

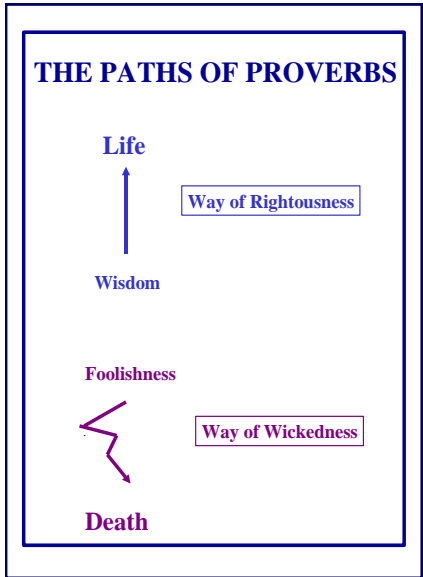


BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF CHILD REARING

A STUDY FROM THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

by Peggi Klubnik

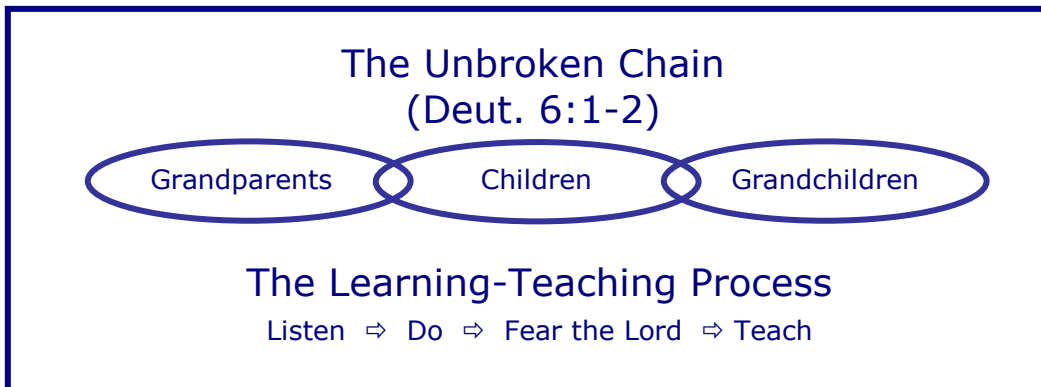
One day after I had spoken at a women’s meeting ,a woman came up to me with tears in her eyes. She said, “My son’s heart has been won by the world. How can I raise him in the ways of the Lord?” Situations like these are numerous in America. The hearts of Christian mothers and grandmothers are torn apart by the waywardness of their children and grandchildren. They are seeking answers. They want to know the biblical principles of child rearing.



Unfortunately, the New Testament is practically silent on the subject of raising children. Most of the instruction for both parents and children are found in one book of the Bible, written almost 3000 years ago. The Book of Proverbs was the textbook of the Hebrew home in Old Testament times and its timeless, practical principles continue to be of value for today’s parents. The correlation of specific behavior to its consequences, a teaching technique advanced in the Book of Proverbs, is of particular significance to the parent. This cause-and-effect principle contrasts the promise of blessing with the warning of imminent peril. This emphasizes the importance of teaching a child responsibility for his or her behavior.

The Old Testament Family

The Hebrew home was the incubator of Jewish virtues and the perpetuator of the teachings of the Torah. As a result, the Hebrew family became an impregnable fortress of Jewish religion and life. The value of a Christian home today is not limited to its family members. A godly home is the foundation of a moral society and the perpetuator of Christianity in a nation. The uniqueness of Jewish education was that it made God the focal point. Its primary emphasis was high moral standards of behavior.



Hebrew Children

In ancient Jewish families, children were highly esteemed—the hope of Israel’s future. The responsibility of parents in child training was the dominant factor in Jewish education. This is illustrated by the Hebrew words for *teach, instruct, tell, command, rebuke, restrain, chasten, guide* and *train*, which are frequently used in the Old Testament when admonishing parents.

Every word, deed and action in the Hebrew life experience was an occasion for child education. “*Impress them upon your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up*” (Deut. 6:7).

