



Consequences That Actually Work

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Introduction

“You’d better watch it, or you’ll get a CONSEQUENCE!”

Have you said (or even yelled) those words?

If so, your good intent is probably to warn your children they’re about to cross a boundary, and they’ll need to learn their lesson in some way to teach them better behavior.

However, when children hear the threat of a consequence, what they may really hear is “punishment.”

For some kiddos, the threat of punishment is enough to stop them in their tracks. For others, they are willing to take the chance and hope the punishment isn’t too severe (or that you’ll relent or forget)!

Either way, **when painful (and randomly administered) consequences are the first go-to for misbehavior, kids don’t *gain* internal wisdom. Instead, they simply learn to hide their misbehavior better.**

So, as we address the topic of “consequences that actually work,” it’s *not* from the perspective of “What punishment will put an immediate stop to your child’s misbehavior!?” That goal is elusive at best and hurtful at worst.

You probably want more for your family than that.

In this ebook, you will learn to effectively understand and teach **natural impacts and logical consequences** to build your kids’ *wisdom*. You’ll nurture a genuine sense of *responsibility* for life at home and in their community as you guide kids to **repair and restore relationships** by “making right what they’ve made wrong.”



Check out our article, "[Consequences vs Punishment: What's the Difference?](#)" for a deep understanding of the difference between these constructive consequences and punishment.

Natural Impacts

Growing Wisdom from Real Life

A lot of misbehaviors, like disrespect or irresponsibility, have consequences that occur naturally, *without* the intervention of an adult. We call this first section “**natural impacts**” because the popular term “natural consequences” is frequently misunderstood as something a parent *imposes*, which misses the whole point!

For example, if a child has a messy room, the natural impact is that he may be unable to find his shoes in the morning before school. If a sister hits her brother, he gets hurt, might not want to play with her, and she may feel “icky” inside. If a child lies, people won’t be as likely to trust him.

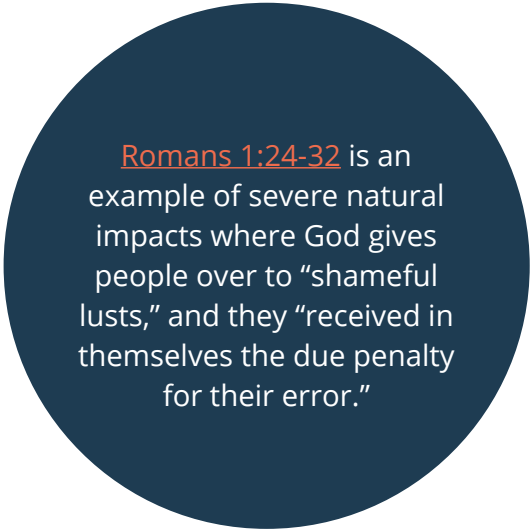
God establishes natural impacts as part of the natural order of the universe he created. [Galatians 6:7](#) says, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.” Think about that. The way that God refuses to be mocked is by allowing His children to reap (or experience) the natural impact of their actions/sin.

Wisdom and natural impacts are frequent themes in Proverbs. The opening verses in [Proverbs 1](#) state the goal of the whole book - to give *wisdom* to the “simple” and the “young.” Wisdom about how life works.

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—

And the book is full of insightful and sometimes clever wisdom. Here’s a classic example of a proverb about *natural impacts*: “If you set a trap for others, you will get caught in it yourself. If you roll a boulder down on others, it will crush you instead.”

[Proverbs 26:27, NLT](#)



[Romans 1:24-32](#) is an example of severe natural impacts where God gives people over to “shameful lusts,” and they “received in themselves the due penalty for their error.”

By helping your children understand that there are both harmful and helpful natural impacts for everything we do, you **grow wisdom that will guide them in life beyond their home.**

Helping children learn from natural impacts requires two important elements:

1 | Avoid protecting children from natural impacts

It can be tempting to rush in and help children solve their problems. This could be smoothing over relational conflict, delivering something they forgot, or getting them off the hook for missing assignments or responsibilities. This quickly resolves the internal distress we feel when our child struggles. But if those impacts are buffered now, kids don't learn from the experience to prepare for more significant challenges later on.



Of course, it is important to NOT allow a natural impact to happen if someone or something can be hurt. For example, you obviously would intervene before the threat of injury if your child were riding a bike unsafely.

