Discipline vs. Punishment

By Chip Ingram

This article was directed at a parent, and for the sake of the original author, I’m not going to switch the addresses he makes. However, as a Camp Counselor, you’re going to become close enough to your camper to feel some serious frustration when they’re disobedient. We believe this article still applies to you. Read on!

 We love the gospel of grace when we come to God with our sins. None of us wants justice in the sense of God giving us what we deserve. But as much as we love His mercy when applied to us, we have a really hard time applying it to others — especially when the "other" is someone who can wound our hearts as deeply as our child can. The closer the relationship, the more betrayed and frustrated we feel. And those kinds of feelings can lead to ill-conceived punishments.

 Think about how God disciplines. Some translations of Hebrews 12:6, where the writer quotes Proverbs to demonstrate that God disciplines His children, use an inade­quate word: "he *punishes* everyone he accepts as a son" (italics added). The translation itself isn't wrong, but it doesn't capture the full meaning of the word. Literally, it means to forcefully correct, to scourge, to take whatever drastic measure is necessary to get someone to obey. Punishment, when not clarified in English with a fuller definition, implies retribution. It can be entirely a matter of payback.

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 Punishment produces some very negative characteristics in your children: guilt, shame, bitterness, resentment, regret, self-pity, fear, and more. Because it's focused on the past, children feel helpless. They can't undo what they've already done, and they can't change the circumstances that their behavior has produced. Punishment doesn't give them a means to right their wrongs; the tools they need to understand redemption aren't included in the punishment pack­age. It is simply retribution that leads to a lot of negative emotions.

 Discipline, on the other hand, is future-focused, always pointing toward future acts. It has nothing to do with retribution and everything to do with redemption. Whereas the purpose of punishment is to inflict a penalty for an offense, the purpose of discipline is to train for correction and maturity. Whereas the origin of punishment is the frustration of the parent, the origin of discipline is a high moti­vation for the welfare of the child. And whereas the result of punishment is fear and shame, the result of discipline is security. Discipline always holds the child's best interests, not the parent's anger, in the forefront. It is never out of control.

***Parenting Myth:****Discipline requires parents to penalize their child as payback for an offense.*

***Parenting Reality:****Discipline means applying appropriate consequences to encourage a child to make better choices in the future.*

 What messages are you sending your kids? Few parents will bluntly declare that they're penalizing a child for his misbehavior. We don't express punishment in terms of vengeance. But when the veins are popping, the voice is escalating, and the parent towers intimidatingly over their children, the message is easily confused. You may have discipline in mind, but your children probably inter­pret your outbursts of anger as pure punishment. It needs to be clear in their minds that you are imposing boundaries for their good because you love them.

 There will be times, of course, when you are angry. Just because you don't discipline out of anger doesn't mean you won't feel angry. My kids have done things that made me livid, and it took me between ten minutes and an entire day to calm down. But I've learned that I am not ready to discipline my child until I can do so under control. The best way to do that is to have your child go to his room, or for you to go to your room, or both. *(This still applies to a camp counselor! You often have a choice to calm down before addressing the situation!)* There's nothing wrong with taking time to invite God to "clothe" you in the Spirit of Christ, remind yourself that Jesus has already paid for your children's sins, ask God to help you handle your anger appropri­ately, and then deal with the situation rationally.

 It's fine to tell your children how upset you are, but the focus soon needs to turn to helping them get right with God and learn how to correct the behavior for the future. I confess that this approach takes a lot more work on the parent's part, and a lot more self-control. But in our home and countless others, it has turned the disciplining process from an ugly exchange of hurtful emotions to a time of resolution and deeper intimacy between parent and child.

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 **Discipline** teaches children new skills, such as how to manage their behavior, solve problems, and [deal with uncomfortable emotions](https://www.verywellfamily.com/teach-your-child-to-deal-with-uncomfortable-emotions-1095028). Discipline helps kids learn from their mistakes and teaches them appropriate ways to deal with emotions, like anger and disappointment.

 **Punishment** teaches kids that they are not able to be in control of themselves. They learn their parents must manage their behavior because they are not able to do it on their own. – www.verywellfamily.com



