

Provoking Your Children

Family-life specialist Delmer W. Holbrook

Conducted a survey of several hundred children.

He came up with the three most common responses

Fathers have for their kids.

The first is: *I'm too tired!*

The second: *We can't afford it!*

And the third: *Keep quiet!*

And I added a fourth, *Go ask your mom!*

In sympathy with fathers

I understand why their responses are what they are.

It's not easy these days . . . maybe never easy

To come home after a long day

And be attentive to the needs of your children.

But despite the challenges

There are still ways

To raise a healthy and whole family.

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The Ephesians passage today

Is part of a larger conversation

The NRSV describes as the "Christian household."

In it, Paul describes what healthy relationships look like . . .

Between a husband and wife

Children and parents

And servants and masters.

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Reading the passage from today's perspective

Paul's writings are patriarchal.

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However, almost every scholar will admit
That Paul's comments are really radical
When compared to the culture of his day.

A perfect example of this is his comment
On fathers' treatment toward children.

Ephesians 6:4 (ESV) Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

It really is an extraordinary comment
Considering the context.

Ephesus was an important city in the Roman Empire
Its inhabitants Roman citizens . . .
Church members a mix of Jews and Romans.

In this Greco/Roman context
Children were household property.

The father of the house had absolute dominion
Over everyone in the house.

A father could do with his kids whatever he chose
With virtually no legal consequences.

If a child was born and unwanted
A father could "expose" him/her.

Exposing a child is still a practice in some isolated cultures.

Exposing essentially means leaving the child outside
To die of exposure or eaten by wild animals.

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A father could sell a child into slavery
For any reason whatsoever.

A father could disinherit a son or daughter
Scourge or imprison them for disobedience
And even have them put to death.

So Paul's admonishment to fathers
Not to provoke their children
Is actually quite astounding and perceptive.

The Apostle Paul saw that raising children with an iron fist
Ended up having negative consequences.

As Paul mentioned
Overly harsh, strict, and severe discipline
Can result in provoking anger in children.

This anger can potentially evolve
Into bitterness and rebellion.

An overly punitive and stern environment
Will actually have an opposite effect
Than the desired outcome.

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However, the other extreme can be just as problematic.

An overly lenient parenting style can be very harmful as well.

Many children are unruly
Because of too much leniency.

In an article entitled *Kids Gone Wild*
Published by the New York Times
More than 10 years ago

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Judith Warner writes

After decades of indulgence, American society seems to have reached some kind of tipping point, as far as tolerance for wild and woolly kid behavior is concerned.

In 2002, only 9 percent of adults were able to say that the children they saw in public were "respectful toward adults," according to surveys done then by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan and nonprofit public opinion research group.

In 2004, more than one in three teachers told Public Agenda pollsters they had seriously considered leaving their profession or knew a colleague who had left because of "intolerable" student behavior.

In 2005, 70 percent of those living in America declared, "people are ruder than they were 20 or 30 years ago." Among the worst offenders: children (Associated Press-Ipsos poll).

Why? Experts say it's because of what parents expect from kids. "The pressure to do well is up. The demand to do good is down, way down...."

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I like the way Warner juxtaposes
Doing well with doing good.

We push our kids to do “well” academically.

We do everything we can to prepare kids for college.

We also push our kids to do “well” in sports.

We believe sports teaches teamwork and discipline.

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But how about when it comes to doing “good?”

When it comes to instilling manners

To be obedient and well-behaved

To be respectful and courteous . . .

We just don’t seem to have the time or the energy.

Harvard University child psychologist Dan Kindlon believes most parents want considerate, polite, well-behaved children. "But they're too tired, worn down by work, and personally need to take up the task of teaching them proper behavior at home."

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Paul tells us in our passage

Not to be excessively harsh on our kids.

Ephesians 6:4 (TLB) And now a word to you parents. Don’t keep on scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful. Rather, bring them up with the loving discipline the Lord himself approves, with suggestions and godly advice.

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Today’s psychologists tell us we need

Stricter discipline to curb their rudeness.

Warner writes: If stress and strain, self-centeredness and competition are the pathogens underlying the rash of rudeness perceived to be endemic among children in America today, then . . . Stop blaming the children, they said. Stop focusing on the surface level of behavior and start curing instead the social, educational and parental ills that feed it.

This may mean less "quality" time with children and more time getting them to do things they don't want to do, like sitting for meals, making polite conversation and picking their clothes up off the floor.

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It may be quality time to sit in the bleachers
And cheer on your kids' sports activities all weekend long

But at the end of the day
If you haven't spent time disciplining them
To clean up after themselves
To speak respectfully to others
To be a contributor in the family

Than we haven't done what the Bible has instructed us to do.

I know all of us are crunched for time
And when we do have time
We suffer from fatigue and stress.

But there are three times that should be set aside
To teach our kids to do good and be good.

This comes from David Stone pastor from Louisville KY.

First there's meal time. I encourage you to guard it, protect it. Harvard professor Dr. Catherine Snow followed 65 families over an eight-year period. She discovered dinnertime is of more value to child development than play time or school time.

At the table you can affirm, teach, listen, warn, and laugh. Life lessons can be learned there.

He says to put away the phones, turn off the TV
And look into your kid's eyes and talk.

Secondly he writes there's travel time.

Like it or not, the inside of your car has become a modern-day family room. As you shuttle your kids back and forth to school and practice,

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you have a captive audience. . . . Don't forget: you won't always have them in your backseat. Use the travel time you have with them now to prepare them for when you're not there.

And finally, Stone says there is bedtime.

It's easy for dads to miss this time. Either we're too tired, sitting in front of the computer, or just can't miss the ninth inning. . . . we miss a great opportunity to affirm, bless, pray, and console our kids before they fall asleep.

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Sports and academics are important.

But spending time with your kids
 In nurturing and affirming ways . . .

Teaching them life's lessons
 Introducing them to God and the church . . .

Disciplining and instructing them
 On how to act in public places
 And treating one another with respect . . .

Comes from time spent with them
 For no other purpose than time spent with them.

Let us, then, do everything possible
 Despite stress and fatigue

To bring them up in loving discipline
 To teach them to love and not to hate
 To teach them to be civil
 And to respect all peoples near and far

It is God's calling, to us as fathers.