Dual Responsibility

Both the parent and the child have responsibility and accountability in child rearing. The parent is to teach; the child is to listen. Parental responsibility in child rearing begins at birth and continues to maturity. There is an urgency in discipline;¹ it is to begin early before the child forms firm habit patterns. Proverbs 22:6, “*Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart it,*” emphasizes the importance of starting the child off on the right path at the beginning of his life. The word *train* elsewhere in Scripture is translated *dedicate*, and is an “*act of consecration.*” This verse is not a promise, but a conclusion drawn from observation.



The responsibility of the child to heed parental advice was ongoing, “*Cease listening, my son, to discipline, and you will stray from the words of knowledge*” (19:27). Proverbs 23:22 addresses the entire span of childhood, from the birth of the child to the aging of the mother, “*Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old.*”

Wisdom and foolishness

The dynamics of the book of Proverbs are manifest by the author’s selection of oppositional subjects such as wisdom and foolishness. The ideal is defined by the condemnation its opposite. The basic distinction between the wise and the foolish child is the response to parental instruction.



¹ The Hebrew word מוסר (*musar*) means discipline, or correction. Discipline is achieved by means of observation, instruction, verbal admonition, and or physical chastisement. The goal of discipline is moral education which produces self-control, submissiveness and wisdom. *Musar* occurs in Proverbs 1:2, 3, 7, 8; 3:11; 4:1, 13; 5:12, 23; 6:23; 7:22; 8:33; 10:17; 12:1; 13:1, 18, 24; 15:5, 10, 32, 33; 16:22; 19:20, 27; 22:15; 23:12, 13, 23; 24:32.

Wise children adhere to parental instruction (13:1) and are a delight to their parents, "The father of a righteous man has great joy; he who has a wise son delights in him. May your father and mother be glad; may she who gave you birth rejoice" (23:24-25). And the parental joy continues into the child's adult years, "A man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father" (29:3a). The wise child accepts parental rebuke (15:5), and is both obedient (23:22) and discerning (28:7).



Conversely, the foolish child of Proverbs resists parental advice and discipline. The mother of a foolish child is grieved (10:1) and bitterly distressed. Likewise, the father is grieved by the behavior of his child (17:21, 25), who becomes his ruin (19:13). Foolish children refuse the rebuke of their parents (13:1), despise their father's instruction (15:5), and choose bad company which humiliates their father (28:7). They abhor their mother (15:20), do not consider it wrong to rob their parents (28:24), ruin their life and property, driving them away (19:26), curse (20:20) and mock them (30:17). The end of such shameful and disgraceful (19:26) behavior is the untimely death of foolish children (20:20), led astray by their own folly (5:23).

CHARACTERISTICS OF WISE AND FOOLISH CHILDREN²	
WISE CHILD (righteous)	FOOLISH CHILD (sinful)
obedient (Proverbs 23:22)	disobedient (Proverbs 15:5)
accepts discipline, reproof (Proverbs 13:1; 15:5)	despises parental reproof (Proverbs 13:1; 15:5)
discerning (Proverbs 28:7)	right in own eyes (Proverbs 12:15)
brings joy (Proverbs 23:24-25; 29:3a)	causes grief and distress (Proverbs 10:1; 17:21, 25)
righteous, pure behavior (Proverbs 8:20)	shameful, disgraceful behavior (Proverbs 19:26; 28:7)
honors, blesses parents (Exodus 20:12; Pro. 31:28)	despises, curses parents (Pro. 15:20; 20:20; 30:17)
blessed with long life (Proverbs 10:27; 12:28)	untimely death (Proverbs 12:28; 20:20)

Elements of Child Education

The Goal. The primary objective of child rearing in Proverbs is the inculcation of *wisdom*, godly living, by means of verbal and physical discipline. The descriptions of wisdom in Proverbs 1:1-7 state the objectives of the book. In verse 1, *discipline* ("instruction") denotes self-government or self-guidance. *Discernment* (v. 2), or expertise in living, is the ability to distinguish between truth and error, good and bad, and the wholesome and the

² Parents are encouraged to complete practical assignments, located at the end of this article, on each of their children as a guide in encouraging wise behavior and hindering foolishness.

destructive. While *insight* (v. 2) is the ability to discern between good and evil, moral insight is making the proper choices based on the consequences of past behavior.

