

Parenting is Not for Sissies – Family Matters Series
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Dr. James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, tells of a “woman with seven rambunctious children who boarded a Los Angeles bus and sat in the seat behind [him.] Her hair was a mess and the gaunt look on her face revealed a state of utter exhaustion. As she stumbled past him with her wiggling tribe, [he] asked, “Do all these children belong to you, or is this some kind of picnic!” She looked at [him] through sunken eyes and said, “They’re all mine, and believe me, it’s no picnic!”¹

Today as we continue our mini Series on the theme of “Family Matters,” I am entitling today’s installment, “Parenting is Not for Sissies!” While this particular message is obviously directed toward young parents, parents of all ages and grandparents, for the rest of you, in not too many years you may likely be parents also. And for those still living at home, today’s thoughts may help you reevaluate how you relate now to your own parents.

For there is no doubt that, when it comes to family matters, we are living in difficult times, complicated times, and confusing times. We live in a time when the previous hidden secret of child abuse in all its ugly manifestations has been revealed for what it truly is – monstrous! We read of frustrated and depressed parents whose infants die of ‘shaken baby syndrome.’ We read of parents who in utter desperation have placed their children’s hands on the top of a hot stove in the insane desire of punishing their kids. And so rightly we cringe with fear for what might possibly happen to our children. We also hear almost daily of children and even teen agers who have been abducted, molested or worse.

We fear what is presently being unleashed upon their tender minds through the fire hose of mass media especially the internet in its more seedy side of pornography just a mouse click away. So no wonder we cringe with disgust and fear the worst for what might possibly happen to our kids.

But in such times as these, the collateral damage of all this is that most, if not all forms of discipline seem to be loosing ground.

I. Who’s in Charge Here Anyways?

That leads me to the big question: “*Who’s in charge here anyways?*” That’s the first thing. “Who IS in charge here anyways?” – the parents or their children?

So for instance concerning the school system one writer wisely summed it up saying, “It should come as no shock. . . . that we have the situation where teachers are afraid of the principle, the principal is afraid of the superintendent, the superintendent is afraid of the school board, the school board is afraid of the parents, the parents are afraid of the kids, and would you believe, the kids aren’t afraid of anybody.”²

¹ The Strong Willed Child: Dr. James Dobson; p. 11

² The Strong Willed Child: Dr. James Dobson; p. 183

So obviously from toddler to teenager we need to have set boundaries. But to our surprise, we discover that contrary to popular believe and every protest our kids might say they not only need boundaries but children actually feel secure when they have boundaries, and in an unspoken way they actually want to have boundaries. For believe it or not children are lovers of law and order and justice and secure boundaries. The writer of the book of Hebrews in the Bible tells us that an undisciplined child feels like an illegitimate son or daughter, not even belonging to his family.³

What better explanation can be given for the present popularity of the mythical Superhero craze including Spiderman, Batman, Ironman, X-men and even stranger the return of the 1938 creation by a Canadian: the ultimate servant of justice, (and *The American Way*), namely Superman? Even stranger is that not only are children and teens drawn to such mythic lore, but now the trend has spilled over to adults both young and old. So then beginning at a very early age we see the strange and curious value system of children which respects strength and courage especially so when combined with love. All this to say that even children value law, order and justice.

In the words of Dobson: “Why else do children [in the school yard] proclaim, “My dad can beat up your dad!”? [To which] one child replied to that statement, “That’s nothing; my mom can beat up my dad, too!”⁴ And so children all from 1 to 81 need boundaries. For as Leonardo da Vinci wrote, “He who does not punish evil commands it to be done!”

There can hardly be a better example in scripture than the story of Eli’s two adult sons Hophni and Phinehas. If you are not familiar with their names you might remember that it was High Priest Eli who helped the small boy Samuel to hear God’s gentle call upon his life. This is the same Samuel who would later become the mighty prophet.

But as for his own sons, Eli let them run rampant. Then as adults they were appointed as priests of the Great Temple in Jerusalem yet we are told, “They did not know the Lord.” And when Eli discovered that his sons were greedily pilfering for themselves part of the offering that belonged to the Lord, he tried to discipline his sons but it was too little too late. When Eli learned that both died in battle as the Lord had prophesied and that the Ark of the Covenant had been taken also, he fell backwards dead. Their tragic stories are told in 1 Samuel chapters 2 and 4.

