

INTRODUCTION

Developing Your Own Biblical Philosophy of Parenting

YOU'RE HOLDING A BOOK OF IDEAS. AS PARENTS, WE need all the ideas we can find. Each child is unique, and the same tools don't work with every one. Furthermore, parenting ideas that had an impact last year may need some tweaking, because your child continues to develop and change. The suggestions in this book will help you be a better parent.

But you need more than ideas. In the parenting field, ideas are a dime a dozen. Everyone has an opinion of what's best when it comes to parenting. You probably have more ideas now than you can use. What you want to know is *how*. I'm sure you'd take a cup of implementation over a bucket of ideas any day. Ideas are easy. Implementation is hard, because that's where things get complicated. Every child is unique, and every family has its own set of dynamics. Parents are eager to know how to take ideas and put them into practice. We're going to help you with that.

But we're going to do even more than help you apply the changes. Each chapter in this book can contribute to your biblical philosophy of parenting. A philosophy is a way of thinking, a framework of ideas and theories. Our goal is to help you develop a biblical structure from which you'll be able to pick and choose from the advice and

suggestions you'll receive in order to determine the best strategy for your home. By weaving together God's Word with practical applications, you'll begin to develop patterns that will make a tremendous difference in your life and the lives of your children.

Paul warned in Colossians 2:8, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." That warning is important for parents, because our world is full of ideas, and many of them are unhelpful, resting on tradition instead of godliness. Instead, you can develop a parenting philosophy that's based on a solid theology of God and his plan for life.

Some elements of a biblical philosophy of parenting will be the same for every parent. Relying on God's Word as the authority, passing faith from parents to children, and teaching kids to live lives that follow Christ are important in every home. But many elements of a biblical philosophy of parenting will differ from parent to parent. Some will emphasize a more relational approach, where others are more firm. Some children need more structure than others to move them forward.

The formation of a unique, yet biblical approach to parenting provides parents with a way to think and act that's best for their family situation. The ideas represented in the chapters of this book will guide your thinking. You may choose to emphasize some more than others. Let the Holy Spirit guide you to develop your own unique approach. The common factor is reliance on God's Word for the development of your own philosophy of parenting.

Furthermore, you'll make adjustments along the way as you grow in Christ. In fact, before you get too far in this book, we suggest you create a quick action list, a reminder of what you want to *do* as you read through the chapters. Alongside your to-do list, though, we hope you'll create a *think* list, identifying key principles and concepts you'll use to guide your thinking over time. Each item on these lists represents a piece of your strategy, a biblical way of thinking about

parenting and working with children. Together they'll help you formulate your own biblical philosophy of parenting. In essence, you'll develop a mission statement and a vision for your home and for each of your kids.

As you consider the principles in this book, you'll find yourself carving out a parenting style. You'll take your personality and allow it to be molded by a biblical framework and a grace-based, heart-based approach to parenting. In the end you'll find yourself growing faster than you had imagined in your ability to parent effectively.

Bear in mind that a heart-based approach to parenting involves strategic thinking, planning, *and* implementation at home. An idea is only an idea until it takes wings and flies into your home. It's not enough to have a good idea. You'll want to plan for its implementation as well. That's why many of the chapters that follow contain specific words you may use in your family. Our desire is to help you transfer good ideas into practical application that form how your family relates. As you formulate your own biblical parenting philosophy, please keep these principles in mind:

1. Begin with prayer, and ask your heavenly Father for wisdom, grace, patience, and perseverance. Praise God for progress and glimpses of maturity you see in your child.
2. Build on a biblical foundation. First and foremost, the Bible is the authority. It's amazing how many passages in Scripture apply to the family. Look at the Bible as God's training guide for life, and you'll discover many, many biblical truths that will impact your parenting. Every chapter in this book contains scripture to guide your thinking and mold your ideas.
3. Think long term. Maintain perspective by moving from the small picture to the big picture. Daily interactions are a piece of something much bigger. Misbehavior happens in patterns that reveal issues of the heart. Correcting any one instance can fit into a greater strategy to move kids toward maturity.

