

# A Few Ideas on Raising Godly Children

by Dave Coles - Third edition October 2001

Includes suggestions from the family's four children

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This is a compilation of some of the principles we have tried to apply in our 19 years of child rearing so far. Since, by God's grace, the fruit up to this point has been good<sup>1</sup>, and many friends have asked for ideas, we wanted to put these principles in a brief, accessible form. Obviously, all of these ideas could be further expanded, explained and illustrated. That would be a book; which would take a lot longer to write and a lot longer to read. Hopefully we've been able to distill here the parts that, if you were reading a book, you would highlight as the essence of what's worth remembering. Many of these ideas are not original; perhaps none of them are.

All we've done is discover them, wrestle through how to implement them, thank God for the fruit, and now, put them in a concise form for you to consider. Your questions and discussion are welcome.

## General Principles

- Know the target for each child's life: a mature, godly, Christ-dependent (independent) individual; fulfilling their God-given potential. This means a gradual process of letting go; consciously planned and implemented step by step; always keeping in mind the target of a unique, godly adult who will mature throughout his/her life.
- We model godliness; while still in process ourselves.
  - We aim to make visible the reality of a godly life; moment by moment life in Christ, life values rooted in Scripture; actions consistent with values.
  - We're still in process. Recognizing our frailty, we don't try to hide the process. 2 Cor 3:12-18
  - We need to be ready to apologize and admit shortcomings, while still holding high standards.
- We convey to our children their first impressions of what God is like. What an incredible responsibility! To try to do this well, in addition to continually growing in godliness ourselves, it's important that:
  - We say what we mean to say, and then be *consistent* with what we've said. If you've said something rash that has to be changed, apologize for the rashness and fix it. Otherwise, let your "yes" mean "yes" and your "no" mean "no." (This implies training ourselves to *think*, and sometimes gather more information, before answering.)

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<sup>1</sup> 2007 note: The fruit is still good!

- Father and mother communicate enough with each other that we can agree on policies, guidelines, standards, etc. The distinct persons of the godhead never have conflicting standards or values. This doesn't mean two parents always think exactly the same on every issue, but it does mean agreeing on what standards are going to be presented to the children.
  - Any other significant care givers (especially of small children) need to be brought into this communication loop. If we as parents choose to delegate some of the nurture to someone else, God still holds us as parents responsible for all that is conveyed, including its internal consistency and consistency with biblical values.
- Try to be aware of what is God's best for any given situation or child, and whether there is anything you could or should do to move the child and/or situation toward God's best. Don't just let bad patterns and sins slide by as mild irritations. Take your God-given role to move your family in the direction of experiencing His best; His fullness of blessing in Christ!

## Boundaries

- Recognize our role and responsibility as primary conveyors of God's *love* and God's *truth*. Studies confirm that a loving environment with clear boundaries is optimal for development of character.
- Clear, biblically rooted boundaries facilitate the growth process & bring real freedom. Psalm 119:45
- Discussion of boundaries with children at a level appropriate to their age & maturity facilitates the process of internalizing biblical values. Giving them opportunities to make "safe" choices develops maturity. As they get more mature, they should be given more and more freedom to make their own choices. The goal is a mature adult able to make wise choices from a heart that loves God and delights in what is good.
- In many situations, rather than telling a child how something must be done, you can give them two choices; both of which are within the range of what you will accept. ("Would you like carrots or squash for your vegetable tonight?") In a conflict situation, sometimes one of your choices may be a negative consequence. ("No, we're not going to buy cotton candy. Would you like to enjoy the popcorn or go home now?") But because you're involving them in the process by giving a choice, it tends to bring forth a less resistant response. They themselves are facing clearly the choice of obedience or negative consequence.

This enables you to calmly escape all forms of childish coercion. You establish the boundaries of the playing field, then let them play!

In some situations, it's appropriate for you to get the child's input before you set up the choices. This can increase your wisdom.

- Set clear boundaries for appropriate behavior, and make sure these are understood by each child. (This is an almost continual process, as children mature and the issues and boundaries change.)