Wisdom is designed to equip one to deal with life in a scriptural way. And wisdom can be taught; for the child, it begins with parental guidance, "*The rod and reproof give wisdom*" (29:15a). Wisdom is the prism from which parental education radiates; its instrument is communication, the chief instrument of parenting. Specific rules or precepts provide guidelines for obedience. "*My son, observe the commandment of your father, and do not forsake the teaching of your mother*" (6:20).

The cornerstone of wisdom is the *fear of the Lord* (Pro. 1:7; 9:10), a complex expression encompassing the antithetical aspects of absolute obedience (Gen. 22:12) and rejection of evil (Pro. 3:7; 16:6). It is a willful response to the essence of God that incites one to godly living. It involves a choice and is frequently linked with obedience (Pro. 1:29; Neh. 5:15; Ecc. 12:13). It results in a prolonged life (Pro. 10:27). The wicked sin because they do not fear the Lord (Gen. 20:11; Job 28:28).

Discipline and Correction. In the book of Proverbs, discipline is synonymous with instruction and teaching. The goal of discipline is a wise child who will accept correction and discipline from the Lord because he or she has learned to respond correctly to parental correction and discipline. Just as there is a progression in sinfulness (from the naïve to the scoffer to the fool (Pro. 1:22)), there is to be corresponding discipline, beginning with teaching, then verbal reproof, and finally physical punishment. The model for discipline is the Lord's loving relationship with believers (Pro. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:4-13).

The Urgency. Proverbs 22:6, "*Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it*" emphasizes the importance of training the child at the beginning of his or her life. The word *train*, or *dedicate*, also used in reference to the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:63), denotes an initiation in the first instruction or direction given to children. It is an act of consecration or setting the child apart unto the Lord. The emphasis is on the advantage of early training in the ways of the Lord. This verse is not a promise but a challenge to parents to set their child out on the right path early in life.

The parent is commanded to intervene in the life of the child while there is still a possibility of molding his or her behavior, "*Discipline your son, while there is hope; and do not desire his death*" (19:18). The goal of this verse is to break the self-will of obstinacy through wise and loving training, regulating both the measure and limits of correction. Parental anger, which is the source of revenge, is condemned in the following verse (19:19).

The Context. Discipline is to be motivated by love and a desire for the child's ultimate good. Love is to be both the motivation for and context of discipline. This integrated parenting projects to the child a balanced image of the God's love (Isa. 66:13) and discipline (Pro. 3:12). Our parenting role model is God Himself. His relationship with the believer is the example for the relationship of Christian parents with their children.



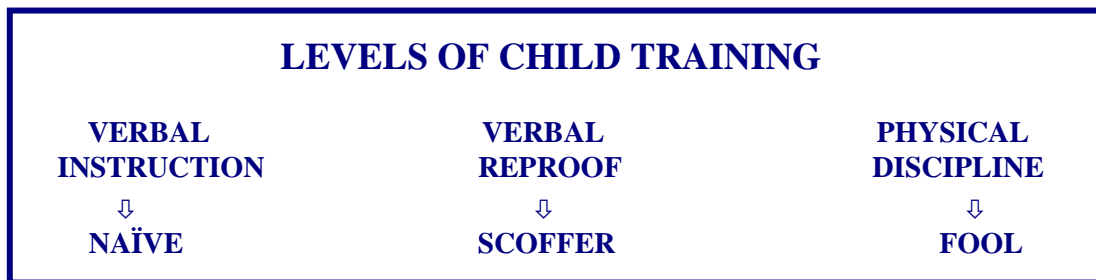
Failure to discipline exhibits a lack of affection, "*He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently*" (13:24) in "*the morning of life.*" The urgency in this verse is due to the pliability of a young child, who with proper discipline can be easily molded and influenced for good.

The quality of maternal child rearing is evident by the praise which the mother receives from both her husband and her children: "*Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her*" (31:28). The Hebrew mother was to select her words carefully and speak kindly, "*She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue*" (31:26).

Instruction. The contrast between the discipline of the father and the teaching of the mother is stressed early in the book, “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction [discipline] and do not forsake your mother’s teaching” (1:8). These concepts are summarized in Ephesians 6:4, where fathers are admonished to bring up their children in the “discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Instruction must involve teaching the consequences of both obedience and disobedience. The prime example of this method of teaching is recorded by Moses in Deuteronomy 28 as the Lord admonished Israel to choose between the blessing and the curse that was set before them. The consequences of each choice were specifically explained before the decision was made. Israel had the opportunity to foretell their own future. Likewise, Proverbs sets before its readers life or death. The wise choose life; the fools, death.