Watching your kids struggle with problems that you could easily fix can be difficult, but remember: **natural impacts are powerful learning tools. They help children learn that their problems are theirs, not yours.** It is a gift to your children to let them experience how life really works.

This doesn't mean that when your child forgets his instrument or assignment, you sarcastically comment, *"Bummer. Bet you won't forget tomorrow!"* Instead, you lean in with empathy. *"Oh, I'm sorry. That's hard. But I know it's not helpful if I just jump in and fix it when you forget stuff. I'll try to help you remember it tomorrow."*

A genuinely compassionate response makes it easier to stand firm if kids protest when you don't fix the situation and just let natural impacts play out.

2 | Nurture wisdom from natural impacts

Children gain the most wisdom from a natural impact if they learn to stop, think about it, and form practical conclusions. You can facilitate this process by helping your kids learn to pay attention to their feelings and be internally motivated to change.

For example, at age seven, our son Noah was frustrated that he didn't have the money to buy Legos. He complained and begged me (Jim) to buy him some. I started to lecture him about whining, but then I remembered this principle about facilitating awareness of natural impacts. So instead, I stopped and empathized: *"I know it's frustrating when you can't get what you want. I've felt that before."* I then used the opportunity to teach and encourage, *"When you buy something right away with your allowance, at first it's fun. But then it's hard when you've spent it all, isn't it? What would you like to do differently next time?"*

I helped Noah understand the natural impact of the poor spending choices that led to his whining for Legos.

I also could have helped him understand the natural impact of the whining.

Lectures like *"Stop it!! Do you know how annoying it is when you whine?!"* do not build wisdom. They only "fertilize" the misbehavior with attention and power. [Thoughtful questions](#) help kids discover natural impacts.



A wisdom-building way to address whining

"Hmm. You must be pretty frustrated because you're kind of whining and demanding about these Legos. But I'm not sure that will be a helpful habit for you in life. How does it make you feel? How do people around you feel when you whine? What else could you do when you're frustrated?" (A gentle smile and a friendly, curious tone are essential when asking questions.)

Your child may be unable to answer those questions in the moment, but they can be the source of a great conversation later. Asking thoughtful questions also strengthens your ability to slow down and respond in a way that doesn't "fertilize" the whining.

The "natural impacts" of teaching kids about natural impacts will equip them into the future as they grow up, leave your care, and become independent.

As an adult, you rarely have other adults give you "consequences" for hurtful behavior. Instead, when you've "misbehaved," you have probably felt frustrated, sad, or maybe remorseful that you've offended someone. Awareness of these natural impacts helps motivate change.

For your children to gain that awareness, **you can learn to guide them to notice and understand the natural impacts of their mistakes so they can learn more effectively.** If you do this well, you'll need to impose consequences far less frequently, and your children will be much better prepared for their future lives.

REFLECT: As you think of your children's most common misbehaviors, what are some natural impacts of those behaviors that occur without your interference? How could you ask your children thoughtful questions to help them understand and learn from this?



Logical Consequences


Related, Reasonable, Respectful

Sometimes, children are *not* motivated by a natural impact to make a wiser choice, or their preferred choice might be unsafe. When this is the case, children may need more concrete consequences to help them learn.

A logical consequence is simply an enforced consequence related as closely as possible to the source or impact of the misbehavior.

Logical consequences can come in many forms, from losing the privilege (e.g., losing access to a misused toy for a while - the *source* of the misbehavior) to fixing the problem (e.g., paying for the window your baseball broke - resolving the *impact*).

In the Bible, God often used logical consequences- especially “losing the privilege” - to discipline his children.



Moses' disrespect of God and poor leadership caused him to lose the privilege of leading the people into the Promised Land (see [Numbers 20](#)).

Jehoshaphat, a faithful king of Judah, built ships through an alliance with the wicked king of Israel. "Because you have made an alliance with Ahaziah, the Lord will destroy what you have made.' The ships were wrecked and were not able to set sail..."

[2 Chronicles 20:35-37](#)

When Adam and Eve misused the fruit in the garden, they lost the privilege of being there (see [Genesis 3](#)).

How does this “logical consequence” principle look with a misbehaving child?