4. Remember what's most important. Focus on those things, and leave the rest for another time. To be most strategic in your approach, avoid "reactive parenting."
5. Watch for variations on a theme. It's not just about the moment. It's about life. Many times the challenges you face now fit into the bigger picture of the change that's needed.
6. Focus on the heart. Develop parenting plans that help children overcome internal roadblocks for the long term, not just current behavior problems.

More than anything else, we want this book to challenge you to think biblically, assess your situation, make adjustments in your parenting, and help your children move forward. We've compiled a list of fifty parenting principles that we believe to be the best we've seen over the years. We've worked with thousands of families and taught hundreds of parenting seminars. We initiated many Bible studies and research projects. We've received tens of thousands of feedback forms. Out of it all, we've found fifty strategies that can make a significant difference.

With the information in this book, we believe you'll be able to develop a personal framework for parenting success. With strategic thinking and planning, you'll face daily challenges with more perspective, greater motivation, and confidence that you're moving in the right direction. Remember that God is the one who changes hearts, both yours and your child's, so read this book prayerfully, allowing God to speak to you about your relationship with him and what he wants for you and your family.

It's our prayer that you will find hope and wisdom in the following pages. Parenting is a journey requiring all the wisdom you can get, but having a biblical parenting philosophy in place will help you navigate through the challenges with greater ease and more confidence in God's grace at work in your life.

1

Parents often feel discouraged because they can't be consistent. They feel like failures. It's time to rethink some of the underlying assumptions proposed in many parenting approaches. In fact, the reality is that . . .

CONSISTENCY IS OVERRATED

“MY BIGGEST PROBLEM IS THAT I FEEL GUILTY WHEN I can't be consistent. Every parenting book I've read talks about the importance of consistency, but I'm running from here to there, getting things done, and my husband parents differently than I do. I feel like I'm failing because I can't be as consistent as I would like to be.”

Charlotte has three children, ages eleven, seven, and four. For the most part, she's doing quite well, but she's plagued with an overarching sense of guilt when things go wrong. The voice inside tells her the problems in her kids would go away if she were more consistent, but is that really the answer?

We've all heard that consistency is the key to good parenting. But many parents believe it's more important than it really is. If you're doing simple behavior modification, then consistency is essential. Giving the reward or punishment every time you see the behavior will reinforce change.

Behavior modification as a science began in the early 1900s. Ivan Pavlov made some exciting discoveries as he worked with dogs. If he consistently rang a bell just before he fed the dogs, he could eventually get the dogs to salivate by simply ringing the bell. This discovery of how to motivate a dog was picked up by John B. Watson in the 1920s, and he began to apply behavior modification to people. In fact, it wasn't long before behavior modification became a primary way to

help people stop smoking, lose weight, and deal with a host of other behavioral issues.

In time, behavior modification influenced the classroom as well, and teachers used it to help children learn. By the 1950s behavior modification had also become the primary tool for parenting. Giving rewards and punishment to children worked quite well to modify their behavior. And one of the things parents and teachers all learned was that the key to behavior modification is consistency. The more consistent you are, the faster you'll see change. The problem is that behavior modification embraces humanistic thinking, the belief that people are just a higher form of animal. The Bible teaches something very different.

God created people different from animals. He gave each person a spiritual "heart," and that heart affects the learning process. The heart contains things such as emotions, desires, convictions, and passion. In short, the heart is a wrestling place where decisions are made. A child's tendencies come from the heart. When a child lies to get out of trouble, that's a heart issue. If a brother reacts with anger each time his sister is annoying, that's a heart issue too. Simply focusing on behavior may provide some quick change, but lasting change takes place in the heart. We're not saying behavior modification is wrong. We're just suggesting that it's incomplete and, in the end, lacks the depth for long-term and lasting change.

