

# **Raising Children with God's Wisdom**



**by Mike Harding**

# **Raising Children With God's Wisdom**

by  
Mike Harding

Copyright © 2017  
All rights reserved.

Pastor Mike Harding  
Love Gospel Church  
P.O. Box 4482  
Apache Junction, AZ 85178  
480.510.7089  
mikecrisharding@aol.com

For videos and audios of  
Pastor Mike's teachings, please visit:

[www.lovegospelchurch.com](http://www.lovegospelchurch.com)

My wife, Cris, and I are not credentialed child-raising experts. As we were raising our son, Todd, we searched the Bible for wisdom, and we tried to learn all we could from older, more experienced parents and ministers. As pastors, our first desire of course is to help people to experience an amazing relationship with God. But we also want to help people to be successful in every area of their daily lives. And so, for anyone who is raising children in these very challenging times, and maybe looking for a little input, advice or encouragement, we offer here a few things that we have learned and applied over the years, with our love.

### **Proactive Parenting**

In our church, we have several sayings or mottoes that we try to live by. One of those is this: "Live Boldly. Love Boldly. Lead Boldly." We believe that the love of God empowers us to live, love and lead with boldness. What does this mean when applied to parenting? Successful parenting can actually be thought of as a very specialized form of leadership, and leadership can be learned. Parenting is a long-term project that requires an educated plan. Plans can be adjusted as you go, but there is a true-ish saying that having no plan at all is planning to fail. We must recognize that we (parents) are the leaders in the parent-child relationship. Parenting is leadership, and as parents, we must lead proactively. If we don't lead, if we don't parent, the world will take over and provide its own form of leadership and influence - without us. There is another saying in the world: nature abhors a vacuum. And a leadership vacuum will always be filled – usually by something we don't want. If we don't proactively parent our own children, the world around us will. Our children will become the product of popular culture and the political values of the day – for better or worse. As parents, we must decide what values and morals and principles we want to reproduce in our children. As parents, we must learn what ingredients go into producing spiritually and emotionally healthy young people. God has given us an assignment. Our God-given

mission as parents is to produce adults that are emotionally healthy, loving people with good character and the ability to make responsible choices. We need a plan!

## **Two Keys: Love and Discipline**

In our experience, there are two essential ingredients that go into producing spiritually and emotionally healthy children. The two ingredients are *love* and *discipline*. The order is important: love is first, and discipline is second. And the two ingredients must be balanced. An imbalanced combination can produce pretty bad results. We believe that we should love our children openly and generously and extravagantly and expressively. We also believe that we must discipline them firmly and fairly.

Many parents today are understandably confused by the conflicting and contradictory messages of our culture regarding parenting. But the wisdom of the Bible is eternal. God is the best Father. He invented parenting. Many parents today either duplicate the errors of their own parents, or they overreact and overcompensate for the errors of their parents. What that mostly looks like today is that people who were raised with super heavy-handed discipline often overcompensate and give their children almost no discipline at all. The problem with overreacting or overcompensating is that it can send you out of one ditch and straight into the opposite ditch. Then, someday, your children might end up overreacting and overcompensating for *your* parenting errors. Ouch!

The proof is in the pudding, as they say. Children that receive a lot of love but very little firm discipline usually turn out spoiled and selfish, self-centered and irresponsible and demanding. Children who receive a lot of hard discipline without love and affection often turn out to be angry and rebellious...or insecure and withdrawn...or sometimes they become perfectionists and overachievers, striving in vain to feel loved or approved. Either

imbalance - love without discipline, or discipline without love - can drive children into a ditch of dysfunction that they have a hard time getting out of.

The order is important also. Children are born with empty tanks that need to be filled with love. Infants don't need discipline; they need love. They need to know that they are wanted and loved and cared for and protected. They need to internalize all of that first. After that, the need for discipline comes quickly enough! Once they internalize that they are loved, they will need firm and fair discipline in order to turn them into responsible, self-controlled adults.

### **The First Key: Love**

The first key to raising a spiritually and emotionally healthy child is love. A long time ago, the pastor of a great church taught me that all children are born with a need for seven basic things.<sup>1</sup> Every child is born with an empty tank. Mom or dad, or preferably both, must fill the child's tank with these seven things:

- 1.) ***Unconditional Love*** - Children should never have to earn love or perform for love. A child should never have to fear that their parents' love will be withdrawn or held back for any reason. A parents' love should be unconditional and generous and freely-expressed. This is how children learn to love themselves in a healthy way. This is how children learn to love others in a healthy way. This is also how children learn to believe and trust that God will love them as well.
- 2.) ***Security and Protection*** - Children should feel that their home, in the presence of their parents, is the safest and most protected place in the world. Children must be able to internalize a feeling of safety that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Mothers and fathers give this to their children. It's how they eventually learn to live above fear.