We can find some hints by looking at how consequences *shouldn't* look. Consider a child who repeatedly uses a toy recklessly and unsafely. Parents might send the child to her room or the time-out chair, which is unrelated to the misbehavior.

Or the parent might angrily say, “That’s it, we’re getting rid of this thing since you can’t use it appropriately!” and march to the trash can to drop the beloved toy in.

That approach may be related to the misbehavior but is excessive and delivered disrespectfully. I (Lynne) did exactly that when our oldest son, Daniel, repeatedly intimidated and scared his siblings with a toy bow and arrow. I angrily marched it out to the trash.

Is it any wonder our power struggle escalated to a yelling match with no good solution in sight?

Dr. Jane Nelsen, author of *Positive Discipline*, suggests remembering the following “Three Rs” - Related, Reasonable, Respectful - to ensure that consequences are both logical and *helpful*.



Related

When the consequence is related to the misbehavior, **it helps to cement the relationship between the initial misbehavior and the consequence in the child’s mind.** It is far more helpful than taking away some unrelated privilege (like their favorite toy or dessert).

Consider the case of a child who tracks mud into the house after being told to leave his dirty shoes outside. A related consequence would be to have the child clean the carpet where he walked. If he is too young to do this alone, you can either use the opportunity to teach him or at least help him do the cleaning. This not only lets children know they are responsible for their actions, but it also provides a positive interaction for learning further skills and responsibilities.

Reasonable

A logical consequence must be reasonable — that is, **appropriate to the child's age and the severity of the behavior**. Scrubbing the floor where he tracked mud is a reasonable consequence. But, having him clean all the spots on the carpet or forbidding him to play outside for three days would be unreasonable.



Respectful

To be most helpful, the consequence must be spoken and enforced respectfully. Adding humiliation to a consequence makes it hurtful instead of helpful. Simply and kindly explain, "Tracking mud in the house is not okay because it damages the carpet and makes extra work to clean it up." A simple explanation of the consequence diffuses negative emotions and enlists cooperation.

How might my "bow and arrow fiasco" with Daniel have looked if I had made sure my consequence was related, reasonable, and respectful?

Perhaps like this...

"Daniel, you're pretty excited, and you're having a hard time using this in a safe way. Did you notice the kids screaming and running away from you when you pointed it at them? What do you think they were feeling?" (Curious, relaxed questions can help kids discover the natural impact.)

"The bow and arrow will go on the shelf for a few days, so all the kids will feel safe. You can try again on Saturday, and we'll practice together when I give it back to you. I bet you'll be really careful with it."

Helping children understand the natural impact of their actions often guides them toward wiser choices. But if it doesn't, remember the "3 Rs" and use logical consequences to help your kids take responsibility for their actions.

REFLECT: As you think of the rules in your home, or maybe some recent bouts of rule-breaking, what logical (related, reasonable, respectful) consequences would best address each situation?

Make-It-Right Consequences

Learning to Repair and Restore

The beautiful gift of reconciliation

The history of the patriarchs shows God's heart for reconciliation and restored relationship. It is woven into the foundation of God's chosen people:

Abraham's wife
Sarah and her
servant Hagar
Genesis 16

Isaac and
Ishmael
Genesis 25:9

Jacob and Esau
Genesis 33:10-11

Joseph and
his brothers
Genesis 45

In each case, the focus was not on punishment for their sin but on restoring the relationship.


It helps kids to know both the *wonderful truth* that we are all created in the image of God and the fact that we "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...*" Romans 3:23. We will be plagued by me-first selfishness from the cradle to the grave.

But the next verse does something profound. "*...and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus,*" Romans 3:24. This truth brings healing to humanity's faulty beliefs that started in the Garden of Eden, beliefs that linked sin with shame and rejection. Genesis 3:6-8. God declared His **love** for us *while we were still sinners* and provided a way for reconciliation. Romans 5:8

Consider the impact in your home of *unlinking* sin from shame and instead linking it to God's merciful love and grace!



This response to sin provides a biblical pattern for *us* to follow in order to respond to the sin of others, including our kids:



"If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore that person gently."
[Galatians 6:1](#).

Let's make that practical for parenting as we draw kids toward the beauty of reconciliation.

There are two key observations from this verse.

