

Taking Care of our Families "Do not provoke your children to wrath"

Intro: In our Families series we've already talked about some of the fundamental principles that guide the work of parenting. Sometimes in spite of their conscientious efforts, parents find themselves confronted with a rebellious child. And the reasons for that are many and sometimes complicated.

While children may be more easily molded and compliant early in life, they may develop rebellious attitudes later in life that their parents didn't help create. Those attitudes may be the product of natural selfishness or listening too much to other influences in their lives. So I don't want to beat up on parents who've given it their best and who are already blaming themselves too much for a rebellious child.

But on the other hand, there is Biblical justification for urging parents to take steps to prevent such an outcome. And we can identify some parenting behaviors that contribute to rebellion in their children. It would be helpful for parents to know them early in training their children. And so today we are exploring this topic together.

Warnings to parents about causing rebellion and discouragement

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Eph. 6:4)

This verse at least shows that parents can share some blame if their children become rebellious.

To "provoke to anger" is to incite rebellion.

Fathers, do not exasperate your children, that they may not lose heart. (Col. 3:21)

The idea here is similar--to incite resentment.

In addition, Paul shows that this resentment may lead children to quit trying to please either their parents or the Lord.

Paul in both verses is describing the kind of response that we see so frequently in our society and in the church where a child is driven by anger to turn away from what is most precious to their parents. It is the child's way of expressing anger against the way he was treated as a child. This rebellion may be manifested by:

Living an immoral lifestyle

Marrying someone the parent would not approve.

Being rude, difficult, and unappreciative, refusing to honor them or meeting their needs in old age.

Manifesting boredom or Indifference to the parents spiritual values or actively pursuing in their place worldly goals

"Provoke to anger" does not mean that parents...

...Never do anything that makes their children angry.

...Never correct their children

...Never tell their children that something is off-limits or wrong.

...Never force their children to do something that they do not want to do.

...Never tell their children 'No, you cannot do that,' even when the matter is not sinful.

These are all things that parents may do that might cause their children to become angry; but are things that good parenting may require.

Behaviors that engender anger and discouragement

Listen to children and you will hear what upsets them and become familiar with the seeds of anger that may lead to rebellion. When the 10-year-olds in Mrs. Imogene Frost's class at the Brookside, N.J. Community Sunday School expressed their views of "What's wrong with grownups?" they came up with these complaints:

Grownups make promises, then they forget all about them, or else they say it wasn't really a promise, just a maybe.

Grownups don't do the things they're always telling the children to do—like pick up their things, or be neat, or always tell the truth.

Grownups never really listen to what children have to say. They always decide ahead of time what they're going to answer.

Grownups make mistakes, but they won't admit them. They always pretend that they weren't mistakes at all—or that somebody else made them.

Grownups interrupt children all the time and think nothing of it. If a child interrupts a grownup, he gets a scolding or something worse.

Grownups never understand how much children want a certain thing—a certain color or shape or size. If it's something they don't admire—even if the children have spent their own money for it—they always say, "I can't imagine what you want with that old thing!"

Sometimes grownups punish children unfairly. It isn't right if you've done just some little thing wrong and grownups take away something that means an awful lot to you. Other times you can do something really bad and they say they're going to punish you, but they don't. You never know, and you ought to know.

Grownups are always talking about what they did and what they knew when they were 10 years old—but they never try to think what it's like to be 10 years old right now. (For Families Only, J. A. Petersen, ed., Tyndale, 1977, p. 253)

There's a lot of wisdom in those comments. They reveal some clear parental behaviors that will cause children to lose respect and become resentful.

How we may provoke children to anger or exasperate them.

By being harsh or inconsistent in discipline (Eph. 6:4)

Certainly we have the right and obligation to discipline our children; but with fairness and good judgment.

Neither physical or verbal abuse qualifies as "the discipline of the Lord." Nor is it right or just to punish a child at a degree far beyond the offense.

It is better then to make sure you have calmed down and are acting out of love--disciplining according to principles and not angry emotion.