All this to say, that our children and young adults do in fact need and even want boundaries even if they would never say so.

II. No One Hears us When We Shout

Well if the big question is “Who’s In Charge here Anyways?” the next thing I wish to impress upon you is this: “*No one hears us when we shout!*” That’s the second thing. And believe it or not it’s true: no one hears us when we shout. All the shouting

³ See Hebrews 12:5-11

⁴ The Strong Willed Child: Dr. James Dobson; p. 15

match achieves is our display of anger in which the one who shouts the loudest wins or so we think but it's just not so.

If I were to Canadianize and embellish the classic illustration of James Dobson from his book 'The Strong Willed Child,' it might sound something like this: Suppose you are driving your car home from work and you exceed the speed limited by 30 kilometers per hour. Standing on the street corner is a lone policeman who has not been given the power to arrest you. He has no squad car. He wears no badge, carries no gun, and can write no tickets. All he is commissioned to do is stand on the curb and scream insults as you speed past. Would you slow down just because he shakes his first in protest? Of course not! You might wave to him as you streak by. His anger would achieve little except to make him appear comical and foolish.

On the other hand, nothing influences the way Mr. Motorist drives more than occasionally hearing the sound of a siren, and looking in the rear view mirror and seeing a black and white vehicle in hot pursuit with a hundred and nineteen red and blue lights as well as an array of white flashing lights as blinding as lightning (or so it seems).

When his car is brought to a stop, he doesn't get out at first. He makes you wait for about 5 minutes that seems like 5 hours as he checks your license plate number and calls into the station to see if the car is reported as stolen and to see just how many traffic violations you might have and how many criminal convictions you have mounted up, and how much time you've served in maxim security prisons, and checks to see how long you have broken parole (at least that's how it feels).

Then quietly and slowly a dignified courteous constabulary approaches your rolled down driver side window. He is six foot sixteen in height. He looks like a young Arnold Schwarzenegger on steroids, (now wait a minute – Schwarzenegger was on steroids!) He carries two giant AK 47 machine guns one on each hip (again it just seems that way at least). He bends way down to the drivers side window and bringing his face about an inch away from your nose he say, 'Sir' speaking in gentle and even polite tones [now remember this is my Canadian version of the story] and he asks, 'did you know our radar unit just clocked you going 110 clicks in a 80 km zone? May I see your driver's license and car registration please? He opens his ominous leather bound black book of citations and leans toward you. He has revealed no hostility and offers no criticisms, yet you immediately go to pieces inside. You fumble nervously to locate the small light blue drivers license in your wallet, the one with the photo in which you were not allowed to smile, the one that looks like the mug shot of convicted bank robber. Then you rummage through your cluttered glove compartment trying to find the pink slip of paper – your Alberta car registration. "Where is it? Did I forget to put the new one in? Oh there it is," you think to your self while wiping a trace of sweat from your brow. Now why are your hands moist and your mouth dry? Why is your heart thumping in your throat? Because the course of ACTION that John Law is about to take is notoriously unpleasant. It is his action, not his shouting which dramatically affects your future driving habits.⁵

⁵ Adapted from The Strong Willed Child: Dr. James Dobson; p. 99-100

III. Action Speaks Volumes

From this thought flows naturally our next: If no one hears us when we shout then ‘*Action Speaks Volumes.*’ That’s the next thing: Action does indeed speak volumes. It is action not anger that works.

One teacher said on a national television program in the US, “I like being a professional educator, but I hate the daily task of teaching. My children are so unruly that I have to stay mean at them all the time just to control the classroom”⁶ Friends, how sad is that?

Action speaks volumes. Again this points to the fact that our children do need boundaries but let me add to this saying they need ‘appropriate boundaries,’ with the emphasis on the word ‘appropriate’ – which also implies ‘age appropriate boundaries.’ Let me add to this again by saying that any such discipline must also be appropriate to the level of misbehavior and no more.

Years ago an Italian criminologist by the name of Cesare Beccaria wrote a famous book entitled ‘*Crimes and Punishments.*’ The title implies the same for parents, children, and young adults living at home. Any punishment must be appropriate to the crime (so to speak) and no more.