Parents who simply use behavior modification often end up with kids who look good on the outside while having significant problems on the inside. Consistency can teach kids to appear good, clean, and nice, but to help them change their hearts, other parenting skills must be added to the picture. Because you believe that God has created your child with a heart, you have access to an additional barrel of parenting strategies.

Rhonda, like Charlotte, found this principle particularly helpful. "I used to feel guilty all the time because I can't be consistent. I have four kids and a house to run. Invariably I'd have to sacrifice

consistency in an area with one or more of my kids to accomplish my other tasks. When I realized that there's more to parenting than just being consistent, it freed me up to work on bigger goals with my kids. The consistency trap produced a lot of guilt in me. Now I realize that there's much more to parenting, and I feel freed up to use other tools as well. I'm continually asking questions about my children's hearts, and I'm learning a lot about how to mold and influence them to go in the right direction. I'm seeing more change in my kids with this new approach."

If you're training dogs to salivate, then consistency is essential. But you're trying to raise children. You don't want children to do the right thing just so they can get a reward. If you do, then kids learn to ask, "What's in it for me? What am I going to *get* if I do what you say?" Instead, you want children to change their hearts. You want them to ask, "What's the right thing to do here?" That shift in thinking is "heart work."

Developing a strong, biblical parenting philosophy requires you to embrace a more comprehensive approach that focuses on the heart. Looking beyond behavior modification calls for different parenting tools. When you focus on the heart, another quality becomes even more important than consistency: creativity.

The heart is where children hold their beliefs. It's where they develop operating principles about life. Kids learn through experience, stories, activity, and modeling. Sometimes children develop resistance in their hearts to a consistent approach. The same lecture from Mom or Dad over and over again builds up immunity through patterns of arguing, bad attitudes, and manipulation. Furthermore, when parents simply use behavior modification, kids tend to want bigger and bigger rewards for compliance.

Creativity has the ability to move around children's resistance and allows a truth to explode with meaning inside the heart. The best teachers are those who use creative teaching methods to communicate their point. Ed is mean to his sister. His father, Dave, is trying to help

his son develop kindness. Sometimes he uses a consequence to correct Ed. Other times he requires an apology or has his son practice doing the right thing, requiring three acts of kindness before Ed can go. Dave is also having his son memorize scripture, and they've had several conversations about cruelty in the adult world. Dave is helping his son develop compassion for people, and they recently attended a Special Olympics event to gain a greater sense of empathy for others who are different. Dave will be successful with his son. It'll take time, but his commitment to creativity will help Ed develop a better response toward his sister and eventually to others in life.

Please don't misunderstand us. Consistency is important, especially when kids are young. But if you think more broadly about parenting and embrace creativity and strategy in your training, you'll be more effective at molding the hearts of your kids at any age. Your primary task as parent is to teach your kids, and a little work in the creativity department can make all the difference.

Deuteronomy 11:18–20 not only tells parents to train their kids but it tells them how to do it. Notice the creativity designed by God. “Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” If you take that verse apart, you'll start thinking about your own home and your own kids and creative ways to teach them.

Even in Old Testament times, God knew that kids learn best through life experiences. Add creativity to your parenting goals, and you'll enhance your training tenfold. When consistency is unreasonable, don't let a lack of it produce guilt. There are other principles that are more important. Embrace a heart-based approach to parenting and you'll see lasting change in your children.

2

When you feel as though you're working on the same things over and over again and your kids aren't changing, it's important to remember the need to . . .

BUILD INTERNAL MOTIVATION

“I WISH MY KIDS WOULD DO THINGS WITHOUT ME having to prod them along every step of the way. I feel like I’m a cross between a drill sergeant and an inspector. We do the same things every day. Why can’t my kids do it on their own?” That’s a great question and a common feeling among parents. The goal is to help children manage themselves, but will that happen before they’re adults? One mom said, “I’m afraid my kids will grow up and have to move straight into assisted living. They can’t seem to do anything on their own.”