1. Who should respond to someone's sin? The fruit of the Spirit at the end of [Galatians chapter 5](#) (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) gives us the context for the phrase "*you who are spiritual...*". When our child misbehaves, imagine if we took the focus off of finding the "consequence that will stop the misbehavior" and put our focus on responding with the fruit of the Spirit.

2. How should we respond to sin? Notice there is nothing about punishment, shame, criticism, isolation, or rejection. The word for *restore* is a Greek word often used for *mending a broken bone*. You can help your child *mend* a broken relationship by guiding them to make right what they've made wrong.

"Make-it-right" consequences are a type of logical consequence that can help a child who has damaged something or mistreated, offended, or hurt someone during a misbehavior to *repair* any damage done and *restore* that relationship.

But helping kids "right their wrongs" does not mean quickly forcing a child to "say you're sorry." **Forced apologies or restitution don't teach genuine remorse and reconciliation.** The child might conclude that they should say or do whatever they need to in order to get out of trouble. Quick, forced "reconciliation" may even foster a pattern of, "*I can hurt someone; just do a little something nice, and it's all good.*"


Jesus is not interested in insincere, external behavior or "fake reconciliation." His goal is always heart change.

If there is aggression, you can ask guiding questions to help the hurt child articulate the impact of the grievance and their feelings. This can be empowering and even healing. As you suspend any judgments and help the aggressive child really *listen* to the person they hurt, the Lord can grow the compassion that will decrease the likelihood of continued aggression.

Follow the Holy Spirit's leading to build your children's value of respect and reconciliation over time. A good starting place for this is lots of "modeling out loud" in your own relationships - either with another adult or with your kids. Do you talk about the inherent preciousness of each person God has created and the joy of respectful relationships? When you have reconciled well, do your kids see you celebrate the renewed closeness in that relationship?

When kids view reconciliation as a "shame reliever" instead of a "shame inducer," they will naturally be drawn to it. We've used the phrase, "*Put reconciliation on a pedestal in your home.*"

[Episode 140 of the Connected Families podcast on building the value of reconciliation](#) in your kids will give further practical ideas.



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Reconciliation with few words

You can also build your kids' value of reconciliation by noticing how family members forgive each other as a simple, natural process with little to no words.

"[Love] is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs." [1 Corinthians 13:5b](#)

Often kids are more naturally forgiving than adults who are more prone to ruminate on wrongs. Since kids live in the moment, they may have a little skirmish, exchange a few angry words, and move on quickly to resume the fun. They can hop right back into relationships without needing someone to apologize.

In those situations, you certainly don't need to intervene and direct kids to "apologize or make it right." Instead, you can take the opportunity to *call out the way your kids reveal Jesus in how they forgive easily and reconnect.*

The Holy Spirit will give you the wisdom to see if your involvement is needed. For example, if hurts are accumulating or one child is taking on too much of a victim role, you may want to intervene. (See [this article](#) for more practical guidance on facilitating reconciliation between siblings without over-involvement.)

Whether you affirm quick forgiveness for a little skirmish or guide reconciliation for a deeper hurt, the overall message to communicate to your child is: ***“Your relationships are valuable! When you mess them up, it’s important to do your best to reconnect.”***

Restitution consequences are radically different from traditional “punishments.” Especially with sibling conflict, punishing the offender often breeds resentment. This can sometimes lead to more (and craftier) disrespect from the offender toward the unpunished child.

“Make-it-right” consequences filled with God’s grace encourage personal responsibility and usually end with one child feeling cared for and the other feeling caring.

As you model building a value of reconciliation in your home, you can invite your child to make right what they’ve made wrong (once they’ve calmed down and felt understood).



Putting privileges on hold

Instead of having kids “say sorry” or go through the motions of “making it right,” you can set them up for sincere reconciliation. There may be times where you will need to put distracting priveleges on hold until the child has repaired the damage or restored the relationship.

There is strong scriptural basis for this approach. In [Matthew 5:23,24](#) Jesus teaches the importance of reconciliation by commanding us to leave our offering at the altar if we remember we’ve offended someone. Go make it right and then return to give the offering.

You can share this example with your kids to help communicate that our first priority in life is to have reconciled relationships with each other. What a gift this teaching is to us! God wants us to have loving, connected relationships more than He wants our gifts or service. It's a primary way we can worship Him.

