

Long-term Resentment in the Young

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Paul's Teaching on Child Training

And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (*Ephesians 6.4*).

It hardly needs to be said that parenthood is a tremendous responsibility, and we are glad of every word we have in the Bible showing how we should go about it.

In *Ephesians 6.4* Paul gives direction to fathers. Mothers seem to be out of the picture, but obviously this cannot possibly be the case. Everything that is said here about fathers must apply also to mothers. However, the apostle avoids using the Greek word for 'parents', but puts the chief responsibility (and accountability to God) on fathers.

He begins by challenging fathers to think about how they may provoke their children to anger. This refers not only to immediate anger, but also to exasperation and resentment which may not emerge for several years. How, exactly, may we stir up anger and frustration in our children?

No parent should feel condemned by the answers given here, because every one of us has failed in so many ways. The purpose of this article is to help, not to hurt.

This caution not to provoke our children to exasperation, applies to children and young people of all ages. Do not frustrate and embitter them, says Paul. So important is this that he mentions it before giving any positive exhortation.

Clearly, bitterness can be provoked by ill-tempered and violent behaviour, but that is not the whole story. There are other mistakes of parenting that produce the same painful reaction in children.

Here, then, are seven ways in which we may anger and exasperate young people, both short-term and long-term.

1. Indifference

Firstly, and most obviously, we may give long-term bitterness and frustration to children by being indifferent to them and their concerns. This is very easily done these days. We live, after all, in the most complicated days which have ever occurred in the history of the world.

We are burdened by numerous responsibilities, and a vast amount of information constantly bombards us in this media age. It is all too easy for parents to find the needs of children tiresome and trivial. We may tend to sometimes ignore them or forget about them. Or we may leave all the close involvement to the other parent. We may take little interest in their developing views and distinctive interests, scarcely even noticing that one child is different from another. We may also become indifferent to our children's need of companionship.

The time may come, as children get older, that they reject parental authority. But the reality may be that respect and authority was forfeited long before, through parental indifference.

When children reach mid or late teenage, parents want to protect them from the moral snares of society, and difficult conflicts sometimes arise. How much easier it is if their affection and respect for parents is intact.

2. Over-direction

A second action likely to provoke exasperation in children needs to be considered alongside the previous point. Parents may take *too much* interest, in the sense that they *over-channel* their children in their decisions. They *over-direct* them. Parents decide entirely by themselves that the child.

is going to go to a particular kind of school, or will engage in particular sports, or will take up particular subjects. Parents push the child all the way, so that independent judgement or taste is crushed.

This may occur due to pride on the parents' part. The child *must* do this or that, because these things are what parents will be proud of when the child gets to late teenage, and on into adult life. The child's course of life is predetermined. Compulsory direction which takes no account of the child's tastes and inclinations (however gently carried out), may possibly embitter a child in the long term.

Over-protectiveness may equally frustrate a child. There are so many things that rightly concern parents, and from which children have to be protected. But we have to be careful not to overdo this protection, so that growing children are denied virtually anything which may appeal to them. Children are not blind. They see what other children are free to do. Unreasonable protectiveness may produce bitterness.

This is not a matter of skipping discipline. Parents who let their young children get away with rudeness and bad behaviour store up trouble for the future. To introduce reproof at sixteen is to court resentment, contempt and rebellion.

3. Too much criticism

Thirdly, children may become deeply angry if they are *over-criticised and discouraged*. Their minds and abilities are developing. They constantly do foolish things, measured by adult standards. Their ideas are frequently immature, and their method of carrying out projects sometimes bizarre. But they are children, and parents must ration their criticisms in the light of this. Children can only take so much criticism before being undermined and frustrated.

It is easy to discourage the young by crushing their dreams and aspirations. Children have all kinds of schemes and opinions, and these may change every couple of years, or even every couple of months. We cannot keep pouring cold water on them. If their dreams are not intrinsically bad, let them dream (particularly in the case of younger children). They are not committing themselves to a lifelong course of action. If children are younger, we should not behave as though we were counselling older teenagers. What does it matter if a child's heart is set on being a train driver or an astronaut?

