

## The Biblical Approach to Spanking

Regardless of the method, the Bible's word on discipline clearly demands that parents be responsible and diligent in spanking, but strongly prohibits physical abuse of any kind. Obviously, the biblical approach is balanced, reasonable, and controlled. So let's get very practical. What does it look like to spank in a way that obeys Scripture, modifies attitudes and behavior, and actually strengthens the bond between parent and child?

### Seven Steps

Don't panic when you have to use action to enforce discipline. I know how much second-guessing a parent can do. Let me give you seven key steps that will enable you to discipline your child without fear of overstepping your bounds.

**1. *Clear warning.*** Your first interaction with your child about a situation should be verbal. A child should never be blindsided by the discipline you hand down to her. It should always be preceded by a clear warning, both for her sake and for yours. You want to know whether your child deliberately crossed a line or made an honest mistake. A clear warning will help her steer clear of danger and will help you know you're correcting intentional disobedience. That's why it would be appropriate to issue a warning to Johnny the first time you see him walking out of the neighbor boy's house.

The enforcement of discipline comes only after words have not done the job. Physical means of correction are only appropriate in cases of clear disobedience, and then only at certain ages.

**2. *Establish responsibility.*** It's important for your child to own up to his misbehavior. Many parents make the mistake of asking, "Why did you do that?" That's not a good question; "why" doesn't help him admit his responsibility in the situation. Besides being a theological no-brainer — your child is a sinner with a predisposition to disobedience, which he inherited from you and every other generation all the way back to the first parents in the Garden — that question gives him room to inject shades of gray into his understanding and explanations. He'll begin to rationalize, and you'll lose sight of the real issue. Here's a better way to go about it:

"Johnny, *what* did you do wrong?"

"Nothing. Everyone was going over to that house, and I just went in for a minute."

"Try again. What did you do wrong?"

"I only went in to ..."

"I'm going to give you one more chance. What did we talk about?"

"I'm not supposed to go over there for any reason."

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"So *what* did you do wrong?"

"I disobeyed you."

Do you see how, with that kind of conversation, you're calm, controlled, and not trying to punish? You're trying to help him learn. Remember that your child can't learn without being able to own up to his responsibility. No one can. When you put your child in a position of having to do that, you're preparing him for responsible adulthood.

Remember to always keep your focus on the child's behavior, not his identity. If Johnny says, "I'm a bad person" or "You don't like me anymore," affirm how much he is loved and how special he is, but turn his attention immediately back to his actions. You want him to understand that the act was wrong and that he is fully capable of doing the right thing.

**3. *Avoid embarrassment.*** Never embarrass your children in front of their friends, siblings, or even strangers. Don't yank them out of a booth at a restaurant, don't yell where everyone around can hear you, or do anything else that will make your children feel as if all eyes are on them. All that accomplishes is shame. Instead, go to a private place. At home, that can be the bedroom. In public, it can be a trip to the restroom for a young child or a firm statement that "we need to talk later" to an older child. However you do it, don't damage your kids' esteem among their peers or even among strangers. Embarrassment can do a lot of damage that you'll have a hard time undoing later on.

**4. *Communicate grief.*** I want my children to know that more than being angry, I'm disappointed and heartbroken when they disobey. Early on in their lives, I let them know I trusted them. And when that trust has been violated, they need to know that the relationship is wounded. Many times I've had tears roll down my face when their actions hurt me and betrayed our relationship. When kids see the grief of their parents, they'll better understand how their sin affects God. They'll understand that God isn't shaking His fist at us every time we make a mistake, but He grieves just as a loving parent does when witnessing the destructive nature of disobedience.

**5. *Flick your wrist.*** This is an extremely practical method that will save you a lot of second-guessing. Remember the point of a spanking: It's to sting, to provide a painful deterrent to misbehavior, not to injure.

The Bible never implies that the rod of discipline should be violent. It offers no specifics about how hard a spanking should be, and there's no reason to assume that it's talking about a brutal form of punishment. Just the opposite, in fact. A parent who reaches back and swings hard is acting out of anger and frustration, not out of love and desire for the child's welfare. That's unbiblical by anyone's definition.