Let's get practical for parenting. What a "make-it-right" consequence looks like depends on the people. The goal might be for one or both people involved (depending on who has hurt whom) to reconcile the offense and restore the relationship by doing a specific kindness for the other. Ideas might include helpfulness, making a little gift or card, planning a special time of connection, etc. This practice is fertile soil for a lifetime of goodwill in relationships.



Five examples of “make-it-right” consequences

“Make-it-right” consequences often flow from the natural impacts that have happened.

1

A coaching client's son was nonchalant about striking a boy in the back with a billiard ball despite the obvious pain it caused. She required her son to call an acquaintance in the medical profession to find out what injury might have happened if it had struck him on his spine or head. This prompted the boy to choose to write a letter of apology for his carelessness. They also found out the cost of X-rays his friend received, and he helped pay those charges.

2

David was bullying his sister – randomly hitting her or shoving her out of his way. His mom discussed the natural impact: He was practicing aggressive behavior that was hurtful to both of them, and Katie was learning victim-like submission to it. His “make-it-right” consequence to offset these patterns was to follow her directions while playing “Katie Says” (i.e., like Simon Says.)

He participated willingly when he understood this would also help her not get bullied at school. When her instructions were timid, both her mom and brother said, “No, Katie, say it strongly!” This increased her confidence and decreased his aggressiveness.

If kids are resistant to “making it right,” they can lose the specific privilege that was abused until they show they value it. Or, any privileges (such as friends or screen time) that would distract them from making it right can be put on hold until they are ready to make right what they’ve made wrong and restore the relationship.

3

Let’s revisit the bow and arrow debacle. I also could have utilized a “make-it-right” consequence. Here’s how that might go after helping my son notice his siblings’ expressions and understand how their fear has a natural impact on their relationship, here’s how that might go. *“Daniel, when your brother and sister are afraid of you, does that make them want to play with you or not want to play with you?”*

“The bow and arrow will go away for a little while until you can think of something fun that you can all play together, something where everyone will feel really safe! I can help you get whatever you need to make it fun for everyone.”

If he didn’t have any ideas, I could ask if he wanted a suggestion: *“You could make a big target to shoot the arrows at with points for different sections. Bethany and Noah could take turns while you keep score. Then, after one of them wins, you could join in the next round!”* Later, I could ask if he wanted to *sincerely* apologize.

Our two final examples are about kids who leave messes. They are from the appendix of the Connected Families’ book, [Discipline That Connects With Your Child’s Heart](#).

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4

Usually the “stimulus” that prompts kids to clean up messes is their parent’s reminder. Here’s how you can “work yourself out of a job”: If a child drops something in a common area of the house, you can have her practice putting it away several times, starting from whatever she was doing before she dropped it. This do-over of the whole sequence helps a child practice a “neatness routine,” so she gradually learns independence. For example, *“Put your jacket back on, walk through the front door again, and put it on the hook this time. Tomorrow, if you forget, you can practice that two times.”* Then, encourage her with the natural benefits of her responsibility, *“Now your jacket won’t get dirty, and you’ve learned a good habit!”* One dad said, *“This is changing everything about how I train my kids in basic responsibilities.”*

This fifth consequence is an example of a “do-over,” which can be a great way to make-it-right as you change brain pathways. Sincerely cooperating with a do-over expresses a desire to learn a better habit.

5

A “make-it-right” consequence we used flowed from our vision to maintain a quickly hospitable home. We knew kids would need the skill of noticing and spontaneously cleaning things that were messy. If they left a mess in a common/hospitality area of the house, the consequence was to find a certain number of things (usually 3 or 4) that needed to be put away or cleaned and report back to the parent. This provided an opportunity to affirm and value their noticing and their diligence.

Affirming kids for any effort to “make-it-right” after they’ve “made-it-wrong” is essential for any age child; it’s a vital “de-shamer” that represents God’s grace.

“...where sin increased,
grace increased all
the more...”
[Romans 5:20](#)



“Make-it-right” consequences for different ages

Young children

are concrete thinkers and could learn the concept of making it right as you demonstrate fixing something that is broken. You can show your kiddo a disassembled pen, *“Uh-oh, it’s broken!”* Involve your child, if possible, as you put it back together and celebrate that you *fixed it!* Then, in situations of misbehavior. *“Uh-oh. How can we fix this?”*

Make-it-right consequences for young kids are simple: getting a blanket or pacifier for a younger child they whacked, helping you wipe a spill, etc. It doesn’t have to be complicated to be genuine reconciliation. Then celebrate that they made it right!