Developing internal motivation in children is one of the fast tracks to help them toward maturity and being responsible. Unfortunately, too many parents use external motivators to get their kids to move forward. “If you get your homework done, you can go out and play.” “If you clean your room, you can watch a video.” This approach basically says, “If you do what I say, I’ll give you what you want.” Unfortunately, children trained this way often develop a mentality that focuses on external motivation instead of developing the internal motivations they’ll need to be responsible and mature.

A continual reliance on external motivators takes advantage of a child’s selfishness and exchanges a little gratification for a desired behavior. Children raised on heavy doses of external motivation develop attitudes of entitlement, asking, “What’s in it for me?”

God is concerned with more than externals. He’s interested in the

heart. The heart contains motivations, emotions, convictions, and values. A heart-based approach to parenting looks deeper. When parents focus on the heart, kids learn to ask, “What’s the right thing to do?”

External motivation isn’t wrong; it’s just incomplete. When parents use a heart-based approach to parenting, longer-lasting change takes place. Parents still require children to finish their homework and clean up their rooms, but the way they approach the task of parenting is different.

Instead of just getting things done, parents have their eyes on other, heart-related issues. They’re looking long term and often focusing on character. It’s interesting to see that many of the misbehaviors that a child presents can be boiled down to a few character weaknesses. The job of parenting becomes more focused as parents are able to target specific heart qualities and require changes that adjust patterns their children have developed.

Many children aren’t quite ready to change on a heart level, so parents must be strategic. Sometimes that means more relationship to soften the heart, and other times it requires creating a “mini crisis” to show kids that the way they’re living just isn’t going to work.

A heart-based approach to parenting often shares values and reasons behind rules. It requires more discussions with kids, helping them understand that their hearts are resistant and that they need to develop cooperation. A heart-based approach is firm but also relational. It’s a different mind-set for some parents and looks at the interaction of family life differently. Instead of simply getting the room cleaned and the dishes put away, parents are more interested in developing character, values, and convictions.

As you consider your kids, remember the words God said to Samuel when Samuel thought Eliab should be the next king: “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). That was a paradigm shift for Samuel and one that many parents need as well.

Unfortunately, you can’t force children to change their hearts.

But you can do a lot to motivate them in the right direction. We've identified several tools that, when used properly, address the heart. Many of these are shared in the chapters of this book. Here are a few suggestions to get you started in reaching your child's heart.

Use sorrow instead of anger in the discipline process. Ann illustrated this well. She went out her front door to find that her eleven-year-old son had dropped his bike too close to the flowerbed, damaging some of her flowers. Her first reaction was anger, and she started imagining what consequence she'd give him. After taking a few deep breaths, Ann decided on a different approach. She calmed herself, went into the house, found her son, and with a flower in her hand, she said, "I'm so sad. I really liked this flower, but your bike landed on it, and now it's broken." She then turned and left the room.

A few moments later, her son came to her and said, "Mom, I'm sorry about the flowers. I know they're important to you. I'll be more careful with my bike next time." Mom was surprised. Usually her son would brace for her anger and immediately start defending himself. Ann was pleased that this time he was more responsive.

Parents who misuse this technique often lay a guilt trip on their children. The key is to be genuine. If you, as a parent, look past your anger for a moment, you'll see that you truly are sad about what your child has done because you know the long-term consequences of such behavior. Reflect it in a gentle way. Sorrow opens doors of relationship, whereas anger builds walls.

The Scriptures are also very powerful in the heart-change process because the Bible has an amazing quality: the ability to pierce through to the deepest areas of the heart. Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Don't use the Bible in a harsh way. Instead, reveal what the Bible has to say about being kind, respectful, or obedient. There's a lot of wisdom and conviction that comes through the Scriptures.

