

Perspectives on Spanking

from  Connected
Families






Introduction

A coaching client asked for our input about spanking. She told us that her pastor's advice about her daughter's persistent difficult and frustrating behavior was brief and to the point: "When your daughter gets that way, you need to be consistent and firm in asking her to stop, and spank her immediately and without question whenever she is defiant."

If you've ever heard a similar answer but feel unsure, read on.

Throughout our decades working with parents we have heard this question and have had countless conversations about spanking. We hope in this eBook you'll be encouraged and equipped to accept nothing less than the Holy Spirit's guidance as you consider the extremely important question of *whether or not* you should spank your children.



“The Bible clearly mandates parents and caregivers to take **firm authority** for the discipline of the children in their care.”

We often get asked, “What about spanking?”

This question often reveals strong and even conflicting feelings and opinions. It can even become divisive in families, small groups, and churches.

While conducting a workshop for pastors this question came up again. This group of pastors were concerned about the divisiveness of this issue. The answer we gave elicited such a positive response that we felt prompted to share our thoughts with anyone interested. (Even though we know that not everyone will agree with us.) What this group of pastors essentially said was, “The Connected Families approach to this issue is *biblically sound and UNIFYING!*”

So, what’s the short answer?

The short answer we give, when asked, is that we believe the Bible clearly mandates parents and caregivers to take firm authority for the discipline of the children in their care. Effective discipline is *not* about doling out painful consequences with the goal of modifying behavior. Rather, it’s a work of restoration and reconciliation that communicates messages of grace and truth to misbehaving (sinning) children.

The methods noted in the Bible about how to lead people to repentance are widely varied, revealing that the road to restoration and reconciliation is not a formula. Because of how much “bad fruit” we see when parents use spanking as their go-to disciplinary tactic, we want to spend the rest of this ebook unpacking what we have learned.

Tell me more!

It is important that we open this discussion with an understanding that both theologians and well-intentioned Christian parents fall along all places on the spanking continuum. There are some who believe [“spanking is a biblically mandated form of discipline”](#) and others who say [“Jesus would never spank a child and neither should we.”](#)

While we aren’t biblical scholars, we’ve had years of experience diving into the biblical narratives and research as this topic is so vital to our work with parents. We’ve come to our understanding of this issue significantly influenced by seeing how both Jesus, and the Apostle Paul, disciplined their “children.”



With the goal of shedding light to help parents honorably navigate this potentially divisive issue, we'll explore the following five topics:

- 1. The Complicating Factor of Parents' Motives pg 4**
- 2. Biblical Discipline: Prescriptive vs. Spirit-led pg 7**
- 3. Considerations About "The Rod" in Proverbs pg 10**
- 4. Brain Research Related to Spanking and How Children Learn..... pg 14**
- 5. What the Bible Says About True Obedience pg 16**

As you explore these topics we pray that you will seek Holy Spirit wisdom for the methods you choose to discipline your children.



The Complicating Factor of Parents' Motives

To be upfront: we spanked all three of our kids. They challenged us beyond anything we ever imagined. But, as their parents, we often didn't agree with each other about when and why we spanked. We didn't really have a plan. We'd heard the teaching suggesting it was a biblical mandate to do so and, to be honest, there was some appeal to following that mandate.

Why did we spank? It was quick. It didn't require much thought. It sometimes gained immediate results.

As we began wrestling through this issue we understood the teaching we followed was suggesting we always have pure motives of love for our kids when we spank. However, we also found that pure motives were elusive at best, if not utterly impossible. Can our motives when we discipline ever be perfect and pure?



We had good intentions in wanting our kids to know right from wrong and understand that the real-life consequences of doing wrong can be painful. However, we came to realize that **when we chose the quick, powerful tool of spanking, there were usually (if not always!) selfish motives present.** These motives were probably more pervasive than we were aware. Perhaps you can relate to one or more of these statements:

- We were confused, or exasperated, and did what we needed to do to gain a sense of control.
- We felt more powerful when intimidating children into obedience.
- We were being watched or assessed by others and didn't want to be judged too soft.