Older Kids

can be more resistant to any kind of consequences because of years of accumulated discouragement, shame, and resentment in the relationship. If a child willingly accepts a consequence, it’s like an admission of guilt, so consequences are often passionately resisted. *“I’m NOT guilty as charged!”* (If you’re the parent of a teen, this is probably not new information!)

Light-hearted connection and keeping any shaming or condescending language out of the conversation are vital. Eyebrows up, relaxed expression, maybe a little self-deprecating humor, offering to join in cleaning up messes; these are ways you might communicate, *“I’m for you, not against you.”*

That doesn’t mean if you respond this way, your child will say, *“Oh, thanks, Mom/Dad. I appreciate you staying firm in your discipline. I know it’s so good for me!”* Of course not. But you can stay kind but firm as you set your expectations and, as needed, put privileges on hold until repair or reconciliation happens.

It helps to recognize that it can be a long road of gently talking about the wonderful mercy of God, the value of reconciliation, and *modeling, modeling, modeling...* in your relationships with other adults and in your conflicts with your teen.

I’m for you,
not against you.

A dad of five teenagers once said, *"I feel so blessed to have great relationships with my teenagers."* We queried him a bit about how his way of relating to them might be a factor. His response was simple but profound: *"I practice confessional living and have a 'no-freak-out' policy."* You can hear the shame-free living in that statement. He confessed readily, *reconciled when he blew it*, and stayed calm and non-shaming when his kids messed up. God's grace was more than enough to cover any mess-ups in the family. It is so much easier to guide kids toward reconciliation with those habits.

Over time, you can gently hold kids accountable to reconcile their relationships by saying, *"What help do you need from me to resolve this well?"* or, *"After you both feel calmer, you two can talk this through whenever you're ready. Then you can head off to be with friends or have screen time."*

We worked for years to teach our kids the values and skills for reconciliation. As teens, they often independently reconciled their conflicts by taking each other out for coffee. Whoever felt most at fault offered to pay the bill. 😊



REFLECT: What is a frequent misbehavior of one of your kids that involves hurting or offending someone? How could you thoughtfully guide your child to sincerely make it right? (Include a discussion of natural impacts and/or the loss of a related privilege if necessary.)

Conclusion

These stories and examples are just a few of the endless creative ways you can guide children toward wisdom and true reconciliation.


But one caveat: Even though reconciliation is a *vital* part of life in Christ, any good thing can become a rigid habit and lead to legalism. So model reconciliation well, and let go of any angst about *"gotta get my kids to make things right every time."* Sometimes, you might simply remove a privilege for a while. Sometimes, you let stuff go and know there will undoubtedly be another opportunity.

The bottom line is:
Let God's grace richly permeate
the whole discipline process.

Grace, grace, and more grace.
Grace for you when you have no idea what to do.
Grace when you blow it and charge in with harsh punishment.
Grace for your kids when they are too upset to reconcile.

Growing a culture of reconciliation in your home is a long, messy, awkward, beautiful process. Conflict will always be part of family life and your kids will continue to misbehave. *(And so will you.)*

But true reconciliation gradually builds wisdom and strong relationships filled with deep connection and joy! And we're guessing that's what you really want for your family.



True reconciliation
gradually builds wisdom
and strong relationships
filled with deep
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We've worked with thousands of families around the world for more than two decades, and we would love to help you get there.

Connected Families Offers:

- [Parenting blog posts](#) via email give the regular encouragement and guidance needed to make lasting changes in your family.
- [Engaging podcasts](#) that minister to thousands of parents each week.
- [Online courses](#) guide you to dive deeper into these principles with a spouse, relative, close friend, or small group.
- [Our books](#) provide lots of practical examples and tools as a quick reference.
- [Parent coaching](#) brings you immediate, individualized help!

We are honored to partner with you as you grow a family filled with the beautiful reconciliation that flows from God's gift of reconciliation with us! Let us know how we can help you.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

[Colossians 3:12, 13](#)