



DISCIPLINE
— *and* —
CORRECTION
— *in* —
CHILD-REARING

ANDY ANDREWS

If a man had a knife and he was about to cut one of your children, would you intervene? Is there any measure you wouldn't take to stop that man from getting to your child? Probably not...*except I know for a fact* that you would stand by and let it happen...if...

If your child had a tumor and the man with the knife was a gifted surgeon assigned to your child's case. If he offered hope that the surgery would free your child from the tumor and its threat to your child's life, you wouldn't stop the man at all...you'd *hire* him to cut your child. Even though there is no fun in the doctor's knife (in fact, there is risk inherent in any surgery), the threat of the tumor is much greater than the threat of the knife.

This little story illustrates why parents discipline their children at all. It is because they believe there is a threat against their child that requires "surgery" in the form of discipline and correction.

But how does a parent ever get to the point of asking, "What is the best method to use in order to correct and discipline my child?"

If you are a parent, you know that by the time you start asking that question, it means one of those threats to your child has already raised its ugly head: loss of control, defiant attitude, direct disobedience, back-talk, tantrums, or maybe even overall chaos. Most parents realize very early in their child's life (10-12 months) that something is amiss.

How about this scene? You're changing your angel's diaper and instead of staying still and letting you do your "dirty work," the little guy suddenly arches his back, starts screaming in rage, flails his arms, and tries to turn over and crawl back to his toys. He's not treating you like the loving parent who's helping him, but as a bitter enemy who is keeping him from what he wants right now.

If an adult screamed at you with that kind of rage and came at you swinging, you'd probably enroll in a self-defense class. So the first time it happens with your child, you are left feeling a bit unsettled.



And it doesn't stop there. Eventually, your sweet little dear learns a whole new set of skills: stonewalling, disobedience, tantrums at the most awkward moments, lying, and disrespect. And in most cases, you didn't teach them any of these things. They miraculously "pick them up" somehow. And *that* is why most parents start asking, "What do I do about child discipline and correction?"

WHY DO WE CALL IT CORRECTION?

Have you ever dislocated your shoulder or elbow? It looks grisly, but more than that, it hurts both physically *and emotionally*. Sure, you can't believe the pain you're in, but *how it looks* is just as disturbing. "My arm isn't supposed to be shaped like *that!* Help! I'm broken."

Strangely enough, the immediate damage from a dislocated shoulder or elbow joint is usually minimal (unlike a broken bone). And even more strangely...the cure for it can be as simple as "popping" it back in place. However, for a split second, the level of pain goes through the stratosphere right as the joint pops back into its proper location (followed by immediate relief).

If you were short-sighted, you might be tempted to let that instant of greater pain persuade you to leave the bone out of place. But no one (except maybe a child) is that short-sighted. If it were your daughter's shoulder, you'd tell the doctor or coach or person-of-knowledge to go ahead and "pop it back into place." It is a very real problem (the dislocation). It needs to be corrected...even at the cost of more pain (temporarily).

That is what "child correction" is. It is based on the assumption that something in the mind and behavior of your child is threatening him. So it must be corrected. And that something is not just painful now. More importantly, it is dangerous to your child's future. It will cost him dearly if left uncorrected.

If a ship sets sail from New York to London and is only half a degree off course, by the time it gets across the Atlantic, it will be hundreds of miles away from its intended port.



The same ship, if on course at the start, would end up very close to London even if it got off course at the end of its journey by many degrees.

Errors in direction early on make much more of a mess than errors at the end.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Before we get further into this issue, we should address one of the first things that come to mind for anyone asking about discipline and correction: Is this guide about spanking?

No, it is not. In fact, I won't be weighing in on the question of "to spank or not to spank." That's a personal decision for each family to make. Now I know that means if you already lean hard in either direction, you may be disappointed in me for not taking your side, but bear with me. Because I believe I have some valuable things to say to both sides of this issue.

Any perusal of internet blogs and forums, especially in the "comments" section, will show you how emotionally heated this discussion gets.

Those who are dead set against spanking regularly accuse parents who use the traditional method of spanking to correct their children of being "child abusers." (Could it be that the word "abuse" is one of the most abused words in the English language?) Likewise, those who are committed to the traditional tactic of spanking will often accuse non-spankers of being naïve.

My job in this guide isn't to take one of these sides over another and talk you into joining my side. My overarching goal here is for you to commit to *some* method of correction and be diligent about it, fully aware of its importance.

Let me say right up front, discipline and correction (in any form) are among the most unpleasant tasks a parent has to perform (worse than diapers). Whether you believe in spanking (S) or not spanking (NS), when you correct your child, you are doing painful but necessary work.



(Remember, we're talking about a behavioral "dislocation." And regardless of the method, there's pain involved for both parent and child when you decide to re-set it.)