When older teenagers form totally unattainable or inappropriate dreams, it may be necessary to find amicable ways of talking them round. Even here, care and respect is called for. But the intellectual activity of a child, if morally wholesome, should not be crushed.

4. Failure to adjust to growing up

Fourthly (and building on the preceding point), exasperation may be produced in children by the *failure of parents to adjust to their growing up*. We are all slow to make this adjustment. Little by little, children become adults. And little by little, responsibility for their lives must be yielded to them, even if it means they make mistakes. If we find we are treating a child virtually the same way at 15 as at 10, we may be courting deep-seated rebellion in the future.

5. Ill-temper

Fifthly, everyone agrees we provoke our children to anger by *hostility, ill-temper*, and far-too-severe punishments. If tired and tense, parents may react to misbehaviour in an unjustifiable way. Despite fondness for their children, they may give way to bad temper, punishing children out of frustration, rather than in a proper spirit of correction. The scale of the punishment will be according to the parent's emotional state.

Deep frustration may not be immediately apparent, because children seem to bounce back and get over their trials. But within them, a kind of debt may build up, and the time may come when they resent all unreasonable treatment. Then parental authority will be discredited and undermined.

What we do to a child may not come home to roost until the child is a teenager. We must take care that hostility and over-punishing does not provoke to wrath.

6. Unfairness

Sixthly, unfairness embitters and frustrates children, especially over time. The previous point covered unfairness in the scale of punishments. Unfairness may also arise in the assigning of blame between children. To decide a 'case' often requires the wisdom of Solomon. But if there is frequent unfairness, parental authority may be shattered. Exasperation may also build up in children if the reason for discipline is not apparent, or is not explained. Does it come like a bolt from the blue? A child may ask, 'What was wrong with that?' or, 'Why can't I do that?'

The unfairness of favouritism may be another failing. If one child regularly gets more than another, a parent may not be conscious it is happening, but the child who goes short most certainly is. If one child is punished more than another for the same offence, or one is encouraged more than another for the same achievement, parental guidance and authority could be at risk. If there is any unfairness in the giving of warmth or approval, trouble may lie ahead.

7. Lack of example

A seventh way of exasperating children is the failure of parental example. It is obvious that if parents do things themselves for which they punish or reprove their children, resentment and confusion may result. Beside this, children very often acquire the behaviour of the parents.

Many years ago a husband and wife came to see if they could be helped to master a serious problem. They said, 'We cannot stop arguing.' The evidence was soon seen, because even as they described the problem, the sparks began to fly. Immediately after discussing this, they raised a second problem. Their children were very volatile, and violent to each other. They could not be pacified. Why were their children so bad?

The answer was that they had learned their behaviour from their parents. By their own conduct these parents produced instant exasperation in their children, and forfeited authority. They were not credible people in the eyes of their youngsters.

To sum up, seven potential danger points for either short- or long-term 'wrath' are the following:

1. Indifference
2. Over-direction or over-protectiveness
3. Over-criticism
4. Parental failure to adjust to growing up
5. Hostility or ill-temper
6. Unfairness or favouritism
7. Bad parental example

'Bring them up'

Moving on to the positive side of child rearing, the apostle says – 'but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord'. *Bring them up* has been rendered – 'rear them with tenderness'. Before we consider how we rear them, we must appreciate the concept of tenderly, thoughtfully rearing children, and see it as our commission and responsibility.

The key question is – What are we bringing them up for? What is our aim? It may sound a trite question, but it is not always correctly answered. We are bringing up our children for *life*, not for *childhood*.

Some parents say, 'I want to enjoy my children, and enjoy watching them grow up.' We do not fault that attitude. A home with children is a wonderful blessing. But at the same time we should

never forget that we are rearing children not only to be happy as children, but for their future lives. We ask, 'How am I training my children to prepare them for adult life? How do I prepare them for the kind of world which they must soon face?' The following suggestions say nothing about instructing children spiritually, as it is assumed readers need no persuading about that.