Be sure that violation of boundaries is *consistently* followed by appropriate negative consequences (appropriate to the offense; administered with love and without excessive emotion). If violation of boundaries is only sometimes followed by negative consequences, this actually tends to reinforce negative behavior. It's essential that children learn from us the eternal inviolable truth that obedience always ultimately brings blessing, and disobedience always ultimately brings negative consequences.

Talk through each violation at the appropriate time. (Ideally right when it happens; but when that's not possible, as soon as there is a private place with a few available minutes.) Don't give out negative consequences without making sure you adequately:

- Make sure they understand what the boundary was that was violated, and why the consequence happened;
- Make sure they know you love them, desire God's best for them, and are working to help them live in His best (you're on their side, or more precisely, you're both on God's side - working *together* in this);
- Give safe opportunity for them to express their understanding, thoughts, and feelings about the related issues. But don't allow them to "chatter." (See explanation under "Relationship" section.)

Be willing to listen, explain patiently, apologize, share Scripture, pray together, or whatever else is needed to bring adequate closure to the issue. Then put it in the past and don't bring it up again.

- If you suspect a child is lying, there's no need to browbeat them or make accusations you can't substantiate. Clarify to them that there is a measure of uncertainty in your mind, but you are going to trust that what they're saying is true. Then explain that while your knowledge is limited and fallible, God knows and see everything. This can be strongly backed up by reading together a Scripture such as Hebrews 4:13.

Let them know that you are entrusting the issue to God; and if they are lying or covering up wrongdoing, you will let God do the punishment directly (and His punishment is worse than yours). This doesn't need to be said in a threatening way. It's a fact of the moral structure of the universe, about which you, as a loving parent are teaching them. This step can be accompanied by prayer together, with you surrendering the issue to God

This approach frees you to truly let go of the issue; and frees all concerned from the unpleasant dynamics of suspicion, unsubstantiated accusation, and unresolved conflict. In our experience, this approach will often bring forth a direct confession. In some cases, the confession will come forth a day or so later after the child has been actually experiencing the heavy hand of God. (And of course, in some cases, they're truly innocent, and the issue ends there.)

- When possible, use rewards more than punishments to motivate desired behavior. When appropriate, involve the children themselves in thinking creatively (brainstorming) about possible rewards, disciplines or patterns that would help them move toward the desired goal.
- Boundaries responsibly & consistently obeyed can be expanded as appropriate. Boundaries violated are diminished; not as punishment, but in order to give the training needed to obey the boundaries (i.e. more time with parental supervision to establish appropriate patterns of behavior in a given situation). The goal is always joyful, submissive obedience to God. If that's not happening, agonize in prayer and creative thinking, and invest energy in loving training, to find a way toward the goal.
- When a boundary or rule is violated, distinguish the wrong action from the identity of the child him/herself. Facilitate his/her repentance by not conveying "You are bad," but rather acknowledging his/her capability and responsibility before God. For example, help him/her internalize a godly response by a process such as this:
  - "Do you know what God thinks about this?" (If he/she doesn't, clarify; based on Scripture, in an age-appropriate way.)
  - "Do you know that wrong behavior has consequences?" (clarify, or depending on maturity, discuss, the appropriate consequence in this case)
  - "What do you think God wants you to do right now?" (repent, ask for forgiveness, apologize, make restitution, or whatever is appropriate in the situation)
- Distinguish between acts of rebellion (willful defiance of a known, understood boundary) and childish irresponsibility (forgetfulness, clumsiness, silliness, too much energy, etc). The former calls for discipline; the latter for creative solutions. Some creative solutions might include:
  - for forgetfulness: redoing the action correctly (adding one more repetition each time the action is forgotten)
  - for too much energy: finding a creative outlet
  - for silliness: taking time out to be *really* silly, or perhaps helping them understand the situation from a more mature perspective, so that they can choose more appropriate behavior.

## Relationship

- Treat children as real people; worthy of respect. They're made in God's image. They're not little adults; so we deal with them according to their level of capability and maturity. But this doesn't call for any less respect toward them as a person.

