



HOW TO...

Speak to parents about discipline in the household

Watch the [recording](#) of the Practical Workshop hosted by Sikunye, discussing how to speak to parents about discipline during the First Thousand Days. This is a big topic, and this workshop started the conversation around what is discipline, what kind of harsh punishment do parents revert to and offering other alternatives, as well as looking at scripture and where the phrase “spare the rod, spoil the child” comes from.

– Convention on the Rights of the Child definition of Punishment –

“Any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light”

This mostly involves hitting (“smacking”, “slapping”, “spanking”) children with the hand or with an implement (a whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, or similar) but it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding or forced ingestion (e.g. washing children's mouths out with soap or forcing them to swallow hot spices). There are also non-physical forms of punishment that are cruel and degrading such as punishment that belittles, humiliates, threatens, scares, or ridicules the child.

In South Africa, punishment in the home is a violation of children's rights and is unconstitutional

can a child in the first thousand days be naughty?

Serve and return is like a game of tennis or volleyball between child and caregiver. The child “serves” by reaching out for interaction – with eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, babbling, or touch. A responsive caregiver will “return the serve” by speaking back, playing peekaboo, or sharing a toy or a laugh – and this is repeated again and again. But when mom doesn't respond – see what happens by watching this [video](#) and see the baby's reaction.

Do you think punishment/violence in that moment would have helped? The baby is already scared, feeling alone, and neglected so to discipline in that moment with harsh punishment will only negatively impact the baby. In the early years babies are exploring the world around them – trying to figure out how things work. When parents come down hard on them or ignore them, they crush this creative, learning, and figuring out things themselves and replace it with fear, which damages their learning. But rather parents need to ask is the baby hungry? Or tired? Or sick? They can not communicate what they are feeling or needing, and they need parents to meet their needs. So how can a baby in the First Thousand Days be naughty, when they are just letting their parents know something is wrong and they want them to respond!

I was punished but I turned out ok

Many can say that they turned out OK even though they were disciplined with harsh punishment. But the punishment hurt! It hurt physically and emotionally. Through research being done across the world, children testify to the hurt – not only physical, but ‘the hurt inside’ – which this violence causes them, compounded by adult acceptance, even approval of it. Causing physical pain to a child is itself a breach of children’s right to protection from assault – and adults often don’t appreciate the difference in size and strength between them and a child, and the impact that this difference can have on the actual physical pain felt by the child. What research is also showing is that corporal punishment has a wide range of negative health, developmental and behavioural outcomes for children that can follow them into adulthood – this includes poor mental health, poor cognitive/brain development, lower school grades, increased aggression, poor moral regulation and increased antisocial behaviour.

No one knows how they would have turned out if they did not receive discipline in the form of punishment, and many people, in saying it did them no harm, are denying the hurt they experienced when the adults closest to them thought they could only teach them by inflicting pain. Adults who hit their children in the name of discipline usually began doing so because they themselves were hit as children. It is not the experience itself that made us OK, but rather the way in which we cope and deal with the experiences, but it does not change that in the moment we felt the fear, pain, shame etc.

Remember: Parents raise their children the way they were raised. So they discipline their child, the way they were disciplined, and the child is more likely to do the same – we need to break this generational cycle!

Remember: Parents discipline their child out of love, they do not do it to cause pain, but rather parents want to protect and teach their child how to behave and keep safe

there is a big difference between beating a child and a loving smack

Beating a child may physically hurt more than a “loving smack” but both are on a continuum of violence, and both breach a child’s right to respect for human dignity and physical integrity. Societies do not justify any level of violence when challenging violence against elderly people. So why should they when it comes to children? A “loving smack” is a contradiction of the worst kind.

Some people argue that “there is a big difference between child abuse and a light smack”, focusing on the degree of violence used. However, it is inaccurate to suggest that adults have control over the degree of violence they use. Research shows that often more force is used than intended, and that the degree of force escalates depending on how angry they are. If zero-tolerance on other forms of abuse to adults or elderly, why are we not doing the same for children – as it is not possible to differentiate from child abuse and corporal punishment. Watch Rachel Rosentals-Thresher’s answer to this question [here](#)

Remember: Discipline is good – when it is done well. But discipline does not need physical or emotional punishment.

Remember: The habits and patterns of discipline or punishment that happen in the First Thousand Days are carried into later years

Remember: punishing a child leads to them lying and secretive behaviour later. Which then breaks relationships due to rebellious behaviour

Remember: Punishment/harsh discipline tells children nothing about how they should behave. On the contrary, hitting children is a lesson in bad behaviour. It teaches children that their parents find it acceptable to use violence to sort out problems or conflicts. Hitting children also sends a confusing message to children that although they shouldn't hit other children or adults and adults shouldn't hit other adults, it is OK for adults, who are bigger and stronger, to hit children, who are usually smaller and more vulnerable. Children learn from what their parents do, not just from what they say.

*Discipline is teaching, training, and modelling
(discipleship) not physical punishment*

where does “spare the rod, spoil the child” come from

The original Hebrew word translated to “*discipline*,” is the very same word that is translated into “*instruction*,” elsewhere. The root word being “mū·sar,” and looking at how it's used throughout the Bible, we see how this word ranges from teaching, training, and modelling (discipleship) to verbal correction and even consequence (discipline) and it is the same word that references God's instruction and discipline.