'in the nurture'

We are to rear children in the *nurture* of the Lord. *Nurture* means *training*. If only we knew how to produce in children *diligence*, so that they may one day bring great glory to God in their work and witness! If only we could impart *initiative*! How wonderful it is to have people who can respond to circumstances and carry on initiatives, both in their personal lives and in the service of the Lord. How glorious it is to have people in the church who have inner energy and tenacity! Is there anything we can do to promote these virtues in our children? These are the kind of concerns that we should have.

If only we could discover how to bring about a sense of *duty* in our children, and how to make them considerate and polite! If we had the secrets, the answers to these questions, we would be happy parents. We may take heart, because the Scripture gives us answers to those questions. We can help our children to be all these things as we prepare them mentally, spiritually, morally and socially for the journey of life.

Nurture includes chastening, but it is broader in scope. The difference between nurture and admonition has been explained in this way: *Nurture* is what you do to the child, while admonition is what you say to the child.

What we do to a child encompasses all the restraints and constraints that we put the child under. Nurture means that we design activities, circumstances, rules, duties and rewards in the life of the child. It is the opposite of spoiling. If we spoil a child, it is because there are no rules and restraints. (Spoiling is one of the worst disasters of all, because scars often remain even after conversion, and have to be eradicated over time by the process of sanctification.)

Nurture is more positive than negative. We want to train children *socially*. We long that they should know how to relate to other people, whether in the family, the church, the school, or the place of business or study. We want to bring out, where appropriate, the shy child. Equally, we want the more extroverted child to know how to control and contain himself, and to have consideration for others. We want our children to be observant, and sensitive to needs. These are aims to keep in view as we develop our approach to them.

By nurture, children are given a scale of reference; a framework by which to judge, assess and think. They come to know that they may do one thing and not another, for clear reasons. They will spend their future lives under the discipline of both divine and human providences and 'systems'. They will sometimes have ambitions which cannot be attained. The 'system' may bar the way for them. It will not allow them to do what they want.

This will be intensely frustrating unless children have been reared to understand and endure limiting influences. Human beings cannot do everything they want to do, when and where they want to do it. Nurture enables them to come to terms with limitations.

To have a system around them teaches them values. It develops a capacity to come to terms with things they don't like, and exercise self-control with things they do. It helps them to control their appetites. All this is very positive and strengthening.

Many of the troubles of moodiness and disillusionment afflicting young people (along with self-indulgence and self-centredness) are due to the fact that nurture has been regarded by modern society as repressive. They have grown up without goals or restrictions.

A simple example of restraint in the home is that of 'no-go' areas. In every household, from a child's earliest years, there should be some prohibited places, especially certain drawers and cupboards relating to their parents. This is most helpful to children. It teaches respect and restraint.

On the other hand, parents may say, 'Oh, there is nowhere where my children cannot trample freely. They may scramble over my bed at five o'clock in the morning. They may open any drawer and sift through anything. Nothing is private; nothing is sacred; nothing is special.' But such a liberal attitude denies a child vital strengths of self-control. Who knows whether a young adult's gross act of adultery may not have been encouraged by the lack of prohibited areas in his life! Prohibitions in childhood may have developed emotional muscles of respect and self-control.

This applies in church also. It is not a good idea for young children to be running here and there, in and out, say, of the minister's or the deacons' rooms, and respecting no part of the building. If no place is out of bounds, and if nothing is to be regarded as special or sacred, how will a child ever learn that he is a small unit in society, and bound to respect its rules and systems? How will he be helped to respect the Word of God and the church which is the pillar and ground of the Truth? There must be places that are out of bounds.

Another amazingly underestimated nurturing tool is that of table manners. Someone once said to this writer, 'What is the point of middle-class table manners? Why do some people take them so seriously?'

Table manners are hardly middle-class. Every so-called 'class' has, in the past, had its distinctive approach to table manners. They could well have been devised in Heaven for the benefit of children being nurtured in this fallen world. Table manners inculcate control over appetites, and the value of restraint. They also teach sensitivity to and consideration for others, who must be passed the plate first.

Table manners communicate the practice of noticing the needs of others, and habits of helpfulness and hospitality. They teach that appearances are important, because to behave like hogs is offensive to others. Children learn to bear in mind how they come across, and how they appear from the other's point of view. All these things are easily learned at the table.