Another way to help children change is to emphasize the heart during times of correction. “I can see you’re angry because I said no. I’d like you to take a break for a bit and settle your heart down and when you’re ready, come back and we’ll talk about it.” A heart approach takes work, and a child may need a long time to settle down at first, but a change of heart is worth it in the end. Resolve the tension by having a positive conclusion or debriefing together. Address heart issues, not just behavior, and help children see things from a deeper perspective.

“What, then, is the place of rewards in child training?” you may ask. Should you reward your child for good behavior, or just expect it to be done? Rewards shouldn’t be abandoned but instead should be used to encourage the heart. Use them sparingly, because rewards often lose their effectiveness over time, requiring that you increase the reward to get the same result. A reward is best used as a motivation to jump-start a new plan, to get the ball rolling in the right direction.

The real issue, however, has to do with the difference between internal and external motivation. Internal motivation comes from the heart, the desire to do what’s right. You want your son to be clean or neat because he has an inner obligation of neatness. When children experience positive internal motivation for accomplishing something, it often makes them want to try even harder.

External motivation comes from the outside and includes things like praise, getting paid, having a treat, paying for a broken window, missing a privilege, or seeing disappointment in a parent’s eyes. As you develop your own biblical parenting philosophy, look for ways to build internal motivation, not just rely on externals to get things done.

Here’s the principle to keep in mind. External motivations are helpful if they build internal motivation. So even though you may give a star or check mark to a child, talk about character and heart change. “I’m giving you a star for cleaning your room, but the most important reward is in your heart. It feels good to have your room neat, doesn’t it?” Or, for an older child, “I can tell you’ve been working

on being responsible with your homework this month. I can see that you are even feeling better about getting assignments turned in on time. Here's the reward, but I'm sure the real reward is the satisfaction you feel inside that you're demonstrating responsibility."

After all, God uses rewards and punishment with us, but he's most interested in the inner motivations of doing the right thing and showing love to others for the right reasons. The Scriptures promise rewards for God's children, but the greatest reward we could ever receive from God is the internal satisfaction of pleasing him.

3

Parents sometimes move to consequences too quickly. Children need to change their hearts, Other tools are often more effective, so it's important to remember that . . .

CONSEQUENCES AREN'T THE ONLY ANSWER

“IF YOU DON'T CUT IT OUT, I'M GOING TO . . .”

“Do this or you'll lose the privilege of . . .”

“Get it done now, or I'm going to take away . . .”

If you find yourself typically going to consequences with these kinds of statements, then you may be relying on behavior modification more than is helpful.

Some problems that parents face with their kids are more difficult than others. Children who have annoying habits, who tease relentlessly, or who explode in anger, have ingrained problems that can drive parents crazy. Out of frustration, some parents think these children need bigger and bigger consequences. They believe that the bigger the consequence, the faster the change. Then those same parents are disappointed because their kids don't seem to be any different after the correction.

Parenting is the toughest job in the world. It's important that you don't get discouraged. Perseverance pays off, and your determination to hang in there with firmness and love is often what's needed. As you consider consequences for changing behavior, however, there are a few things that will help you get further in your parenting strategies, and you'll want to embrace them in your biblical parenting philosophy.

Remember that the goal is a changed heart, not just punishment for doing wrong. A larger consequence may be needed to get the child's attention, but the real work takes place by helping children adjust the way they think and by training them to develop mature behavior. Often, many small corrections are more effective than one large consequence.

Many parents move to consequences too quickly. They see a child doing the wrong thing and they yell, "If you don't stop that, I'll . . ." and off they go into consequences to motivate change. Keep in mind that there is a finite number of consequences available to you as you train your child. If you overuse them, they wear out. Your parenting responsibility must go on for many more years, so look for other forms of training and motivation. A good biblical parenting philosophy emphasizes more than just consequences for correction.

For example, one way to help children move from negative patterns to positive ones is to practice doing the right thing. After a correction time, whenever possible, go back to the offense and practice doing it the right way. You might say, "I was standing about here, and you were right there, and you go ahead and ask me for a snack again. I'll say no, and you show me how to respond the right way based on what we've talked about."