- 3.) **Acceptance** - Children should feel that they are accepted for who they are. Children are born with very different strengths and weaknesses...very different talents and skills...very different likes and dislikes. While we certainly want to shape their morals and values and principles, we don't want to make them feel that they have to change their personalities in order to gain our acceptance or our respect. This is how they learn to accept themselves and to accept others.
- 4.) **Value as a Person** - Children should feel that they have value and worth. They should never be subjected to demeaning or belittling words. This is how children learn to value other people, and to treat other people with honor and respect.
- 5.) **Forgiveness of Mistakes** - Children need to know that their mistakes will be forgiven and forgotten. They need to know that they will not be defined by their mistakes or haunted by their mistakes. They need to know that they are worth forgiving if they do something wrong. This is how children learn to forgive others and to live free from bitterness and resentment.
- 6.) **Motivation to Reach Potential** - Every child needs to know that someone believes in him or her, that someone is their cheerleader, motivating them to be all they can be and do all they can do. This is how children learn to believe in themselves, and how they learn to become leaders later in life.
- 7.) **Affirmation and Praise for Accomplishments** - Every child needs someone to notice and praise their accomplishments. This is how they learn that their behavior and contributions are important in their family and in their community.

As a parent, you must start with the goal of establishing a heart-to-heart connection with your child. This is called bonding. If you do this, your child will feel safe and secure with you. Your child

will feel loved and accepted and valued. Your child will want to please you. Eventually, your child will want to emulate you and become like you. You establish a heart-to-heart connection, and then you develop and deepen that connection throughout the years of their life. There was a time, decades ago, when a lot of parenting was done without displays of affection or love. But that was a terrible mistake. Hug your children! Kiss your children! Laugh and play with your children! Listen to your children when they have something to say! Look in their eyes and tell them that you love them! Give them your time! Give them your affection!

There is a beautiful verse in the Bible. It is 1 John 4:19. This verse says that we love God because He first loved us. We don't love God because it is the right thing to do, or because He commanded us to. We love God because He first loves us. We only come to genuinely love God *after* we have experienced His love and His affection towards us. This is a model for us as parents. Our children will grow up to genuinely love us if we first love them – if we fill their little empty tanks with our unconditional love and affection. This is how they develop a healthy love and respect for themselves. This is also how they learn to trust that God is good, and that they can count on His love if they go to Him in faith. Simply put, children who are loved are like plants that are watered. You can see the results pretty quickly. Children who do not receive enough love and affection are like plants that are NOT watered. The results are also evident pretty quickly.

### **The Second Key: Discipline**

The second key to raising a spiritually and emotionally healthy child is discipline. Disciplining children is not for *your* benefit. It is for *their* benefit. The goal is to prepare them to be self-controlled and responsible adults who have internalized good values and morals and principles.

But again, that means that you must love them first. If your children do not feel loved by you, if they do not bond with you, they may not want your values or your morals or your principles. In fact, they may openly rebel against everything you believe and want and stand for. But if they feel loved by you and bonded to you, they will also respect your discipline and they will eventually adopt your morals and your values and your principles.

Disciplining your children really involves two different goals, in two different stages. The first goal and stage is to teach them to obey you and respect you as an authority figure. This training involves *external* discipline from an *external* source of authority – meaning YOU. The second goal and stage is to train them to make responsible choices and to exercise self-control for themselves. This is where you instill *internal* discipline in them to equip them for their adult life.

## **External Discipline**

The first goal and stage is to teach them to obey you and respect you as an authority figure, and to impose consequences when they do not. Many parents today are struggling with this. But it really is important. This should be the emphasis when your children are still small. It is best – and easiest – to win this battle when they are very young. The older they get, the harder it becomes. If they don't learn to respect people that are in legitimate positions of authority, there can be terrible consequences in their character that grow worse over time. They can become very disrespectful and unpleasant human beings. They may have difficulty succeeding in school, they may have trouble being successful in a good job or career, and they can even end up in trouble with the law. Ultimately, they may not even see the need to respect God or His authority in their lives.

