

Grace Parenting

Principle 9: *The goal of good parenting is to help children be responsible for their own choices.*

Problems that arise in parenting a child are most often problems with the parents. That does not mean that parents are responsible for the choices of their children. Children are responsible for their own choices. The goal of parenting is to help children be responsible for their own choices, just as parents are to be responsible for their choices. The problem is that as a parent and an adult, I have a lot of power and authority-physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

ILLUSTRATION FROM JEFF VANVONDEREN

"Several years ago, a young couple came in for counseling concerning domestic violence on the part of the husband. They arrived at the office fifteen minutes late and in the midst of an argument. On top of that, they brought their two-year-old daughter into the room and the wife announced apologetically, "We couldn't find a sitter. We hope it's okay that we brought her. We could leave if you'd like."

I reassured them that it was fine this time, and we began the session. As time went on, I noticed two things. First, the little girl didn't seem to be able to say very many words, the cause of which became apparent because her parents did all of her talking for her. Second, it also became apparent that I was more comfortable that their little girl was in the session than they were. As far as I was concerned, she was mostly acting like a normal, curious, active two-year-old. While she did seem a little out of control at times-which made it hard for us to talk-both parents seemed easily irritated at almost everything she did. They spent most of the session trying to control her behavior.

Here is how the session went: Amy, the little girl, comes over beside me. I smile and tell her I'm happy to meet her. The dad looks irritated. Mom notices the dad's nonverbal signals and asks the daughter to come and sit by her. The daughter blurts "No!" and starts crying. (After all, she had just made a new friend.) The mom says, "I'll give you a red gumball if you stop crying and come over here by me." The girl stops crying and goes to her mom.

Three minutes later, Amy tries to get the mom's wallet out of her purse. The mom says, "No." The daughter starts crying. The dad looks irritated (progressively irritated, with each event). The mom notices and tells Amy to stop crying. She cries harder. Mom says, "I'll give you a red gumball if you stop." The girl stops and receives a gumball. Then she slaps the mom on the shoulder. "If you do that again you're getting spanked," hisses the mom. Amy hits her again. The dad quickly says, "I'll hold her," and picks her up. "If you calm down, I'll give you a gumball," he says. Amy calms down . . . ad nauseam.

Finally I said, "Would you folks mind if I tried something?" Both indicated their permission. I said, "Amy, could you come here please?" She came over by me. Then I said, "Do you remember the friendly lady (the receptionist) you met when you first got here?" "Uh-huh." "Well," I continued, "you can choose to stop hitting and crying, and sit with your mom or dad. If you do, you can stay in here with us. Or you can choose to keep crying and running around. If you choose that, you will spend the rest of the time out with the lady, so your mommy and daddy and I can finish our talk. It's up to you. What is your choice?" At that point she stopped crying and whining, hopped up on her dad's lap and started playing with one of the toys they had brought for her. Both parents gasped simultaneously. "I don't believe it!"

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT TRAINING CHILDREN BY GRACE.

1. First, bribing behavior with poor rewards always backfires, as in "calming a child with sugar."
2. Second, bribing can be a form of reinforcing bad behavior. True, the parents thought they were rewarding her for cooperating. But fussing first, then cooperating is reinforcing bad behavior.
3. Third, instead of it being Amy's responsibility to control her behavior, it had become the task of the parents. Amy was not learning to control herself, but the parents were doing the controlling.
4. Fourth, and most sad, Amy was learning that her behavior had a lot of power to control how her parents were feeling. When this occurs, parents no longer discipline for the child's best interest. They control in order to fix the child, so that when the child is fixed, they feel good themselves.

Jeff, the counselor, took control over the environment, to influence her choice. Rather than trying to control her behavior, Jeff used his authority to empower the girl to control her own behavior. Second, this had the effect of making her poor choices her problem instead of her parents' problem. Third, Jeff was able to better maintain peace of mind when Amy's behavior was her problem and not his. With Amy's parents, they could only stay calm if Amy complied with their control. This gave Amy's behavior a lot of power over her parents' state of mind. And lastly, two-year-olds are capable of making wise choices and controlling themselves-when given the opportunity.

As a parent, you have power and authority over your children— emotionally, physically, and spiritually. ***Just because you have the power to control, you can mistakenly think you also have the obligation to control.*** You cannot make your children be honest, for instance. But you can influence them toward honesty by controlling whether you tell the truth. You cannot make them trust you, but you can control whether you mean what you say. You cannot make them trust in Jesus, but you can influence them toward faith by helping them trust in Jesus as they watch how you live. You cannot make your kids obey, but you can control your responses to their disobedience. You can respect their choices and provide wise consequences for their actions, so they can learn just as much about wisdom from disobeying as from obeying. And you can respond in ways that create an environment in which their poor choices are their problem. As you do these things they will be influenced and empowered to make wise choices.

1. Compliance with external pressure means a child has been squeezed into a mold; he is being conformed from the outside/in. Obedience is about learning to live consistent on the outside with what God is doing on the inside.
2. Do not give consequences in order to threaten children into acting the way you want them to. People who do this are trying to control their children's behavior by simply teaching them to act in ways that avoid pain. Children who learn to avoid pain at all costs are afraid to try new things.
3. Do give your children consequences in order to teach about behavior as long as you are going to do a lot of work in being a parent (and you are), do the right work. You can spend your energy trying to keep track of, control, and fix your children through bribes, threats, and sermons. Or you can spend your energy discovering and implementing consequences from which your children can learn about the wisdom of their choices and their ability to make good ones.
4. Children can learn as much from disobeying and receiving wise consequences as obeying.
5. Do allow your children to experience the natural consequences of their behavior. Parent out of the fullness of finding God as your only source. Enjoy your kids as God's gift to you – regardless.

Source: Jeff VanVonderen, *Families Where Grace Is In Place*, Kindle Edition.