Parenting is hard work, and it is easy to become overwhelmed. However, if we choose a method of discipline that doesn't hold us, as parents, accountable for our own thoughts and actions, it's not an intentional, loving, or selfless form of discipline. The Apostle Paul instructs us to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" in [2 Corinthians 10:5](#).

We need to be held accountable for our own sin and selfishness when we discipline. **In fact, a harsh time out, a loud and angry rebuke, or a shaming**

lecture (to mention just a few) can be just as selfishly motivated as using the quick control of spanking.

Here are a few questions we believe parents might ask themselves as they are about to choose *any* method of discipline:

- Does my discipline change when I feel stressed or watched by someone else?
- How am I modeling *listening* to my kids (James 1:19), and how is that affecting how they listen to me?
- Am I disciplining my children for something they've seen *me* do? (For example: Do my kids whine and complain? Are they following my example of whining and complaining about things in my life, albeit in a more sophisticated, adult way?)
- Does my child see in my eyes that we are on the same team and that I am FOR her best interests? Or does she sense I am an opponent?
- Is this the best way to reach my child's heart? Might a different discipline method better help my child *value doing what's right*, instead of just fearing punishment for doing what's wrong?



“The **older** I got, the **wiser** I got,
and the **less** I found it necessary
to spank. ”

We've found that when parents are brave enough to consider these questions they almost always find ways, other than spanking, to discipline and/or teach their children. One of our mentors confirmed this when he said, "The older I got, the wiser I got, and the less I found it necessary to spank."

Question to consider

- Am I feeling out of control? Might my motive for discipline actually be about my own selfish need for control? Is my own need for control causing me to sin against my child?

Our prayer for you, whether or not you choose to spank

- *May the Holy Spirit give you wisdom as you thoughtfully and humbly consider your own heart and motives when disciplining your children.*



Biblical Discipline: Prescriptive vs. Spirit-led

To be clear: it IS possible to modify children's behavior through rewards and punishments. But if our discipline consists of predictable rewards or punishments, it is no more than chunks of cheese in the mouse maze of the behavioral conditioning of our children.

True biblical discipline helps our children come to terms with their own sin and guides them toward sincere repentance. This is in harmony with Paul's teaching to the Galatians regarding discipline:

"...if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently."

(Galatians 6:1a)

As followers of Christ we are encouraged to "keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25) in all aspects of our life. Discipline should be wrapped in the "fruit of the Spirit that is in you" (Galatians 5:22-23). When we are in step with the fruit of the Spirit, the goal of discipline becomes *restoration*.

“The discipline of kids ought to be **Spirit-led** so that it can be tailored to the needs of each child.”



What does it mean to “keep in step with the Spirit” as we discipline?

As believers, we follow Jesus’ example in every way we can. Jesus told us in John 5:19 that all of His choices fully relied on the Father’s guidance: *“Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does, the Son also does.”*

Jesus was always in tune with his Father’s will and way. Perhaps this is why Jesus tailored His “discipline” of various issues according to the uniqueness of the people and circumstances He encountered.

For example, consider Jesus’ discipline of greediness:

- With [Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector](#) suspected of swindling, He simply announced He would stay at his house. His act of connection to a greedy man, who was rejected by most of society, brought repentance and salvation.
- He instructed the [rich young ruler](#) to sell all that he had and give to the poor, challenging him to deeper character and faith.
- When confronting the [money changers in the temple](#), He overturned their tables and

scattered their coins, an immediate act of strong correction. No discussion.

We also see Jesus with three different people caught in the sin of adultery. See John 4:7 (Samaritan woman at the well), Luke 7:37 (the woman who “lived a life of sin”), and John 8:3 (the woman brought to be stoned). In each case he dealt gently and wisely with the adulterer, with three widely varying responses based on the unique circumstances of each encounter.

As we follow Jesus’ example, it is clear that not one form of discipline is prescriptive for all behavior. The discipline of kids ought to be Spirit-led, so it can be tailored to unique situations, personalities, and the needs of each child.

Our observation has been that **spanking is frequently done in the name of immediate obedience by parents who are exasperated and don’t know what else to do. This is NOT Spirit-led.**

We get it! Kids can be challenging! But the Bible doesn’t tell kids not to exasperate their parents. It tells parents not to exasperate their children (Ephesians 6:4). It’s hard work to understand the complex dynamics between ourselves and our kids, and discern what is needed to best lead kids toward true repentance and forgiveness.