When you spank, use a wooden spoon or some other appropriately sized paddle and flick your wrist. That's all the force you need. It ought to hurt — an especially difficult goal for mothers to accept — and it's okay if it produces a few tears and sniffles. If it doesn't hurt, it isn't really discipline, and ultimately it isn't very loving because it will not be effective in modifying the child's behavior.

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Have the child lean over his bed and make sure you apply the discipline with a quick flick of the wrist to the fatty tissue of the buttocks, where a sting can occur without doing any damage to the body. You want to be calm, in control, and focused as you firmly spank your child, being very careful to respect his body.

As your children get older and begin to think more abstractly, spanking becomes less effective and less necessary. A preteen is probably getting past the spanking stage and more into the lost-privilege approach. But if you've done your job earlier in their lives, spanking will have become less necessary at that point anyway. A firm, grace-controlled hand of discipline in early years, combined with a loving attitude, will usually prevent or soften the rebellion of later years.

**6. *Sincere repentance.*** When my kids were small, I'd let them sit in my lap after a spanking and cry for a while. That was a great time to model for them the love behind the discipline. Then after a few minutes, I'd ask, "Are you ready to talk about this with Daddy and with God?" When I received a nod and could tell repentance and genuine sorrow had occurred, I revisited the issue and asked them, "What did you do wrong?" I wanted to help them clearly relate the discipline to the behavior, not to them as a person.

Then I would ask, "With whom do you need to make things right?" Often they would realize they needed to make things right not just with me and with God, but also to apologize to a brother or sister. Then I'd take the opportunity to coach them in how to approach God, what to say, how to confess their sin, and how to receive forgiveness. When they said something like, "I'm sorry, God, for \_\_\_\_\_. Please forgive me," I would tell them how special they were, both to me and to God, and that they'd been disciplined to correct misbehavior, not because they were a bad person.

Those dialogues trained them for a life of relating to God humbly and honestly as no other experience could. And in later years my children told me that some of the times they'd felt closest to me were during those periods of forgiveness and reconciliation.

**7. *Unconditional love.*** For my part, some of the most intimate, touching moments I ever had with my kids were right after exercising discipline. So after disciplining your child, let me encourage you to take him in your arms and pray, "Thank you, Lord, for my precious boy, for the wonderful way You've made him, for the amazing guy he is, and for all the gifts You've given him. Please help him remember what's right and give him the strength to do it. Thank You that he has taken responsibility for what he did. We know You've taken a big eraser and wiped it off the board. You've forgiven him and made him absolutely clean, and I forgive him too." Then give him a big hug and go do something fun. He'll know he's still accepted and that there's absolutely no barrier between the two of you.

The picture and the process I've just described don't fit the portrayal of spanking that our culture tries to give us, do they? A parent who disciplines his child this way is not an angry, insensitive person with a big club and a vicious agenda. Instead, this is a picture of using the rod God's way to bring about actions that will keep a child from destruction. That's about as loving and compassionate as a parent can get.

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Many people have bought into a bad, stereotypical model of spanking, where out-of-control parents and religious fanatics beat children instead of disciplining them. Not surprisingly, they have rejected it entirely, assuming that since they don't know how to do it right, it shouldn't be done at all. "Extreme spanking" has dominated the discussion at the expense of more moderate practices of physical discipline. As a result, a huge segment of the population believes spanking is barbaric, basing that opinion on the abuses rather than the biblical model. But many parents who believe this are having enormous problems at home – constant conflict, high tension, complete loss of control, and no tools to deal with any of it.

If you're consistent with the actions of discipline for a few weeks, you'll find that your children have clear boundaries, and they're likely to have a clearer conscience and changed behavior. You'll probably sense much less destructive stress in your home environment as well. Your children will feel a lot more loved, and they'll have the privilege and blessing of being in a home that's at peace.

**Chip Ingram**