By saying one thing and doing another (1 Pet. 2:1)

We lose respect with our children when we surrender our integrity. To profess to be a Christian is to make a sincere effort to not only talk the talk, but walk the walk.

Personal hypocrisy will lead children to question your values. If they are not important enough for you to do, then why should they do them!

Poem "He whipped his child for lying..."

By making promises and not keeping them (Eph. 4:25)

One father once asked his daughter what she thought were the biggest problems fathers have with kids. She said, "Dads have too many "tomorrows." You know, "I'll play with you tomorrow, I'll talk to you tomorrow." She was right. Dad, be there now for your children, building quality and quantity benchmarks of trust. Don't wait until tomorrow—or you'll end up wasting too many today's. Gary Ezzo, Men of Action, Summer, 1996, p. 11

If we make promises to buy time, and then don't follow through, then our children begin to resent our false pledges.

By always blaming and never praising (Eph. 4:29)

If our children come to believe that no matter how hard they try, they will be criticized and blamed for bad behavior, then we should not be surprised that one day they give up and say, "What's the use? I can never please my parents, no matter how hard I try."

Holding both ourselves and our children to high standards is certainly acceptable; but we must temper that with awareness of our own short-comings and forgiveness. We are not perfect, nor should we expect our children to be perfect.

By demanding more than the child is capable of doing (

First it is important that our children know we love them unconditionally because of who they are. Second it is important that we do not withhold love because they do not meet our expectations of achievement. We need to accept the fact that our children may not be "the best" at everything. We can ask them to always do their "best" and praise them for the effort. Our children have varying skill sets that enable them to do some things more easily than others.

Some children become exasperated by the requirement that they live up to the standards of another child or overly elevated parental expectations. Parents may say, "Why can't you be more like your sister or brother or someone else's child?" If we constant compare them with one another, then they will begin to sense that we do not accept who they are and the gifts that God has given them.

By being partial or showing favoritism to other children (Gen. 37:3-4)

It is not uncommon for couples to triangulate with their children. When we see more of ourselves in one of our children, we may respond more positively to them and favor their desires or requests.

Also we may enjoy the reflected glory of one child's successes and leave the impression that we love them more because they are more successful in some area.

We can see in the book of Genesis the impact that Jacob's partiality toward Joseph had toward his brothers and how they acted out in resentment of their father's favoritism.

By being inconsistent and unfair with discipline (Heb. 12:10)

We make a big mistake when we vacillate from extreme permissiveness to strict legalism.

The problem of course is that it leaves the child with extreme feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about what's going to happen. And it also engenders disrespect. Inconsistency in discipline may be perceived once more as one more example of hypocrisy.

By showing disrespect (Eph. 4:29)

As human beings, we all need to be treated with respect for our humanity and individuality. We have our own individual preferences and ways of seeing things. Parents may show disrespect by:

By insulting names and descriptions

By making light of concerns the child feels or things the child likes

By humiliating them in front of others by rehearsing their mistakes and bad behavior.

If you do that to them, don't be surprised if they take advantage of the same power.

By being unreasonably restrictive (Mt. 5:42)

Children are often caught up in the conflict between what their peers and their parents think is acceptable and what their parents think is acceptable. As parents, we have to accept responsibility for giving good guidance; and we may have to bear the brunt of their protests when children think you're being unreasonably restrictive.

However, it is easy to just to say "no" to everything. Refusal to give a fair evaluation of requests can engender anger. Young people may feel that their parents are not allowing them to grow up and to take on responsibilities they think they are ready for.

The better approach is to give your child freedom as they prove their trustworthiness.

Conclusion: I hope all our parents and grandparents can benefit from thinking about this topic. Our children deserve our best effort to exemplify the principles of love and justice day by day.

And to the children I offer this final word of exhortation. I hope you will love and respect your parents when they make every effort to give you the guidance and help that you need to succeed in life; and that you will not become angry when they are doing their best to do their job.