“Jesus’ goal was always to **change hearts**, not just modify behavior.”



It is hard to be accountable for our own junk. That’s too much work. We just want kids to be accountable. It’s easier. But if we’re not responsible for our own sin in the discipline of our children, and our children are exasperated during the process, the Bible warns that we may well be sinning against our children.

Jesus’ goal in any corrective situation was a changed heart. It was to ask questions and choose actions that looked beneath the overt sin and penetrated the hearts of those he addressed. The only people He rebuked with any form of harshness akin to a verbal/physical “spanking” were those who [overtly dishonored the temple](#), those who [believed they were righteous](#), and [Satan himself](#). All others were “disciplined” gently.

Jesus’ goal was always to change hearts, not just modify outward behavior.

Questions to consider

- What are the circumstances (overstimulated, hungry, tired, etc.) that contribute to my child’s misbehavior?
- What does my child understand about what’s happening?

Our prayer for you, whether or not you choose to spank

- *May you listen well to the Holy Spirit as you discipline your children, considering carefully how to best reach their hearts and draw them toward true repentance.*



Considerations about “The Rod” in Proverbs

In our early years of parenting, we believed that we were not following scripture if we didn't spank our kids. Those who believe that spanking is a *biblically mandated* form of discipline generally reference five prominent Proverbs:

- [Proverbs 13:24](#) - Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.
- [Proverbs 22:15](#) - Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far away.
- [Proverbs 23:13](#) - Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish them with the rod, they will not die.
- [Proverbs 23:14](#) - Punish them with the rod and save them from death.
- [Proverbs 29:15](#) - A rod and a reprimand impart wisdom, but a child left undisciplined disgraces his mother.

Many Christians have used these words to prescribe spanking for any kind of defiance or delayed obedience. Parents who see this differently may feel judged or criticized. They might even be labeled as disobedient, if they don't implement what some feel is the literal interpretation of these scriptures.



“Proverbs rely heavily on metaphors, hyperbole, and poetry to convey wisdom...”

To help us better sort out what these verses in Proverbs mean, we dug into them and the historical and cultural context of the Hebrew language.

Rod/Shebet


- Mainly used in the Old Testament, we discovered that the Hebrew word used for “[the rod](#)” is “shebet.” Most of the uses of this word are metaphorical, and in most of those instances, refers to the “branch” of a people group, as in “[The Rod of Jesse](#)”.
- It was also used to describe a large stick from a heavy root or branch. This was used by shepherds to [guide sheep](#), block an unsafe path, or [strike attackers](#).
- The rod was also used for [correction of adults who were acting foolish](#), and possibly criminals.
- Shebet was also used metaphorically for the [judgment against Israel](#) that God used by the hands of invading troops.
- In numerous verses it was translated [scepter](#) as a [metaphor/symbol](#) of strength and authority. It bears noting that the Proverbs were written by Solomon, a king with a scepter. One author said, “[Scepters](#) were carried not only by kings, but priests, judges, military leaders, and respected elders.”

Child

- The Hebrew word for child (“Na’ar”) used in these Proverbs is most often translated to mean [boy, youth or lad](#).
- There is [no record in all of scripture](#) of children actually being beaten with a shebet.
- The only time physical punishment is clearly commanded was the [stoning of a rebellious son](#) old enough to be a drunkard. The scripture is unclear whether the stoning actually happened.

Application

It seems that the routine spanking of young children’s bare bottoms with a hand, paddle, or belt that is usually practiced as the “literal application” of these scriptures, is not actually very literal. If someone were to state that the proverbs must be implemented literally, the most literal application would be to beat the back of a pre-teen/teen son with a large stick. We don’t know anyone who has implemented “biblical discipline” in this way.



“... the book of Proverbs invites parents to take firm authority for the discipline of their children.”

In addition, Proverbs rely heavily on metaphor, hyperbole, and poetry to convey wisdom and provoke deeper thinking.