You many even be thinking right now of where I am going with this. So to misquote Shakespeare’s Hamlet: “To spank or not to spank; this is the question?” A person by the name of ‘Spock,’ not the one of ‘Star Trekian’ fame you are thinking of, but Dr. Benjamin Spock the famous child psychiatrist wrote a famous book ‘*Baby and Child Care*’ which for years was the second best selling book next to the Bible! It was controversial to say the least. His thesis: Children are basically good. Don’t discipline them and they will find their own way and turn out alright. Many well meaning parents went by the book. Then when they found it didn’t work they decided to use the book as a means of ‘applied psychology’ to the seat of the situation. In other words they didn’t just pat their children on the back but they patted me them low enough and hard enough that it did some good.

Now I am not telling you what to do. In fact there was a time when I did spank our children, but one day in a moment of frustration I realized how hard I had just spanked one of my kids with a wooden spoon. So much so that I fell down on my knees, hugged my little one and said, “Daddy is so sorry for spanking you too hard. Will you forgive me?” From which a little head still crying nodded as if to say, “Yes Daddy I forgive you.” And from that moment on I quite the habit - cold turkey.

Having said this, truth be told, because when we come to the scriptures concerning the manner of discipline proscribed, we are confronted if not puzzled by what appears to be somewhat harsh, even to the point that some might suggest it borders on acts of child abuse. Yet as with all biblical statements we can not afford to gloss over them just because we don’t like what we hear. For example: Prov 13:24 says, “He who

⁶ The Strong Willed Child: Dr. James Dobson; p. 99

sparing the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.” Did you notice two things: First it does not say as we so often think it says, “Spare the rod and spoil the child”, but rather, “he who spares the rod hates his son”. What follows this is a statement that discipline is actually an outflow of our love; “he who loves him is careful to discipline him.” Likewise, Prov. 23:13-14 implies that discipline helps a child avoid the road to death implying eternal death also. Listen: “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.” Then Prov. 29:15 says “The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother.” But to put this in perspective some of the scholars tell us that the word ‘child’ in these verses may refer to older children and not younger ones.

But the question remains, “what does this rod look like?” As much as we would like to say otherwise, undoubtedly in Biblical days parents would discipline their children with some kind of literal rod, hopefully applied to the softest and safest place of the human body. Perhaps more importantly the word ‘Rod’ in scripture is a symbol of other things as well. The word ‘Shebet’ can mean stick, a branch or even a twig. It can also be a word used to describe a ‘spear,’ though hopefully none of us are tempted to skewer our children! It’s also the same word used to describe a shepherd’s crook which can be used both to ward off enemies and guide the sheep. As harsh as it may sound, some times the shepherd would use his crook to break a certain lamb’s leg to keep it from its dangerous habit of consistently straying from the safety of the fold. Then, he would carry it gently in his arms close to his heart until the day it was healed. It would then stay close to the shepherd, not so much because of punishment received but because the lamb knows the shepherd loves him and longs to be with him. Also the word ‘Shebet’ describes a scepter standing for justice – a symbol of God’s authority over the world, the king’s authority over his people, and a symbol of a father’s loving authority over his children. But however we interpret it, it must be in the light of Jesus who was gentle with children as a shepherd – the good shepherd of the 23rd Psalm of whom we read, “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

So then, I am not going to tell you exactly how to discipline your children especially young children other than to say there are a host of different nonviolent methods, of which some work with some children while another method may work for others. Time out chair works for some but not all. For me being sent to my room was like going to prison. I felt like a jailbird rattling the bars crying “Let me out! Let me out of here!” It worked then for me, but might not work now since most bedrooms are like an arcade center complete with computers, video games, and all kinds of gadgetry. Not that making a bedroom a safe and secure place is in anyway wrong. Then some use the method that may or may not work for older children, that of taking away privileges.

But whatever method and appropriate level of discipline you choose it needs to be well defined in advance and never in the heat of battle. We have all done the opposite. Mom says, as her face turns red, “Ok that’s it! Off to your room young man for three whole hours.” Its then that the skirmish intensifies. “OK if that’s the way you want it you’re grounded for three days.” Then your miniature Cleon fires a broadside of proton

torpedoes aimed in your direction as he continues to scream back. What do you do? You return hostile fire with hostile fire saying: “If that’s what you want then, you’re grounded for three weeks.” Then as the galactic battle escalates to all out war, almost to the point of the total annihilation of the universe as we know it, its then you push the button igniting the doomsday bomb: “Ok young man you’re grounded for life, which might not be as long as you think.” I hardly need tell you that when any kind of explosive confrontation, you know and he knows, and he knows that you know: It just 'ain't gonna' happen!