This means don't belittle, talk down to them, or treat their ideas, plans and desires as unimportant. Also don't break promises or appointments with them. Give them the same courtesy you would give any other person you respect (i.e. another adult).

Listen to them; or if you can't listen at a given moment, politely explain that you're busy, but would like to hear their thoughts later (then really make time for it and follow up later). Don't cut them off or ignore them (treat them as less than a real person). *Be* someone they can talk to and share with. Seek to understand them.

Don't say negative (or embarrassing) things about your children when they can overhear. Also, don't gossip about them behind their back. As Scripture commands for any relationship, if you have an issue with someone (including your child), deal with *them* on that issue and get it taken care of. Don't blab it to others.

Children don't enjoy being yelled at any more than adults. Avoid it, except in emergencies.

Think positively about them, based on who God has made them to be (Ps 139:14). What you really think and feel about a person will be communicated in an astonishing variety of unconscious ways. If there are reasons you don't think or feel positively toward a child, recognize the fact and seek after what God wants you to do to remedy the situation.

Do your best to understand how each situation or issue looks from their perspective. See how much you can view and feel the world through their eyes. This will enable you to much better move them toward seeing the world through your (and ultimately God's) eyes.

- Avoid a "me against you" perspective in any given situation. Try to convey to the child that you are on their side (that is, you both want to be on God's side), seeking what's best for them, and the two of you need to work together to attain it.
- Don't be too busy to answer "Why?" questions. These are a prime opportunity to enunciate the core values you're hoping to pass on. If you can't ultimately root your answers in God's Word, you need to do your homework. Why *are* you saying, doing, and commanding these things?  
Don't, however, allow a child to "chatter" (talk back, whine, argue, or keep saying the same thing over and over). The principle to teach (and help them memorize) is Prov 10:8 "The wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin." Once you have made a decision (or given a command, or closed an issue; depending on the situation) the child needs to honor your

authority. In cases where they want to know “why,” we have found it helpful to be willing to explain our reasons. *But*, they can only ask “why” or other questions *after* they have said “OK,” or otherwise showed their willingness to submit to our word. If “why” is the first word out of their mouth, this is generally a form of chattering. Don’t tolerate it. After one warning, there should be a negative consequence. But be willing to repeatedly teach them how to: 1. submit and 2. have a fruitful discussion of issues where they don’t understand or appreciate your position.

- Teach children how to know when the best resolution of a conflict is to “agree to disagree.” Explain and model the fact that difference of opinion doesn’t have to result in argument or unpleasantness. Also teach and model that some differences can be peacefully resolved by appealing to an agreed on authority (i.e. a dictionary, the Bible, the person who originally said something that’s being discussed, an encyclopedia, the Internet, or “any credible published source.”) Train and model that if there’s an authority that can settle a dispute, it’s pointless to continue arguing. Just go peaceably and check with the authority!
- “What should I do about tattling?” Teach children the biblical way to deal with others’ wrongdoing, and with interpersonal conflicts. Then invest the energy needed to make your sphere of influence (at the very least, your home & family) a place where biblical principles can be lived out and yield fruit that satisfies.

Consider this common scene: Child #1 comes to an adult and says, “Child #2 did such-and-such wrong action.” The adult responds, “I don’t want to hear any tattling. Go and work it out yourselves.” Consider the pile of unbiblical messages being taught here: 1. Adults (and God) don’t care about the real problems I face in life. 2. There is no justice in the universe, except what I can get for myself. 3. If someone commits a crime, it’s pointless to report it or appeal to the authorities. 4. If someone commits an injustice against me, I should deal with it however I’m able.

So the child goes back into the situation with whatever limited resources and maturity he has, to resolve the problem the best he/she can. This is a formula for nurturing seething frustration, vengeance, and habitually taking “the law” into one’s own hands. This isn’t how Jesus said to do it.