In Proverbs 23:1-2, I'm told to “*put a knife to my throat*” if I ate too much at a politician's party, while just 12 verses later it talks about “*beat[ing] a child with a rod*”. No book is more full of metaphor than Proverbs, and it certainly seemed possible to us that both of these passages could be using metaphors to teach important principles, not literal instructions.

Another reason we don't think that use of “the rod”, as described in Proverbs, necessarily equates to spanking is that biblical imperatives (as in “love God and love one another”) are for ALL people for ALL time. Even most spanking proponents would agree that **for those children with a history of abuse, abandonment, trauma, high anxiety, or sensory sensitivities, spanking will likely be emotionally devastating.**

You may have heard the guideline: “If the gospel doesn't translate to all cultures, we've added something to the gospel.” If that guideline holds true in regards to parenting, then, “If Christian parenting isn't helpful for all children we've added something to it.”

Jesus would certainly desire that the most wounded and anxious of children be parented in ways that bring grace and truth to life for them.

Let's remember, the whole point of the Proverbs and of discipline is to *build wisdom through instruction* as young people *listen and add to their learning*.

Consider this [introduction to the Book of Proverbs](#):

*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
for gaining wisdom and instruction;
for understanding words of insight;
for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,
doing what is right and just and fair;
for giving prudence to those who are simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young—
let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance...*

The book of Proverbs invites parents to take firm authority for the discipline of their children. As for methodology with regard to the use of “the rod,” it does not seem to be a mandate, but rather we, as parents, must be tenacious to do what is needed to “*train up a child in the way the child should go...*” ([Proverbs 22:6](#))



Final note

When the Apostle Paul, a Jewish religious scholar, began his confrontation of the Corinthians for their grievous immoral behavior, he would have been very familiar with these passages in Proverbs. He refers to the “rod of discipline” when correcting the unruly and immoral Corinthian church. *“What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?”* ([1Corinthians 4:21](#)).

Paul was obviously not suggesting he would come to strike the Corinthians AND he was suggesting that the way of love was the answer to this rhetorical question. He took strong authority for the discipline of his “children” who were clearly sinning and off-track. His prime motivations were love and gentleness.

If you’d like to read more about the scientific research regarding spanking [view our appendix](#).

Questions to consider

- What is the best way to address my child’s sin and guide him or her toward repentance and restoration?
- Are there skills or values (i.e. flexibility, or conflict resolution) I could teach that would help my child value doing what’s right, instead of just fearing punishment for doing what’s wrong?

Our prayer for you, whether or not you choose to spank

- *May you walk in a calling of strong authority for the discipleship and guidance of the children God has given you.*



Brain Research Related to Spanking & How Children Learn

The brain is an unparalleled learning machine. When the [brain is relaxed and alert](#), and its owner feels safe, the cognitive part of the brain does its best learning. When the [brain is threatened into survival mode](#), and relational circuits are shut down, learning is far more rudimentary. Whatever learning occurs is about quick, defensive, or aggressive reactions.

Any time pain is experienced, the brain kicks into survival mode, often referred to as “fight or flight.” Blood flows away from the cognitive learning structures and [diverts to the big muscles](#) as the body prepares to fight or run away. **When kids are spanked it’s important to know that any effort we’re making to teach any lesson beyond, “if you do that you’ll get hurt” is difficult if not impossible to teach.** While the fear of pain *might* motivate a child to do (or not do) the behavior in question, little to nothing constructive is learned.

Pain-based discipline can also be confusing for a child. [Dan Seigel and Tina Bryson](#) state, “One circuit drives the child to try to escape the parent who is inflicting pain; another circuit drives the child toward the attachment figure for safety. So when the parent is the source of fear or pain, the brain can become disorganized in its functioning...” If this dynamic occurs regularly, it can cause anxiety and diminish the trust necessary to learn skills, values, and even faith from that parent.



“...frequent corporal punishment impedes development in the prefrontal cortex...”

Spanking also affects brain development

A [brain scan study](#) indicated that **frequent corporal punishment impedes development in the prefrontal cortex** (in both function and [size](#)) because of the repeated stimulation of fight/flight centers during discipline. The biggest difference (a reduction of almost 20%) was noted in the size of the right prefrontal cortex, which includes the area of empathy for others. If we are to be discipling and growing wisdom (including empathy for others) while we discipline, it seems counterproductive to use discipline that shuts down the learning centers of the brain. [This study](#) shows that spanking at age 5 caused increased fighting, anger, and impulsivity, measured 1 and 3 years later. [This excellent article](#) is a thorough overview of the vast research regarding the impact of spanking on brain development.