Overall, manners provide a remarkable means of imparting to children some of the virtues referred to at the beginning of this article.

Chores and duties are another important tool of nurture. We should assign reasonable and achievable duties to children from their earliest years. If we leave it until a child is ten, we may face difficulties. If the child has never lent a helping hand before this, nor had a regular duty or responsibility, there may obviously be great reluctance to cooperate.

Personal organisation and tidiness on the part of the child should always be well rewarded.

'and admonition...'

We have observed that *nurture* is the framework of training actions applied to children, whereas admonition is what is said to the child. Admonition, therefore, is not training by actions and rules, but by words. In short, we are training them mentally. By words we straighten out and forge the thinking of children, helping them to appreciate principles and higher values, and the right way of looking at issues.

We are developing, stretching and fashioning their minds. That is why parents need to be helpful to children in what they read, and the kind of conversation they promote. To be a parent we need, ideally, an ever-expanding general knowledge to keep ahead of our children. We are feeding their minds. We are informing them.

We must be alive to many things that are of interest to children. If we do not know about such things, we shall have to learn about them. It may be that a parent is an academic whose entire education has been in the world of literature and classics, yet whose children are interested in science and machines. Such a parent will need to find out about some of these things.

If we want to impart to a child some worthwhile information, but the child won't receive it and as another idea, we should not steamroller the child down. It is sometimes a very good thing for the child to win the encounter (and even an argument). Another day will come. We have not lost

the campaign. Another opportunity will come when the child may be more interested.

Parental authority

Parental authority is a vital and precious commodity, but authority must be earned. Some may think it is unbiblical to say this. We do, after all, have a biblical 'office' as parents, by which we possess the right to train and correct our children. But if our parental authority is to be well received, then we have to see it as something to be earned and deserved.

To be respected, authority must have a helping face. Equally, authority must have a friendly face. Authority must have a rewarding hand. Authority needs all these things. If we forfeit friendship with our children, we forfeit authority. If we forfeit reasonableness, we forfeit authority. If we forfeit integrity, we forfeit authority. How disastrous it is when a parent is grossly inconsistent, and not even honest.

Authority needs integrity. Even in matters of general knowledge, if we hold forth on a subject that we don't know much about, we are ultimately risking authority. A child quickly attains teenage, and may know more about the matter than we do. We must be careful not to expound things we know nothing about. It is no bad thing that children should know that we get some things wrong. But for children to see us authoritatively asserting something foolish leads to forfeiture of integrity and respect.

Parental authority must be blended with a measure of liberty. Even adult Christians have to be given time and opportunity to struggle forward little-by-little in the walk of sanctification. Occasionally someone will rush up and say, 'Something must be done about that person!' Often, it is not a serious moral matter, but one to be handled in a context of respect.

We all must be allowed a certain amount of liberty to slip and slide; to go wrong; to offend, but then to put *ourselves* right before the Lord. We do not expect people to correct their faults successfully the very next day. They need time to get on top of things, and so do children.

Therefore, if we have to reprove or redirect a child, we should not necessarily impose intense parental scrutiny to see if the matter has been immediately put right (although this may be appropriate for a very serious offence).

Children are normally entitled to a degree of leeway even to do the wrong thing, and to take time in getting it right. We look for progress, not for instant success. Patience is a pillar of parental authority. Children must develop their own readiness and capacity to recognise wrongs, and to put them right. It would be no use if when launched on the ocean of adult life they were still dependent upon constant intervention from their parents.

Service for the Lord

There is sometimes debate among Christians about whether parents should participate to any extent in church activities. It is often said that a parent's service for God is to take care of the family, but this is a great mistake. We are always under the command of the great commission to engage in evangelistic efforts, though not, of course, to the exclusion of the care of children. There is a balance to be maintained.

However, it is worth saying that whenever parents (with proper balance) are active and committed in fields of Christian service, their children benefit. Far from being deprived of attention, they see their parents diligent about the work of the Lord. They see them loyal to something above them. They grow up knowing that the family has a noble cause to which it is committed. It is a magnificent lesson for children to see that their parents are under the authority of God, and that they love him and serve him. A parent's Christian service is a crowning witness to a child. There is no greater authentication than this.