Jesus’ way is very clear: *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along.”* Matt 18:15&16

So when a child comes to report another child’s wrongdoing, the biblical adult response is, “Did you already talk to him/her about it?” If the answer is “No” (which it usually will be, at least at first), the biblical follow up is, “Then you need to talk to him/her first, don’t you?” (At some point the whole family will need to discuss Matt 18:15&16, and how this process works in everyday

life. Then it becomes a common currency for understanding and resolving conflicts.)

Notice that this suggested response differs in two ways from the too-common “Don’t be a tattler.” 1. Instead of conveying “I don’t want to be bothered,” you’re conveying, “Resolve this problem Jesus’ way; not the world’s way.” 2. The child returns to the problem situation knowing that if his own efforts at resolution fail, he/she has a recourse. Getting justice doesn’t depend on his/her own brute force or scheming.

If (or when) the child comes back to say that he’s tried telling the person, but they won’t listen, then you go with him/her to address the situation. (Or you can call them both to come to where you are. This has the advantage of interrupting child #2’s activity, which offers a negative reinforcement for not resolving the problem just between the two of them.)

You get the attention of child#2, and say, “Child #1 has something he/she’d like to say to you.” (This lets child #2 know he/she needs to pay attention. There are now possible consequences lurking behind the word of correction he/she is about to hear from child #1.) Then child #1 says his/her piece. Sometimes at this point some coaching will be needed on how to address the problem without attacking the person. (i.e. “No, not, ‘You’re such a clumsy ox.’ The issue is ‘You knocked down my tower.’ Can you say that?” )

Keep coaching and practicing as needed, so that child #1 can appropriately and effectively convey a word of rebuke. Then coach child #2 in offering an appropriate response. But don’t allow (let alone mandate) a phony apology. We’re not trying to raise liars or hypocrites. Go after sincerity. Sincere sorrow for sin will include an attempt at reparation. (“Do you want me to help you rebuild it?”) If child #2 does *not* show the fruits of repentance (no sincere apology, or a half-hearted “sorry”) it is your responsibility as God’s representative to give a consequence that will tend to *bring* sincere sorrow. (i.e. “Child #2, I’d like you to stop playing in there for now, and come play something here in the same room with me for the next half hour.”)

Sometimes it will turn out that child #2 was not, in fact, in the wrong. You can judge the situation, and help both children to see it from God’s perspective and resolve it accordingly.

As you can see, training children to resolve conflict Jesus’ way takes a lot more time than saying, “Don’t be a tattler.” But if followed consistently, children really do eventually learn this pattern, and the fruit is wonderful. It’s a huge improvement on the fighting, scheming, selfishness and enmity that too often characterize children’s relationships in a “no tattling” social environment.

- Teach children how to, when they disagree with someone (especially someone in authority), appropriately ask polite questions that will raise the issue; rather than attacking. (“Dad, are you sure Brunei is in the Middle East?”)

## Developing Good Habits

- Live out the kinds of behavior you want children to imitate.
- Have biblical foundations for all that you do, and use “teachable moments” to pass on those foundations.
- Don’t simply tell a child when something they’ve said or done is wrong. Teach them how to say or do it right, and help them walk through the process. “Honey, when I ask if you’d like more carrots, it’s rude to say, ‘No way!’ The polite answer is, ‘No, thank you.’ Can I hear you say that?” It is important that children cheerfully submit to these practice sessions. This is how the foundation is laid for good habits.
- If a child answers “OK” to requests, but doesn’t follow through; have them repeat back to you what you’ve asked them. “What is it I want you to do?”
- Limit the amount of time spent with passive entertainment (both theirs and yours!), and help children focus on active endeavors that will involve some thought and creativity.

## Spiritual Development

- Take time to pray for your children and think through the issues they’re dealing with at various points in their lives. Try to put yourself in their place; to see and feel what they’re experiencing. Ask yourself (or discuss with your spouse, “How can I (we) facilitate the work God wants to do in them at this time?”

