Order* has some helpful ideas (see W-5.4000 "Prayer in Personal Worship"; W-5.7000 "Worship in Families and Households"; W-6.2000 2. Christian Nurture; and W-7.000 "Worship and the Ministry of the Church in the World"). The revised church guide to *Active Parenting Now* has twelve handouts that are new and offer a mixture of biblical material, questions for individual and group reflection and a wealth of practical ideas to help children and parents grow in faith together. Web pages' addresses with helpful additional online resources are in this updated edition. The church guide seeks to combine an emphasis on "inward and outward journeys" of faith, spiritual formation with active discipleship with handouts that include table graces/mealtime blessings, "101 Ways to Live the Good News with Kids", Church World Service's intergenerational activities for a better world and much more.

The churches doing parenting programs will benefit church members and others in the community. Many of the parenting skills like sensitive listening can easily be used by participants in other contexts, such as between couples or at work. Young families may join our churches after the parents first come to attend a parenting seminar.

Our churches offering quality parenting programs will help "parents receive the grace to care for children in love and to nurture their individuality." (*The Confession of 1967*)

**Authors:**

Bruce and Carolyn Winfrey Gillette are the parents of John (age 15), Catherine (age 12) and Sarah (age 10). They are co-pastors of the First Presbyterian Church, Pitman, NJ since 1994. For sixteen years, the Gillettes have taught parenting programs annually, sometimes team teaching with elementary and high school counselors and a Catholic parochial school principal. They wrote the 2003 revision of Freda A. Gardner's *Active Parenting Now in the Community of Faith: A Biblical and Theological Guide*. The Gillettes have done an annotated bibliography that offers 40 resources (90% of these resources were published in the last five years) for church libraries, personal reading and group discussions along with a suggested list of thirty helpful web sites for parents, church educators and pastors at [www.ActiveParenting.com/FaithResources.htm](http://www.ActiveParenting.com/FaithResources.htm)