It's easy to tell kids to stop doing the wrong thing or to assume they learn to do what's right based on the correction you've just given, but actually practicing the right response goes a long way in helping children make lasting changes. Something happens when a child replays the situation and does it the right way. It may look forced and seem as though you're just going through the motions, but sometimes that's just what's needed to help kids make the connection for the next times of life.

When kids have deeply rooted weaknesses, practicing the right thing can help change patterns. One mom had her five-year-old son stop three times a day to do kind things for others. At first he was resistant, but she made it fun, and he became creative with the project. A dad set up a plan with his fifteen-year-old daughter so that in

exchange for trips to the mall, she'd look for ways to encourage Mom instead of fight with her. He was just trying to teach her that a family is a two-way street.

Sometimes parents assume that children know what the right thing is. After all, these moms and dads have been saying the same thing over and over again. But hearing it in their ears isn't the same as embracing it in their hearts. Life requires practice, and good practice builds healthy patterns.

Children need to practice doing what's right, not just receive correction for doing something wrong. This may seem obvious when you think about it, but it can be a challenge to get a plan working in family life. Parents are often motivated by their frustration and respond with correction only. Developing a proactive approach as well can make all the difference. It's amazing how a parent's attitude toward the child changes when both parent and child are working together in a positive direction.

Mature people feel an internal pain when they discover that they've made a mistake or done the wrong thing. This is normal and healthy. Your child may not experience that same inner sense yet. Consequences create a kind of pain for children. This pain can motivate right behavior and get them moving in the right direction. But don't just give the consequence without requiring some kind of positive action.

One example of this is the parent who decided to take away the privilege of riding a bike from her nine-year-old son. She said, "Son, I'm not just taking the bike away for a day. I'm taking the bike away until I see some progress in the way you're treating me when I call you in for dinner. We'll see how you do for a while, and if I see a good response, then you can have your bike back again." Mom turned the discipline around so that the child had to earn back the privilege. She wanted to see several positive change points before she allowed her son to ride his bike again.

Rarely is it helpful to set a time limit on a consequence. It's usually best to tie the return of the privilege to positive actions. In essence

you're telling your child, "Show me that you can do the right thing, and then I'll allow you to have that privilege again."

When talking about the importance of obeying God's Word and not just listening to it, the Bible says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:22–25). This is great advice for being corrected by God's Word, but it's also helpful for parents when correcting their children. Practice doing the right thing to see that change is truly taking place.

Kids often need help to grow and change. Correction is just one of the tools God gave to help us learn in life. Require positive action to demonstrate change, and children will mature faster and learn more healthy responses.

4

When you feel overwhelmed because your child has so many weaknesses and problems, a good strategy is to pull back for a bit and . . .

IDENTIFY CHARACTER QUALITIES TO ADDRESS PROBLEMS

“SOMETIMES I GET OVERWHELMED BECAUSE MY CHILD has so many problems. I don’t know where to start or what to focus on next. I hear advice that says, ‘Choose your battles,’ but I feel like I have so many battles to fight all at the same time. I don’t want my home to be a war zone. I want things to be positive and to move forward, but I’m not sure what to do.”

When you feel overwhelmed your children’s poor behavior, here’s an exercise that will give you some direction. In fact, this activity is good for any parent looking for ways to help children grow, but it’s especially helpful when you’re confused and weighed down by a problem’s complexity or deeply rooted nature. A strong biblical parenting philosophy requires that you do a bit of research and study of your child and the problem at hand so you know how to apply God’s principles in strategic ways.

Take a piece of paper and make a list of your child’s offenses or the problems you’ve seen in the last few days. This isn’t a list to show to your child but is a working list so you can gain some perspective in your discipline. You’re looking for examples of problems that need to

be addressed. Look for behaviors, their causes, common arenas where the problem takes place, and others who were typically involved. In this step, you're simply gathering data and making observations, writing down the facts.