Whereas verbal injunctions are informative, discipline is corrective. The former is preventive, the latter remedial; the former directed to the obedient child, the latter to the disobedient youth. Discipline in Proverbs indicates correction that results in education, either weaning from evil or educating toward good. Spoken correction is accomplished by means of reproof or verbal persuasion, an appeal to reason and the conscience in the child. While oral instruction is profitable in itself, physical correction must be accompanied by verbal reproof and be commensurate in application. Parental expectations are to be reasonable, proportionate to the child’s capability. Discipline should be consistent.



Discipline. Three factors must be considered in regard to discipline. First, the rod is a symbol of authority; second, rebellion and disobedience are the object of physical correction; and third, the goal is the correction of wrongdoing. In the Book of Proverbs, the rod, shebet, is the symbol of discipline. However, the same word in Psalm 23:4, “Your rod and staff comfort me,” speaks metaphorically of God’s protection. Literally, the shebet is a scion, a shoot, or a branch, revealing that physical punishment is involved in discipline

One of the purposes of the Book of Proverbs is to challenge its readers to think, ponder, consider, etc. This is not possible in the very early stages of childhood. Likewise the “rod” is only used in reference to children and fools, implying that this method of discipline is ideally outgrown.

The quality and length of the child’s life are determined by his or her response to discipline (6:23b). Lack of discipline during childhood, whether by personal or parental choice, may continue into adulthood, resulting in a lack of self-esteem (15:32), foolishness (5:23), and stupidity (12:1). Conversely, the disciplined child develops self-discipline and is a source of parental peace and joy, “Correct your son, and he will give you comfort; he will also delight your soul” (29:17).

Lack of Discipline. The antithesis of proper child rearing is an unwillingness to discipline, as manifest in either ignoring the child or permissiveness, “A child left to himself disgraces his mother” (29:15). Maternal shame results from an undisciplined child. Discipline, not indulgence, is a manifestation of parental love. Children left to themselves are undisciplined, like animals grazing in a pasture without fences.

STYLES OF PARENTING		
	LOVE	DISCIPLINE
NEGLIGENT (Proverbs 29:16)	— Lack of Attention or expressions of love	— Failure to reprove, rebuke or discipline
INDULGENT (Proverbs 13:24)	+ Excessive Attention or permissiveness	— Failure to reprove, rebuke or discipline
AUTOCRATIC (Proverbs 12:18; 27:5)	— Lack of Attention or expressions of love	+ Abusive reproof, rebuke or discipline
BIBLICAL (Proverbs 3:11-12)	+ Expressions of love in the best interest of the child	+ Consistent, fair, loving age/behavior appropriate

Maturity

The goal in parenting should be to wean children off mother and father and onto the Lord and his Word. In this sense, the training never ends; its source merely changes. Solomon likened the discipline of God to the father-son relationship. As parental discipline is phased out, divine discipline takes over. And we should teach our child to know the motive, goal, and characteristics of that godly discipline.

We must train our children and watch them carefully during their early formative years. But we must at the same time be teaching them that *"the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord and he watches all his paths"* (Pro. 5:21). They may be out of our sight, but they are never out of His sight. We must teach them that what we say is because God has commanded us to raise them according to His will and then we must be certain that our actions are in line with His Word and not based on our selfish desires.



A well-trained child will possess the discipline and desire to voluntarily continue on the straight path throughout life as he fears the Lord, seeks wisdom, and acquires an intimate knowledge of God. The implication then is that when he is old, he is still walking down that same path on which early in his life his parents held his hand tightly so he would not stumble as his steps were tentative. As he learned to reason and think, he was able to discern right from wrong and to choose wisdom and good over foolishness and evil.

We never outgrow the need for acquiring wisdom and being teachable. The "wise son" must become the "wise man." It is important for a parent to understand not only the stages of childhood, but also the corresponding parenting stages. A young child is not to be counseled or reasoned with, but trained and disciplined. A young man must be taught the consequences of his choices in life through reason and example. A older man continues to need the counsel of godly parents. The stages are not exclusive but rather emphasize a certain aspect of imparting wisdom.