Imposing consequences when children are disobedient or disrespectful is a controversial issue now. People may have strong

personal and political feelings about how to do it, or whether to do it at all. But good discipline is not abuse. Firm and fair discipline is actually a form of love, and children instinctively know that...even if they resist it! The Bible actually teaches that if you don't discipline your child, you don't actually love him or her as much as you think you do. (Proverbs 13:24) So what consequences should we use? Proverbs 13:24, Proverbs 22:15 and Proverbs 23:13 all support what we would call traditional spanking. Alternatives would be timeouts, grounding, or loss of privileges. The method you use may be determined by your personal convictions or by the relative sensitivity of your child, but real consequences must be used when children are purposely disobedient or defiant or disrespectful. Another wise pastor friend of mine once told me that he trained his small children to obey him the first time that he spoke to them in a normal tone of voice.<sup>2</sup> If they did not respond to a normal tone of voice, he gave them immediate consequences. To do otherwise means that you are training your children to obey you only after you have gotten angry and raised your voice. He would also impose consequences if they disobeyed or disrespected him after the first time he spoke to them. To do otherwise means that you are conditioning your children to only obey you after you have gotten angry and spoken to them a second or a third time. If you think it through, there's a lot of wisdom in that! Of course, this pastor was also a very loving and affectionate father. Love is the necessary foundation for successful discipline.

What is healthy discipline? It means that you are disciplining in principle, not from personal anger. You are training your small child to respect and obey your rightful authority. You are not training them to comply with you only when you get angry or frustrated or scream at them. You are training them to respect you and obey you when you speak to them once in a normal tone of voice. If your small child is disobedient or disrespectful or defiant, you apply consequences immediately and with firmness.

You are acting out of love rather than out of personal anger. You are doing this for *their* benefit, not for yours. Good, healthy discipline is not abuse. It is love.

What is abuse? Demeaning or belittling your child is abuse. Yelling or screaming or striking them in anger is abuse. Rejecting them or threatening to reject them is abuse. Withholding love from them is abuse. Reminding them over and over about previous offenses is abuse. But healthy discipline is not abuse. Not by a long shot!

Children are precious, little treasures. They are born with little, empty tanks that need to be filled with love and acceptance and value and safety. But there is something else in them also. It's a little seed of...well, let's call it monster-seed! (It's OK, you can laugh!) The Bible calls it sin-nature, or just sin. It's inherited. It comes with being human. There is something in the little darlings that will cause them to rise up against you at some point...and it doesn't take long! They decide at some point that there is going to be a contest of wills, and they decide that they are going to win the contest! You've got to know that it's coming. Don't take it personally! They will try to dominate you, manipulate you, control you, flatter you, and pit you against each other. Their skills are truly amazing!

But you must not let them win! For the sake of your own sanity, and for the well-being of the world around you, you must win this one! OK, I'm being a little tongue-in-cheek here...but just a little.

You want to train them to understand that there are legitimate sources of authority in their lives that they must respect and obey. Your goal is not to avoid making them mad at you. That is a position of weakness. Your children WILL get mad at you! Your goal is not to try to make them like you. Please don't be that insecure with your own child. They need a strong parent; they need an adult. (But if you get this right, they will truly love you when they are grown!) Right now, your goal is to parent them.

So when they inevitably start to disobey and disrespect you, you must apply consequences firmly and fairly - and immediately! The goal is to cause an immediate attitude adjustment. Whether you use a spanking or a timeout or grounding or loss of privileges, the goal is to cause an immediate attitude adjustment - meaning that maybe they will cry, and definitely they will be sorry. If they are not sorry...if they still have an attitude of anger or defiance, you have not actually accomplished your goal. You have not won yet. If your consequence is "too little, too late", all you will accomplish is an escalation of their defiance and their bad behavior. They will be convinced by your weakness that they can win this battle if they press on. Don't let that happen! Don't let them manipulate you or control you with their anger or their tantrums. Be the parent. There's a place to say, "Because I'm the daddy, that's why." "Because I'm the mommy, that's why." This is that place!

You may have to be persistent. The more stubborn your small child is now, the more likely it is that he or she has great leadership qualities emerging inside them. But that's all the more reason to be a proactive parent that confidently shapes their character and their behavior.

## **Internal Discipline**

The second goal and stage is to train them to make responsible choices and to exercise self-control. This becomes the emphasis more and more as they are growing up and wanting more power and control in their choices. Wanting more power and control in their choices is a very normal part of growing up. You don't want to take that away from them; you just want to train them how to make responsible choices and how to understand and accept the consequences of their choices - good or bad.