TO SPANKERS

First, allow me to address the "spankers" (S) who say that anyone who rejects spanking as a disciplinary method is naïve at best. As you know, the culture in which we live has swung far in the direction of NS. It is nearly impossible to find an article in support of this traditional method of correction. Indeed, the open teaching of any physical discipline or S as a solution has largely been abandoned.

So why does that matter? It matters because when the cultural river is flowing strongly, it is very difficult to fight the current and swim upstream. It takes far more effort and determination to go against the flow of such a vocal element of society. Such resistance and disapproval is a strong and understandable deterrent.

I mentioned the heated discussions in the comments of any article or post that deals with the question of discipline. If new (undecided) parents read any of these discussions, it is inevitable that they sense the fervent emotions from NS proponents. Therefore, it is obviously difficult to *consider* a choice that might open one up to the accusation of child abuse.

So...to the committed S who looks down upon the NS, I would say to keep in mind that you (S) are in the minority now. More people would likely vote against your chosen method of discipline than would vote for it. This doesn't prove that it's wrong or right; it's just a fact to keep in mind.

To the S, I would also remind you of what you already know: that it really does "hurt me (the parent) more that it hurts you (the child)." The fact that a parent may feel spanking is necessary doesn't relieve that pain of soul. So when the NS shrinks back and is horrified at the thought of facing that pain (and causing pain, as a spanking most certainly does), it should be something you can at least humbly understand.

TO NON-SPANKERS

You *also* have a great opportunity for exercising patience and a level head when addressing S.

If you are dead set against all physical discipline (spanking), you must realize that up until about a generation ago, *you* would have been in the extreme minority. If you loudly judge all spanking to be “abuse,” you *must* logically conclude that *every generation in history* up until your own was comprised almost entirely of abusers and their abused children. (Dr. Benjamin Spock’s book *Baby and Child Care* was released in 1946, and it started an entirely new and novel trend: not spanking children.)

If you conclude that *every generation* up until your own was abusive, that would mean that your generation *is the only sane generation* in all of history, having abandoned a near universal practice of discipline by spanking.

Because your view is presently the majority view, it will be easy to quickly dismiss the possibility that a contrary view could have any validity. It is a mark of maturity to be able to at least look at all sides of a disagreement. And in this case, peace with your neighbors and the wisdom of your ancestors is at stake.

One of the most convincing arguments in Dr. Spock’s book has been the idea that “violence begets violence.” The argument goes like this: If you spank your child, that child can’t help but become violent himself as a result of being spanked.

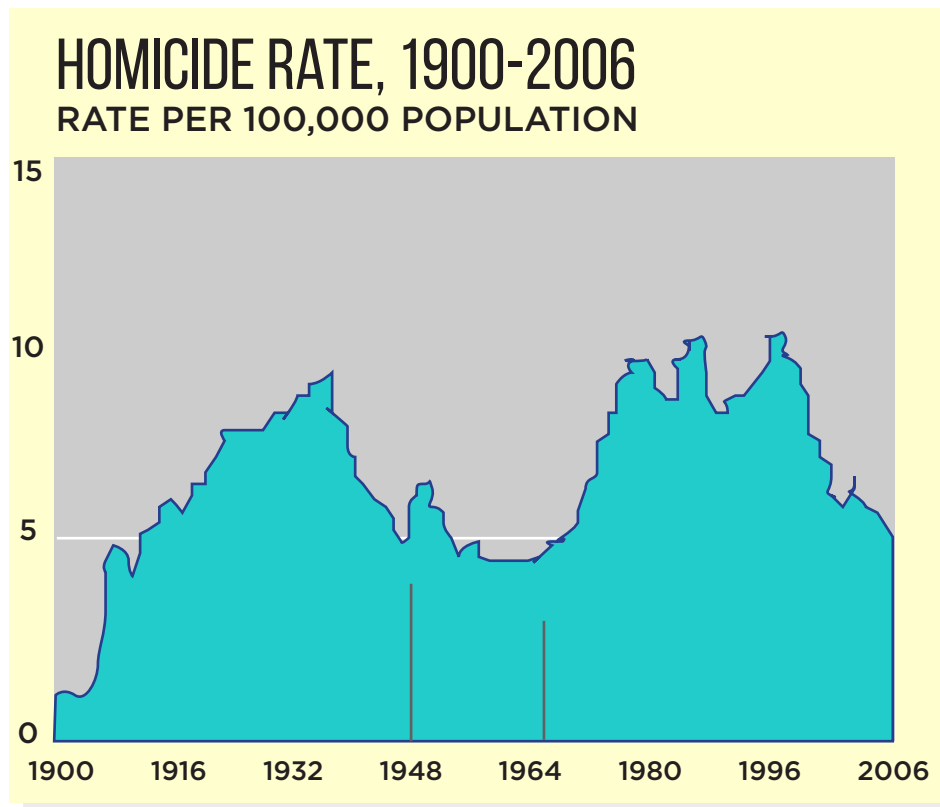
This seems logical. Who can argue? First, spanking must certainly *feel* like “violence.” In fact, from what I’ve seen, outspoken *NS* proponents don’t use the word “spanking.” *NS* prefer the word “hit” or “beat,” (maybe because they sound more violent). Spanking has traditionally meant swatting a child on the behind with a switch (small flexible stick) to inflict a stinging pain for the purpose of correction or punishment. While “hitting” or “beating” usually conjures up visions of punching or pummeling with the fists (things only an abuser would do). We all recognize the difference between these words.

