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**“DID YOU KNOW . . .”**

That discipline and punishment are two different things? Often, the words are used interchangeably, but in the world of child development, they do mean different things.

Discipline is an intentional consequence, given by the parent or caretaker, for inappropriate action and is designed to be a teaching moment for the child. It is not an emotional or angry reaction by a caretaker. An example would be a two-year-old who insists on throwing food at the table. If the child has been warned that continuing to throw food will result in the food being taken away, and the child chooses to throw the food anyway, taking the food away calmly is both a logical consequence and a disciplinary action. The intention is to teach the child that throwing food is not acceptable behavior and that there are consequences to such behavior. Of course, this is by no means a suggestion to starve a child. If the child is very young, such as the age given in this example, the parent and child can have a “snack” an hour or so later. This will still teach the child the lesson and also ensure proper nutrition. If the child is older, such as school age, and has no medical condition barring a slight reduction in food intake, there is no reason not to let the child experience the consequences of inappropriate behavior.

On the other hand, if the parent were to scream at the child and hit the child in anger for the same behavior, that is considered punishment at the very least. It was administered by a parent who was not in control of his or her emotions and it has very little, if any, ability to teach a child about appropriate behavior. It only teaches the child to expect pain if the child throws food.

Countless other actions by a child could be substituted in this scenario, but the important issue here is the attitude and intention of the corrective action by the parent or caretaker. If correction is given while the caretaker is in an emotionally reactive state and is lashing out in anger, that is not discipline that teaches a child the difference between right and wrong. Further, it can teach a child that yelling and hitting are appropriate behaviors, and how many parents want to encourage that?

Of even greater concern is the potential for abuse in this situation. When a parent or caretaker acts out in anger, it can easily escalate to hitting with an intensity that causes welts, bruising or worse, and that is reportable child abuse. Most importantly, while the physical pain will eventually heal, the emotional pain that children experience in this type of situation is much more difficult to heal and if such punishment, or abuse, continues, the relationship between the parent and the child can be seriously damaged over time.

In the context of our faith, it is important to remember that parents are the first teachers their children will know. In this role, it is the parents who are the first ones to demonstrate the love of Christ to their children. Would Christ lash out at a child and abuse the child? Of course not. But we are just human beings and He was the Son of God, so how can we be expected to match His behavior at all times? The reality is that we cannot. As parents and as humans, we are imperfect people, but we still have an obligation to lovingly care for our children. So how do we do that in light of all the pressures we have in today’s society?

One of the best things that parents can do is to admit to themselves that they will not be perfect parents, but also commit to always keeping their children safe. Any parent of a baby with colic will likely agree that there are moments of extreme stress and frustration when caring for a baby with this issue. Parents of toddlers who are testing their independence; parents of school

children who want to do what their friends do, no matter how unsafe it is; and parents of defiant teenagers all know how stressful and trying parenting can be. During those times, parents must be determined to remain in control of their tempers. If you feel like hitting your toddler, which every parent does at some point, walk out of the room. If the baby is screaming and you feel like shaking the baby, put the baby in the crib where there is safety and walk away until you calm down. The key here is to remove yourself or the child before the situation becomes explosive.

Too many parents who do abuse think that they are the only ones who get angry with their children. That couldn't be more false! ALL parents get angry and want to react in anger; even parents who are trained child welfare professionals. The primary difference between the parents who abuse and those who do not is the ability to remain in control. Parents can and should allow themselves a time out if needed. If there are young children involved, the only caveat is to ensure that the child is safe before walking away, which may mean placing the child in a play pen or some other place of safety so that you have time to cool off.

For new parents who are more stressed than they expected to be by the change in lifestyle following the birth of a child, or for any parent feeling stressed by child care, consider utilizing a day care, even if it is just one or two days a week. If day care is not possible for any reason, see if other parents whom you trust will form a group and share child care, taking turns watching the children. Some communities also have crisis nurseries, where parents who are in need of a break to prevent abuse can access free services within certain guidelines. In other areas, parents just need to identify adults whom the parents trust who can take the child if the parent feels as if he or she needs a break to prevent possible abuse. Remember that there is no shame in reaching out for help. The problem lies with not asking for help and abusing instead!

It is also important for parents to understand that there is no reason for feelings of guilt if you do ask for help once in a while. The best and healthiest parents are those who take time for themselves, too, allowing time for personal growth, prayer, and renewal. There is an old principle taught by the late and great Virginia Satir that if you allow your well to run dry, then you will have nothing left to give to others. Too often, good parents forget to refill their well by taking care of themselves! We are all God's children, from young to old, and we all need a little TLC from time to time.

So parents, please take the time to consider your options now, while the children are playing quietly and being the little angels that we *know* they are. Think about calm, rational, teaching responses to your child's inappropriate behavior and mentally rehearse using that strategy the next time the child acts out. For the more serious times, think about what you can do the next time you feel yourself getting out of control. Plan a strategy just like you plan for a fire: think about safety, your best actions, and your escape route. If you have a plan in advance, then the next time you need it, you will be much more likely to act on the plan rather than on the anger. As you become more comfortable using calm discipline to teach your child about desired behaviors, you will use punishment less and less. Your relationship with your child can only get better and stronger, and isn't that what parenting is all about?

God's peace and blessings to you!

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