Stay tuned in to what’s happening in their lives. Don’t ignore patterns that you know or suspect are contrary to God’s will. This is foundational to effectively bringing them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (Eph 6:4) Once you identify an issue that needs to be dealt with, ask God to give you wisdom in how best to approach it.
- Affirm children for who they are; encourage their creativity in appropriate spheres. If they are within biblical boundaries and have good reasons for an idea, give them freedom to do things a bit differently than you would do them. Often the values (reasons) which underlie a behavior are much more important than the action itself, especially as they get older.

Don’t fight battles over specific actions while ignoring the bigger issues at the level of values. Whenever possible (especially as they get older), give your input at the level of biblical principles (read with them relevant Scriptures, discuss the meaning; then help *them* think through godly values based on those Scriptures. If this process is done well, children can more easily make good choices about actions.

- Have a consistent personal quiet time, and do what's needed for your children to develop that habit. (Do it together with younger ones, then gradually enable them to have a simple pattern they can follow themselves. Think through appropriate patterns and resources for their age and maturity.) Help them have a consistent pattern, but don't be a nag. Find creative ways so they can remember and enjoy at least a brief time with God each morning.
- Establish a pattern of family devotions (song(s) of worship, scripture & prayer). Make it simple, enjoyable, and age appropriate. If you make plans for this to be a part of your normal daily routine; you will likely end up with a reasonably consistent pattern. It doesn't have to happen *every* day (sometimes other things prevent it), but if your lifestyle is so hectic that it never happens, you may need radical changes. Ask yourself, "Are we fulfilling Deut 6:5-9? Or do we need some new patterns?"
- If you're seeing a pattern of negative behavior in a child, pray about what's behind it. Don't just hope it will go away. After prayer, consider what positive steps could be taken to address the issue. Here again, try to see the situation from the child's point of view, and be willing to listen to him/her.
- Have family times when you can discuss together current issues (from your lives, the news, events at school/church/work; things a family member has seen or experienced). The goal is to enable your children to view all of life from the perspective of God's Word. Don't just talk about events, but develop an awareness of God's perspective on what's happening. These discussions are some of your best opportunities to develop biblical values (the pattern of Deut 6:5-9).

Don't be afraid to ask time and again, "What do you think God liked or didn't like about this?" This is the question that needs to take root in their heart for *every* situation: "What does God think?" (The unspoken corollary is that we act consistently with what God likes, or anticipate dire consequences.)

These discussions can sometimes take place in family devotions, but don't limit it to that. They can also take place in the midst of everyday life situations, such as when a child has been playing with friends or when the two of you have observed together a situation that can serve as an object lesson. This is the focus of Deut 6:7 - God's Word applied and discussed in the midst of everyday life.

Don't make family devotions always a long heavy discussion, or you'll lose your audience. Especially if there's a broad age range of children, better to have the whole family together for only the attention span of the younger ones; then afterward continue fruitful deeper discussions with the older ones.

The two basic questions for leading a Bible discussion (with people of any age) are: 1. Do you understand what this means? 2. How does this apply to our lives? Use additional questions to develop the first aspect

(understanding) as much as needed before moving on to the second (application). Let them figure out as much as they're able; giving them hints to figure out more; then supply whatever else is needed to complete the picture. Give opportunities for the youngest members to speak first, before answers are filled in by the older ones (or parents).

Two keys to the effectiveness of these discussions: 1. your own knowledge of God's Word and ability to apply its truth in everyday life; 2. your willingness to give children space to think out loud and express opinions; affirming what's on track and lovingly pointing when needed to a better way; i.e. "What about the verse that says, '....' How does that apply?" Don't just say, "No, that's wrong," but guide them gently to see better answers in God's Word.

- Movies, books or other media can also be opportunities to inculcate godly values. After a movie, for example, develop the habit of taking a couple of minutes to discuss, "What do you think God liked or didn't like?" and/or "What were the main issues?" This brief discussion can make the difference between two hours of effective training in godliness versus two hours essentially wasted. Again, the target is that they develop the habit of viewing *all* things from God's point of view.

This kind of discussion will also enable children to recognize for themselves entertainment that's a waste of time or a negative influence; and to think in a biblical way about the dozens of issues involving sin in the real world.