Dr. Spock's book became a runaway bestseller (second only to the Bible), for its first 52 years of publication. Its influence was felt immediately, and its arguments have been ingrained in American culture since 1946.

I'd like to take a look at one result in particular. Consider this: If Spock's declaration is true, that spanking a child produces a violent adult, wouldn't our culture have been overrun with violence before Spock's book was ever released?

Further, should we not have been able to observe some sort of downward trend to that violence as his book's influence grew? Beginning about the time the first Spock-era kids approached their adult years, surely we should have seen the violence in our culture begin to diminish.

So when we look at statistics on violent crime or the murder rate, what do we find? Here is a chart of homicide rates in America from the year 1900 to 2006.



Notice the trend leading up to 1946 when Spock's book came out. Then look at the years between the years 1946 and 1964. (This would have been while the first children of Spock's ideas were growing up until age 18). Overall, things are looking good during those years (leading up to 1964). However, about the time the children of Spock's new ideas start entering adulthood, a new trend begins to take shape... and quickly.

From 1964 to 1974, the homicide rate skyrockets to almost *double*.

Of course we can't blame this trend on one book or even on the drastic change in spanking habits of that generation. The reasons for the change in violence are very likely many, but if spanking causes children to grow into violent people, then when that first generation started following Spock's advice, we should at least have seen *some* downward trend, even if small.

Am I arguing for S? No, I'm asking for humility from both S and NS and calling for *teachability* from both sides. What I believe to be most important is that once you decide *how* you will discipline and correct your children, you should be diligent, while understanding *what* you are doing and *why*. Especially why.

ON THE SAME PAGE—SOME DEFINITIONS

Let's talk about what we mean when we use certain terms (like "correction," etc.). This will help us keep misunderstandings to a minimum.

Correction—When I use this word, I mean to "put your child back on track," like a course correction in a plane or car. It involves stopping the child from going the wrong way and redirecting her to a better way. This usually requires both words and actions.

Discipline—The dictionary definition of this word is "training people to obey rules or a code of behavior, using punishment to correct disobedience." I would say, however, that discipline as we describe it here should have a broader aim than simply making someone "obey rules."



It has more to do with establishing *order* (as opposed to dis-order) in one's behavior *and thinking*. This means that any training of this type must take into account *all* parts of a person (their mind, will, emotions, desires, and “code of conduct”). Therefore, “*self-discipline*” should be understood as having trained yourself to behave according to your code of conduct, *regardless of your emotions or desire for immediate gratification*. Discipline is a process, thus the part of the dictionary definition that refers to “punishment.” Any punishment involved is designed to establish a man-made *cost* to disordered behavior.

Punishment—The dictionary says this word means “to make someone suffer for bad behavior.” I think “suffer” in this context can refer to any sort of pain (emotional or physical). This word was part of the definition of “discipline” because it is aimed toward a definite purpose. In parenting, it is not for the purpose of “getting even.” It is certainly not meant to make the *punisher* feel better. It is for re-alignment with the desired standard by attaching a *cost* to deviating from this standard—otherwise known as misbehavior. This can be any cost (pain, loss of some desirable privilege, etc.), but the cost should logically fit the “crime.” Our American sense of justice knows that having your hand chopped off for stealing a loaf of bread isn't a fitting punishment.

Training—Even though the definition of “discipline” starts with the word “training,” this word goes further than that. When I use it, I am referring to any activity that helps internalize good, responsible behavior, thinking, or attitudes. It can be accomplished at any time, not just when a child has misbehaved. It also implies a *repetitive* process that works toward a defined goal.

CORRECTING A CHILD

I live on the gulf coast and grow citrus trees in my yard. If you allow young branches to grow crossways so that they rub other branches, both branches will eventually rub through their bark and become weak or diseased. When they are really young and tender, you can “redirect” them sometimes by bending them off of the other branch. But if you wait until they get older, they become impossible to train. At that point, the only correction is to prune them off the tree.

You're not going to prune your own children, of course. But while they are young, if you are wise, you will accept the fact that they need correcting (and it will sometimes feel like you are "bending" them). Just know that the earlier you start, the easier it is on you and them.

Think of correction like those "micro" corrections you make as you drive down the road. