

PARENTING

ACCORDING TO

PROVERBS

A short and Biblical guide to applying the wisdom of Proverbs to the role of Christian parenting at home.

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The Bible has much to say about how parents ought to treat their children and lead their homes, and much of it is located in the book of wisdom that we call “Proverbs.” This short guide is an attempt to summarize a lot of the content of Proverbs regarding parenting, and present it in a simple and memorable way with some additional resources that I hope will be helpful as well. My points are that parents (1) lead the way, (2) train up in the way, and (3) correct waywardness.

1. PARENTS LEAD THE WAY

“The righteous who walks in his integrity—blessed are his children after him!” (Proverbs 20:7)

Lead by loving Jesus – The biggest blessing you can give your kids is for you to live a righteous life of integrity before God. You can’t pass on what you don’t possess, and you can’t cultivate in them what hasn’t yet captivated you. So before talking about training up our children, you need to ask, “Am I living righteously and with integrity before God?”

Integrity is not perfection – The words “righteous” and “integrity” in that verse do not mean perfection, but rather someone who is trusting in God and following God. As Christians we know that our righteousness comes from Christ, by trusting in his atoning death on cross (Rom. 3:22). He took our sin on the cross in his death, and he rose again offering us forgiveness, and righteousness as a free gift (what we call “imputed righteousness”), as well as eternal life with God. By faith in Jesus we are forgiven, reconciled to God, and made right or “justified.” We receive the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and help us live righteously, not perfectly, growing in grace to be more and more like Jesus.

So to “walk in integrity,” like Proverbs 20:7 says, doesn’t mean we’re perfect, but rather that we are aware of how imperfect we are. Instead of hiding our imperfections and sins we confess them and bring them into the light and repent from them. To be righteous and walk in integrity means trusting in and communing with Jesus moment by moment and day by day.

We lead in it, they are blessed by it – When we live like this, Proverbs 20:7 says that our children are blessed by it. A tight, intimate relationship with Jesus is the most important commitment we have as parents—this at least means spending daily time with Jesus, worshiping him, praying, and reading God’s word. This will bless our children by strengthening us to love them well and lead them to what matters most. It will also bless our children by showing them what authentic faith in Jesus actually looks like in daily life; as the saying goes, “some of life’s best lessons are caught not taught.” Don’t just teach them, show them. If you want your kids to have a vision for living their lives for Jesus, let them catch it by watching you.

2. PARENTS TRAIN UP IN THE WAY

“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6)

A life wholly surrendered to God – Some people are tempted to throw out this verse about training up children because, in their opinion, it doesn't hold its weight. It says “he will not depart,” but what about all the kids that grew up going to church and then left the church as adults or when they got to college? We need to be wary about reducing, “Train up a child in the way he should go” to just going to church once a week (or once a month for many!). Going to church is crucially important to our spiritual health and training up our children, but if the other six days of our week aren't saturated in the things of God, that's not “the way” anyone should go.

The “way,” all throughout the Old Testament, and the book of Proverbs as well, is to love the Lord your God with *all of your heart, soul, and strength* (Deut. 6:5-6), and to trust in the Lord with *all your heart* and acknowledge him in *all your ways*, and he will make your path straight (Pr. 3:5-6). That's “the way.” A life wholly surrendered to God.

Functional agnosticism or atheism – So if you go to church every Sunday, but the rest of your life is devoid of God-exalting worship, Christ-centered gratitude, heartfelt prayer, reading and studying the word of God, discipleship, service, hospitality, evangelism, etc. then what you're actually doing is training your children to be apathetic about the Lord with 98% of their lives (we're awake for about 112 hours each week, and church takes 1.5, so that's 2%).

If church on Sunday is your only “God time,” and the Lord doesn't really factor into the way you talk, or think, or live the rest of your life, or order your priorities, you need to realize that 98% of your life is functionally agnostic. If that is the environment our kids grow up in, then they are not “departing” from anything when they say “I'm agnostic” or “I'm an atheist” when they get to college. Rather, they are continuing in how they were trained for 98% of their life.

Not always the case – Now, this is not the case for everyone who grows up in church and walks away; the reality is that we are unable (no matter how great our parenting is) to save our children's souls or change our children's hearts—only God can do that. Salvation belongs to the Lord (Ps. 3:8). There are some great, godly parents who love the Lord and love their children and lead their families well (though not perfectly) every single day, and yet their children drift; it is tragic and painful when this happens.

But from my experience doing young adult ministry, many millennials who grew up in church and now claim agnosticism or atheism (or Buddhism, etc.) testify that while they attended church regularly, it was usually disconnected from the rest of their lives at home—there was little to no

family worship, little to no intentionality to pray together, little to no time reading the Bible as a family, little to no time learning theology as a family or looking at historic creeds and catechisms, and little to no time serving their neighbors or inviting the lost into their homes in Christian hospitality.

Family worship – Family worship has fallen on hard times, and we need to recover it. Faith needs to be nurtured daily at home not just weekly in church. Training children up in the way they should go means living a life saturated in things of God. Jonathan Edwards, an 18th century pastor and theologian, said that, “Every Christian family ought to be, as it were, a little church.” What he meant is that parents are like mini-pastors of their families, loving and leading their families toward spiritual growth. We are called to make disciples in our homes. We don't just give an hour and a half, once a week, at church, but we help our children see that every hour is a gift from God and for God, through him and to him ([Rom. 11:36](#)).

Read, pray, and sing daily – So practically, what pastors throughout church history have encouraged families to do regularly in order to cultivate this kind of life at home is read, pray, and sing together. In our regular rhythms as a family (think: car rides, dinner, bedtimes, breakfast, Saturday mornings, etc.) we ought to weave in the habits of reading the Bible together, praying together, and singing God's praises together. As well as fun things like family camping trips where you look at the stars and talk about God's greatness ([Ps. 8:3-4](#)), or going fishing and talk about Jesus calling his disciples “fishers of men” ([Matt. 4:19](#)). A lot of people ask, “What if my kids don't like that?” It's a good question, and the reality is that sometimes they won't—but they also won't always like eating their vegetables, going to school, or doing their chores. Kids like cartoons and popsicles and toys. As parents we need to train them to love what is right and good, and do what is right and good, and nothing is more right and good than loving and worshiping the Lord. He is worthy! Again, ultimately only God can change their little hearts, but we can sow seeds and pray that he grows them and that they bear fruit. Read, pray, sing.

Sowing seeds – Charles Spurgeon said, “As we sow we reap. Let us from the beginning mingle the name of Jesus with their ABC.” Even from early childhood, sow the seeds of the gospel into the hearts of your child by “mingling” the name of Jesus in all you do, weaving the things of God into your family rhythms. There are great tools for this, like *The Biggest Story ABC* book which helps teach the ABC's while also teaching the gospel story. Read this with your children before bed, pray a short prayer, and sing a simple song of praise to God! In only a few minutes you have sown some seeds that the Lord will bless, nurture, and grow. With older children or teens, spend time reading a chapter of the Bible together after dinner, or memorizing a verse, or studying a catechism (like the *New City Catechism* by Tim Keller). Listen to their hard questions and wrestle through them

together—don't just punt all your time at home to screens. Consecrate your home for the Lord, and train your children up to love the Lord and rest in his grace, in the context of a loving relationship where you support, encourage, and play with your kids. So come to church, but don't stop there. Belong to a church, commit to godly community, and saturate your life in the things of God.

Resources to help with this:

- [Family Worship, by Don Whitney](#)
- [Family Shepherds, by Voddie Baucham](#)
- [New City Catechism for Kids](#)
- [The Biggest Story ABC](#)
- [First Bible Basics: A Counting Primer](#)
- [Psalms of Praise: A Movement Primer](#)
- [The Jesus Storybook Bible](#)
- [Thoughts to Make your Heart Sing](#)

3. PARENTS CORRECT WAYWARDNESS

“Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.” (Proverbs 22:15)

The corrective rod of discipline – The majority of parenting is the first two points (loving Jesus and leading the way, and training children up in the way by cultivating a worshipful home), and this is called “formative discipline,” where you positively teach what is right and good. But there is also the need for corrective discipline when children drift, stray, wander, disobey, sin, and rebel (which happens a lot), and we are called to correct them in love.

The word “folly” in [Proverbs 22:15](#) simply means foolishness, which is always depicted as getting off the path that leads to life and onto a path that leads to harm. This verse explains that, “folly is bound up in the heart of a child” (which, if you’re a parent, you already knew). Our kids are the cutest sinners in the world, but they’re still sinners. We love them to pieces, but they are born with a sinful nature. They don’t have to be taught how to lie, push, and steal—that comes from within ([Eph. 2:3](#)). We want to help disciple them out of sin and into godliness.

Discipline for sin, not accidents – The “rod” is not for spilling milk because they aren’t coordinated yet (that’s just being a kid) or crying because they’re hungry (that’s just being a baby). We don’t discipline for that. We do not discipline for accidents that just come from the nature of being a child. But deliberate decisions to do things that are sinful and wrong and unloving (ex: lying,

hitting, stealing, insulting others, etc.), that are not good for them or others, is when the Bible prescribes what's called "the rod," which is meant to "drive out folly" (Pr. 22:15). It's meant to correct and protect; correct sin and protect from its consequences.

The word for "rod" here (Hebrew: *shevet/shebet*) is likely referring to a little tree branch, which is how you would give a little disciplinary pop to the bottom as a spanking in ancient Israel. So do not hear "spank" or "rod" and think "abuse." Parents should never abuse their children, ever. A spanking is meant to be a calm, controlled little pop to bottom for disobedience in order to *correct* sinful behavior or attitudes, and *protect* from the harm that might come from the consequences of those sinful behaviors or attitudes if they are left alone (Pr. 23:13-14).¹

Never spank in anger or in public – Spanking is not getting anger out, or getting something out of your system. That is selfish, sinful, and wrong. Things like slapping, hitting or pushing your child, spanking for non-disciplinary purposes (just because you're frustrated or something), or publicly shaming your child are all sinful actions from a selfish heart and need to be repented of. Spanking should never be done in anger. Acting out in selfish anger or provoking your children to anger is consistently called sinful in New Testament.