If you'd like to read more about the scientific research regarding spanking [view our appendix](#).

Questions to consider during discipline

- Does my child feel safe and can she hear what I'm saying? Or, is my child in "fight or flight" right now? Do I need to wait a little while until the cognitive learning center of her brain can hear me?

Our prayer for you, whether or not you choose to spank

- That your correction will be simultaneously both firm and gentle, and that "fight or flight" will not be your child's normal experience during discipline.



What the Bible Says About True Obedience

There are several verses in the Bible that shed light on what heart-felt obedience looks like.

- *“And this is love that we walk in obedience to his commands.”* ([2 John verse 6](#))
- *“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”* ([John 14:23](#))
- *“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”* ([1 John 4:18](#))

The main point of these three verses is this: **there is an inseparable link between love and obedience**, and fear of punishment grows neither love nor true obedience.



“I used to obey because I was afraid of you. Now I obey because I love you.”

In [John 14:31](#) Jesus modeled obedience to the Father out of love. *“I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me.”* If that was the source of *His* obedience to His Father, He certainly was not looking for fear-based compliance in any of *His* followers. He was not seeking disciples, adults or children, who were [white-washed tombs](#) or people [honoring Him with their lips](#) to avoid punishment while their hearts were far away from Him.

Drawing disobedient kids toward the beauty of God’s wisdom, and facilitating repentance based on the [kindness and love of God](#), is a long process. We believe that it also must be Spirit-led. This is the heart of discipleship, and is inseparably linked with receiving and passing on the love of God.

After taking our [Discipline That Connects With Your Child’s Heart](#) online course, one couple contacted us to joyfully share the results of shifting from fear-based to heart-connected discipline. Their 8-year-old son had recently told them, *“I used to obey you because I was afraid of you. Now I obey you because I love you.”* With this foundation in place it should be much easier to guide him toward love-based obedience to his heavenly Father as well.

Questions to consider

- Are there ways my child may feel [exasperated](#) by my discipline?
- Does my child see in my eyes the love I have for him or her?

Our prayer for you, whether or not you choose to spank

- *May you vividly model obedience to God, and keep your heart connected to your children when they misbehave, so they freely receive your wisdom and choose to obey you out of love.*



Conclusion

Let's apply [Romans 14](#), which addresses a controversy over religious practices, to the controversy over parenting methods. Applying this would indicate that **every parent should discern, to the best of their ability, how the scriptures guides them to parent, while at the same time accepting those who come to a different conclusion.**

"One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind... each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another." Romans 14:5-6,12,13

For us, as we struggled with whether or not to spank our young children, a few things became clear: when we focused more on building wisdom, and less on extracting quick compliance, spanking was less appealing and ultimately unnecessary. As we discovered the parenting implications in [Paul's writing to the church at Thessalonica](#), his teaching cemented our resolve to find other ways to discipline:

"...Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. ...For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory."



“...parenting is discipleship and discipleship is parenting.”

It was an “aha” moment for us when we realized that parenting is discipleship and discipleship is parenting. When we looked to how Jesus and Paul “parented” as our guide, everything changed.

A family we know well described the changes in their discipline approach in their home:

“Moving from a corporal discipline mindset to a connected one, moved our home from fear to faith, control to unconditional love, from short-term parenting to long-term. We no longer parent with the short-term goal of fixing behavior for our own relief. We parent with a long-term perspective, keeping the gospel central in our discipline moments, with wisdom building as our goal. *With this shift we have seen our children grow in authentic and grace-filled faith, rich relationships, and compassion for others!*”

After more than two decades of both personal and professional experience, we felt it was important to share our perspective around this topic. But our bottom line? Since this is clearly something even biblical scholars disagree on, we leave it to you to talk with others, to pray, and to seek Holy Spirit wisdom for your unique family.

Jim and Lynne Jackson
Co-founders
[Connected Families](#)