If you try to protect them from making wrong choices by not letting them make any choices at all, you will sabotage both their development and your relationship with them. In today's

language, this is called being a control freak. They will end up resenting you, and they won't develop the wisdom or the confidence to make good choices. And if you don't allow them to experience the bad consequences of their poor choices, you are teaching them that someone in life will always bail them out when they make poor choices. That is not true in adult life, and people who believe that can ultimately end up behind bars with no choices left at all.

At this second stage we are talking about older children and teenagers. And since it is the second step, it is important that you have succeeded in the first step: you have instilled in them a healthy respect for your legitimate parental authority. If you haven't accomplished that, go back to step one, because step two doesn't work real well without step one already in place.

So what does this second stage look like in real life with real children? It looks like you offering your child two choices that are perfectly acceptable to you, and both choices are empowering to them. For instance, if your child is running up to the front door of your house with muddy shoes, you can say, "Stop and choose. You can either stay outside with those muddy shoes, or you can figure out a way to keep the mud off of our carpet. I'm happy either way. You decide." Notice that at this stage you are not offering a choice between obedience or spanking. You are offering two choices that are both perfectly OK with you. Either way, mud stays off the carpet, and your child gets to practice making a choice and understanding the reason for that choice.<sup>3</sup>

But that's a simple example. It gets more challenging. What if your older child doesn't want to clean his or her room? But you, of course, really want that room clean. And more importantly, you want to instill in them the value of a clean house while still respecting their need to learn about choices.

So you might say, "Hey, I am the owner of this house, and it's really important to me that this room is kept clean. So here are your choices. You can clean it today, or I will clean it tomorrow. But if I clean it, I charge \$50.00 for my services. Your choice. Both options are OK with me." Then you wait. If they clean it today, they made a good choice. If they don't clean it today, you clean it for them tomorrow. Then you say, "OK, I cleaned your room. So here is your next choice. Will you be paying me in cash today, or will you choose which one of your electronic games I will sell to cover my cleaning fee?" And then you smile sweetly. And then you take possession of one of their expensive games, and you sell it! No anger; just choices and consequences.

OR, if your older child doesn't like to wake up in time for school, the approach could be similar. You say, "I have a free wake-up service in this house. But it's only free the first time. If I have to wake you up twice in the same morning, the second time costs \$10." After that, if they wake up the first time, it's all good. If not, you just wake them up the second time, and you start preparing their bill. With a smile! OR, if your child procrastinates doing the dishes, just offer to do the dishes for them right now, but they must compensate you by doing one of your chores later...and you make sure that the chore they get in return is a more unpleasant choice than the one they just procrastinated! No anger; just choices and consequences, served up with a smile!

You are now training your older child how to successfully navigate choices and consequences. You are respecting their need to make choices and to have more power in their relationship with you. But you are still protecting them from choices and consequences that would actually be harmful or dangerous to them. And you are still the parent, large and in charge!

In this way, you can equip your child for the power and responsibility they will have as an adult. You can't deny them any power in their relationship with you - or any power to choose and

experience consequences - while they are under 18, and then expect them to instantly adapt well to having power as an adult. In our desire to protect them, or worse - to satisfy our own ego - we can deny them any power in the relationship. This cripples them developmentally, and even makes them deeply resent us in the long run. But we can respect their need to exercise some power in the relationship and in their choices - at the level they are capable of doing so. And we can let them experience the real consequences of their choices - at the level they are capable of learning from them without being harmed - all without being the unbearable "I-told-you-so" type of parent. Remember, we are parenting for *their* benefit, not for our own ego or self-gratification.

**To sum it up**, let it all begin with love and end with love - lots of love! Love them genuinely; love them generously. Express your love for them freely and often. Hug them and kiss them, and enjoy every moment you have with them. Make sure that they feel and internalize how much you love them and accept them and value them and protect them. Then balance it with discipline that is firm and fair and consistent. Don't be afraid to parent your own children. It's your God-given right and responsibility. They need it. They want it. They just won't admit it. Ever!

With the two balanced keys of love and discipline, you can equip your children to be happy and healthy and successful in their lives, and they will love you for it!

For this teaching, and for their contributions to my own parenting and ministry, I gratefully give lots of credit to:

- (1) Pastor Cesar Castellanos of Bogota, Colombia - from his books and seminars
- (2) Pastor David Swann of Clovis, New Mexico - from a pastors' conference
- (3) Pastor Danny Silk of Reading, California – all the examples of “empowering choices” are from his books