Godly parents

The value of a godly parental role model is noted in Proverbs 20:7, "A *righteous man who walks in his integrity—how blessed are his sons after him.*" And his children partake in the reciprocal admiration among parents, children and grandparents, "*Children's children are the crown of old men; and the glory of children are their fathers*" (17:6).



Practical Exercise #1

Read Deuteronomy 5 – 6 and Proverbs 1.

This project should be done on each of your children (or children under your care).

1. Make a list of good qualities or characteristics (respects authority, loving, obedient; hard working). Put check marks next to what you consider to be your child's strongest qualities.
2. Do a concordance study on significant verses in Proverbs 1 – 15 on the word *wise*. According to Proverbs, what are the wise like? What are their characteristics or qualities?
3. What is the significance of what you have learned in the book of Proverbs about the *wise* in relation to your children? In other words, what characteristics of wisdom do you see manifest in your child? Make separate notes for each child.
4. List several ways you could encourage each child based on the characteristics of wisdom that you have noted.
5. Note how you would encourage a child to make decisions based on wisdom.

Practical Exercise #2

This project should be done on each of your children (or children under your care).

- a. Make a list of those characteristics that are you would like to see changed (disobedient, disrespectful, lazy, won't do homework) in your child. Use a separate page for each of your children (or those who are under your care). Put a star next to the qualities that you think need the most attention in terms of improvement.
- b. Do a concordance study on significant verses in Proverbs 1 – 17 on the word *fool*. According to Proverbs, what are the fools like? What are their characteristics or qualities?
- c. What is the significance of what you have learned in the book of Proverbs about the *fool* in relation to your children? Make separate notes for each child.

- d. List at least three goals per child that you will set in order to develop wisdom. Be specific in terms of what behavior you would like to see changed in your child.
- e. Give at least one specific way that you will encourage your child to forsake foolishness and replace it with wisdom. What characteristics of wisdom would you like to see manifest in your child?

Practical Exercise #3

1. Summarize what the Word of God teaches about the responsibility of parents in Deuteronomy 6 and the book of Proverbs (Be sure to review the Scripture verses in the study notes.)
2. What does the book of Proverbs teach about the responsibility of children in relationship to their parents' instruction?
3. Write a brief summary of the actions of both the parent and the child or children from the following sets. What was good or bad? How could they have improved? What application can we make from these examples?
 - a. Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 17:19-21; 18:9-15; 21:1-12; 22:1-19; 24:1-9; 25:5-11)
 - b. Eli the Priest and his sons (1 Sam. 1 – 4, especially 2:11-25)
 - c. Mordecai and Esther (Est. 2:5-11, 20, 22; 4:1-17; 8:1-2; 9:29); and Hannah and Samuel (1 Sam. 1:1-2:11).
4. Make brief descriptive comments the following parent-child relationships:
 - a. David and Absalom (2 Sa. 3:3; 13:19-39; 15-18)
 - b. Jesse and David (1 Sam. 16:1-22)
 - c. Samuel and sons (1 Sam. 8:1-5)
 - d. Jochebed and Moses (Exo. 2:1-10; Num 26:59)
 - e. James and John and their mother (Matt. 20:20-22)
 - f. John the Baptist and Elizabeth (Luke 1:1-25)
 - g. Timothy and his mother and grandmother (Acts 16:1-3; 1 Tim. 1:5; 3:15)
5. What are some ways that you feel God wants you to change your style of parenting. Be specific. How has God used this study in your life?

Practical Exercise #4

In answering the following questions, use the biblical principles you have learned in this study. Use specific Bible passages to support your answers.

1. A mother with an unruly child has come to you for advice. In talking with her, you realize that she is very loving to her child, but does not discipline him. How would you counsel her from the Scriptures regarding the need to discipline children? How would you advise her to not to smother her child with love?
2. A mother with a very shy, fearful child has come to you for advice. In talking with her, you realize that she is a strict disciplinarian, but shows little love for her child. How would you convince her from the Scriptures of the need to love her child? What expressions of love could you give her as examples? How would you counsel her to discipline appropriately?