Well there’s a better way - action and not anger. Age appropriate action determined well in advance and not in the heat of the moment, for as someone has well said: “If you haven’t defined it, don’t enforce it.”⁷

IV. If Anger Seems to Work It Doesn’t Work Well

Well if no one knows who is in charge, and if no one hears us when we shout and action speaks volumes we can only surmise that “If anger seems to work, it doesn’t work very well.” That’s the fourth thing. Let me say it again. If anger seems to work it doesn’t work well. And if it does seem to work it doesn’t work for long. By that I mean it only seems to work because the person who backs down first only buries their anger where it festers and grows like an infected wound. And when it comes to toxic families where anger is used as the ineffective weapon of choice, buried anger turns to resentment and bitterness that may explode at the most unexpected time or place. Put another way, buried hatchets have a way of rising to the surface!

This misuse of anger is very common: In the school yard we call it ‘bullying.’ In the family therapist’s office it might be called a form of ‘manipulation.’ And sometimes on the home front we might mistakenly call it ‘parenting’ – but its not. Worst case scenario: they grow up, fly the coop and never come back to the nest again and reject you for the rest of their lives for anger begets anger and unresolved anger leads to resentment that can last a lifetime. How tragic when adult children refuse to have any contact with their parents. If this happens it may or may not be our fault, but why add fuel to the fire. The Bible warns strongly against this in Eph 6:4 saying, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”

So then, if anger seems to work it doesn’t work very well, or it doesn’t work for long - all of which is to say doesn’t work at all. Thus any form of age appropriate correction must be done out of love and not revenge. And any correction must be motivated by a heart that longs for what is in the best interest of our beloved children.

Just listen to what the scripture has to say on this: Prov. 19:18, “Discipline your son, for in that there is hope.” Prov. 22:6 encourages us saying, “Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it”. Prov. 29:17 gives a similar message, “Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul”.

⁷ The Strong Willed Child: Dr. James Dobson; p. 31

So then we tell them how much we adore them and love them so much so that we need to set boundaries for their own good. But what ever you do, just don't tell them as your parents told you, "Son, this is going to hurt me more than you," because they will look at you the same way you looked at your dad, as if to say, "You've got to be kidding!"

V. Letting Go is Hard to Do

And so we began by asking the big question: 'Who's in charge here anyways?' Having answered that question we discovered the vital truths that no one hears us when we shout, action speaks volumes, and if anger seems to work it neither works well or for long.

So by way of wrapping up let me say that when our young adults reach a certain age - be prepared for, "*letting go is hard to do!*" That's the fifth and final thought I wish to close with. Letting go is hard to do, but do it we must. And when it comes to our older teens and young adults that is one of the most common mistakes we as parents make. Not always but often in our parental overprotective paranoia we hold them too tight despite their best efforts to squirm by free.

Instead we want to protect them from what ever dangers might come there way. We want to make all their decisions. We may even try to plan out their live for them, and keep them safely snuggled beneath our wings, like a mother hen sitting on her eggs.

But in doing so we force young adults into one of two destructive patterns: 1) Either they will passively accept our overprotection and remain dependent 'children' into adult life thus becoming emotional cripples incapable of independent thought. 2) Or they will rise up in anger against us rejecting not only the bondage and interference to which we have shackled them, but worse: they may end up rejecting us as parents, our values and even the faith in which we have raised them. Either way, they lose!

When we allow ourselves to fall into the paranoia of overprotective parenting that insists on preventing our children from growing up and finding their way to more and more independence, we court disaster. For if you will allow me, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own *children*." That's what I mean by saying, 'Letting go is hard to do.' If we do choose to gently let them go, it should not happen all at once. It happens incrementally when in their late teens and early twenties we slowly allow them more and more independence so that they can grow into emotionally healthy adults.

So what then is our job as parents? We care for them, give them a roof over their heads, provide food, clothing and all the love we have. We raise them the best we can. We encourage them to learn as much as they can and then: WE GIVE THEM WINGS! And in setting them free they may fly away never to be seen again, or like the prodigal's return, they just might fly back into our open and welcoming arms.