Examples:

- "Now the works of the flesh are evident: ...fits of anger..." (Gal. 5:19-20)
- "Be angry and do not sin." (Eph. 4:26)
- "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger ... be put away from you." (Eph. 4:31)
- "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger." (Eph. 6:4)
- "Now you must put them all away: anger ... and obscene talk from your mouth." (Col. 3:8)
- "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged." (Col. 3:21)
- "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." (Jas. 1:19-20)

This teaching on anger aligns with what we see in Proverbs 14:29, where it says, "Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly." Acting out in anger doesn't drive away folly (as the rod is meant to), it exalts folly. Angry outbursts model folly, not drive it away; it's the opposite of the goal of discipline. Never spank if you're angry. Take a time-out,

¹ There has been some research in the last decade that claims disciplinary spanking is not helpful to children, but the *American College of Pediatricians* (a non-Christian organization) has responded to this and commented on some misleading conclusions in that research (see [this article as an example](#)), as well as clarified more accurate and helpful positions on this issue that actually align with what we believe is the Biblical teaching of discipline and "the rod" (see [here as an example](#)).

leave the room if you can, take deep breaths, pray and ask God to help you calm down, and re-enter the situation with a cool head and a heart of mercy.

The “rod of discipline” is not a tool to wield in anger, it is a tool to lovingly, calmly, and carefully correct your child and bring them back to path of life when they have strayed. It's something you do because you love your child (Pr. 13:24). So you should also not do this in public, as this might provoke your child to anger or shame from embarrassment, which the Bible clearly commands us not to do. Instead, do it privately where you can still protect the dignity of your child and have a loving conversation with them about what happened.

The context is love and discipleship – Proverbs assumes that discipline happens in the context of love and discipleship (Pr. 13:24), meaning you are deeply invested in the life of your child, leading the way in righteousness and integrity, modeling godliness, showing grace and mercy to them as God has shown to you, training them up in the way they should go, doing the formative discipline and teaching them what's right and good, cheering them on all the time, praying for them constantly, and showering them with love again and again and again. Then, when they do stray, disobey, and sin, you love them enough to correct that waywardness and folly—usually with just your words, but sometimes with a spanking or the removal of a privilege, always done in love and never in anger.

You're giving 100 times as many hugs and kisses as you are spankings, but sometimes you need to give a spanking in love. To not discipline your child is to hate them (Pr. 13:24), since you are not preparing them for a life of submission to God, but instead would be preparing them to do what they want and live for themselves. This is not how they were created to live and not where ultimate joy is found—ultimately this will harm them and others. So we discipline, in love, to help save our children from a life of rebellion against God's authority, and prepare them to submit to God and his good, right, and loving will (Pr. 23:13-14). God disciplines his children in love (Pr. 3:11-12, Heb. 12:7-11), and we discipline our children, in part, to help them understand this. This is part of how we disciple our children, preparing them to follow Jesus whole-heartedly as adults, repenting from sin and trusting in their heavenly Father.

Always speak to the heart and get to Jesus – When we discipline, we always talk about it and bring in the gospel. We remind our children that mommy and daddy sin too—none of us are perfect. But there is good news: Jesus, the only perfect one, paid for all our sins on the cross. He took them to the grave. He rose again in victory. In him we are forgiven, loved, freed from guilt and shame, and do not have to hang our heads—we rejoice that Jesus paid it all and nothing can separate us from his love! In those raw, teary-eyed moments of discipline, give your children the gospel. Speak to their hearts, deal with the attitude underneath the behavior, and point them to our Savior. Use the tender moment to give them hope and both correct and cheer their hearts with love. Hug them and kiss

them and tell them you love them and that you're proud of them and that you believe they will grow through this and become more and more like Jesus. Then pray together and thank God for his grace and how he is so kind and forgiving to us.

If your kids are older, you shouldn't be spanking anymore (**most experts agree that around 18 months to 6 years is the appropriate age range**), but you can take away a privilege or ground them or something similar that communicates that what they did was wrong and requires correction—this also must be done in love and in the context of discipleship and the gospel. If your children are adults, in college, out of the house, etc. then you aren't spanking or taking away privileges (they're adults), but you can still speak the truth to them in love (**Eph. 4:15**) and point them to the way of Christ as both our Leader and our Savior. Whatever the case, love your child enough to humbly correct waywardness and point them to Jesus.

CONCLUSION

None of us do this perfectly. The only perfect parent is our Father in heaven, who has lavished his grace upon us and has committed himself to walking with us through all the joys and pains of parenting. We look to him as we do this. We trust in Jesus as we do this, knowing that he has paid for every sin and promised to be with us always (**Matt. 28:20**). Jesus redeems. Every sin, every angry outburst, every moment we regret, he has paid for and it is no longer counted against us; there is no condemnation for us anymore (**Rom. 8:1**). We walk by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us as our comforter and counselor, who will bear his fruit in our life (**Gal. 5:22-23**) as we abide in Jesus (**John 15:4**). With God's help, we can do this. Not perfectly, but faithfully.