Proverbs 13:24

“Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.”

Proverbs 23:13

“Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish them with the rod, they will not die.”

Contrary to popular belief, the phrase, “spare the rod, spoil the child” isn't found in Scripture. It's a quote by Samuel Butler back in the 1660s. The Hebrew word for *rod* used in both the Psalms and Proverbs passages is “shabat.” A shabat is specifically the rod used by a shepherd in caring for sheep. The shabat has five common practical uses:

- it is the symbol of the shepherd's guardianship of the sheep;
- it can be thrown with great accuracy just beyond the wandering sheep to make them run back to the flock;
- the shabat can be used to ward off an intruder and protect the sheep from any animals which may attack;
- the sheep are counted as they "pass under the rod;"
- it is used to part the wool in order to examine the sheep for disease, wounds or defects which may be treated. There is no evidence that the rod is ever used to physically strike the sheep.

Instead the rod may stand as a figure for all correction, firm yet kind discipline and instruction. Let's think of what the shepherd's shabat could mean for parental guidelines:

- Security—the child knows he/she is loved, cared for, accepted;
- Guidance—the loving parent will teach the child and keep him/her from going astray;
- Protection—the parent will not let outsiders hurt the child;
- Evaluation—the child will be "counted" and progress will be monitored;
- Diagnosis—the parent will look for signs of anxiety or pain in the child and seek out treatment and healing.

It is important to notice that in these proverbs Jesus makes a big difference between **a rod**, a physical object, and **the rod**, which is used metaphorically. In each scripture that describes disciplining a child, *the rod* is used, not *a rod*. He goes on to present the importance of understanding the different usage like in Exodus 21:20, which states, "If a man beats his male or female slave with *a rod* and the slave dies as a direct result, he must be punished." Though the severity is obviously different in this example, it points out the difference between using *a rod*, and the metaphor for discipline, *the rod*. Without seeing the subtle difference in the usage of the rod here, we miss the purpose of these scriptures.

To use "the rod" in this time is to cultivate awareness in our children. Awareness of their own feelings, as well as what might happen in others given certain situations. Consider that the Holy Spirit is a spirit of gentleness and kindness, but also one of directness and purpose. The aim here is to guide our children to a holy spirit-driven conscience, a higher awareness of self and others. As pastors, we can speak to parents highlighting

the difference in scripture and encouraging them to find other ways to discipline and correct their children that does not result in harsh punishment.

looking at scripture the role of the godly parent is to:

- Train children (Proverbs 22:6); Teach children (Deuteronomy 6:7; Deuteronomy 11:19)
- Live by example (Deuteronomy 6:8-9; Deuteronomy 11:18)
- Make known what God has done (Joel 1:3; Isaiah 38:19)
- Discipline by word and deed (Proverbs 29:15; Proverbs 29:17; Proverbs 13:24; Proverbs 23:13; Hebrews 12:7)
- Maintain proper attitudes (Colossians 3:21; Ephesians 6:4; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; 1 Peter 5:3; Ephesians 4:29; Proverbs 29:22)

Proverbs 22:6 that we should “raise a child up in the way they should go.” So, the key to this effective discipline must be perceived as “fair” for the child and be self-enhancing. Parents can consider other proven alternatives to spanking depending on the child's age. Some of these alternatives including redirection (infants, early toddlers), timeout (early toddlers, Kindergarten to school-age), withdrawal of privileges, or reasoning (school-age to adolescents). – and then go into positive parenting

Our word “discipline” is a derivative of the word “disciple.” Which highlights what is important in a parent is discipleship and character!

your church and positive parenting

We listened to Carmen De Vos and Yonela Sipoko who gave us some practical advice to support families in parenting in a positive way.

Speak Up: Address the difference between discipline and punishment and encourage parents to see that their child is not being “naughty” but is exploring the world around them as they grow up.

Pray: For parents in the First Thousand Days, for patience, gentleness, and self-control with their children, despite what is happening around them. Pray for good two-way communication and understanding between parents and children.

Surround families: Be the support and encouragement that parents need to parent well, offer support, encourage them to seek support if needed

Create warm welcoming spaces: Model the love, gentleness, kindness that we hope parents will model to their children. Be the safe place that parents can come to and find friendship and understanding to then be able to parent well.

Equip and prepare: Refer parents to services such as positive parenting courses, counselling services, and encourage them to use the Robot method to know when to discipline and when to wait so that it does not become punishment.

Collaborate and refer: Know your local organisations and services that offer parenting courses, as well as counselling that parents may need to heal from their past trauma – invite these organisations to speak to parents in your congregation and your community.

resources

Where can pastors and churches get information on discipline or corporal punishment

- Frequently Asked Questions <https://endcorporalpunishment.org/faqs/>
- What does “Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child” mean in the Bible?
<https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/what-does-spare-the-rod-spoil-the-child-mean.html>
- Is the phrase “Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child” in the Bible?
<https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-life/is-the-phrase-spare-the-rod-spoil-the-child-in-the-bible.html>
- A Hebrew word study on “Spare the Rod”
<https://www.chaimbentorah.com/2018/07/hebrew-word-study-spare-the-rod/>
- The Rod of Guidance
<https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/articles/Rod-of-Guidance.pdf>