Next, group the problems by character qualities. That is, look for common threads in the offenses that may indicate a bigger heart issue. For example, one mom was discouraged with her son because he continually resisted chores, wasn't completing his work at school, and gave her a hard time when she asked for help around the house. She saw a common thread: her son didn't like to work hard and resisted work at every turn. She called it a "work ethic," but you could easily give it a character quality name, such as a lack of *perseverance* or *determination*.

Warren recognized that his son, Cory, had a problem with meanness. Cory was mean to his sister, made fun of people who were different from him, and liked to play tricks on people he didn't even know, just to get a laugh. When looking at the list of offenses, Warren was able to see that the real problem in his son's life was a lack of compassion. He began to look for ways to develop compassion in his son. Warren taught Cory to identify feelings in other people. They talked about hurt feelings and how humor can be offensive, and they went out of their way to help people in need. Over time, the behaviors decreased as Cory developed compassion in his life.

Grouping offenses around character qualities is freeing for many parents. First, it provides some perspective. Instead of working on fifty different negative behaviors, now you can focus on three or four positive character qualities. Furthermore, once you develop a strategy for character development, you begin to see many of the offenses in your child's life as opportunities for growth.

This approach also helps parents focus on what their kids need to be doing instead of simply focusing on the wrong behavior. Listen to your words of correction. Are they primarily focused on the problem, or on the solution? One mom caught herself in a trail of statements focused on the problem. "Cut it out." "Stop being annoying." "People

aren't going to like you if you keep that up." Instead, she'd be more effective if she'd say, "Think about being sensitive." "Remember, stop and think first." "Look to see how the other person is feeling." By talking about the positive character quality you're developing in your child, you can be more positive and hopeful in your approach.

To keep character training practical, you may want to develop working definitions of the qualities you're focusing on. These aren't dictionary definitions, but are practical statements that give children hands-on ways to think about heart issues. Here are some examples to get you started, but the best definitions are those you develop that are targeted specifically to your child's needs.

Obedience is doing what someone says, right away, without being reminded.

Honor is treating people as special, doing more than what's expected, and having a good attitude.

Perseverance is hanging in there even after you feel like quitting.

Attentiveness is showing people you love them by looking at them when they speak.

Patience is waiting with a happy heart.

Self-discipline is putting off present rewards for future benefits.

Gratefulness is being thankful for the things I have instead of grumbling about the things I don't have.

One of the benefits of being a Christian is that the Holy Spirit comes into your life and produces fruit. Galatians 5:22–23 gives a list of character qualities that come from relying on God. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." These aren't just qualities for your kids. Parents need these as well. In fact, the family is a great laboratory in which God helps each person develop the character qualities needed for life.

Now, when you see an offense in life, take time to identify the

character quality your child needs to develop. You might say to a teenager, “I sense an ungrateful spirit in you, yet you seem to continually want me to sacrifice. I don’t mind helping you, but I’m going to say no this time, and I’ll watch and see if your gratefulness increases for the things I’m already doing for you.”

With a preschooler you could say, “Remember, we’re working on self-control. That means waiting sometimes without getting angry or upset.” With an early elementary-age child, “When you come into the room, don’t just start talking. Be sure to take time to see what’s going on so you don’t just interrupt other people. That’s what we call *sensitivity*.”

As your children grow and demonstrate godly character, be sure to affirm it. A little praise or even admiration for growth can go a long way. Admiration and gratefulness are two different things. Many parents are in the habit of thanking their kids for things, but many don’t practice admiration. Thankfulness focuses on what a child does; admiration acknowledges who the person is or is becoming. For example, thank your son for taking out the garbage, but then go a step further by saying, “I really like that you did a thorough job. I admire that about you. You saw that extra bag of trash by the door and took it out too. Thoroughness is a great quality.”

Admiration helps kids recognize character in themselves. A little work in this area can help children better understand how small tasks fit into the larger picture. Focusing on character is a great way to help both parents and kids maintain a healthy perspective on growth.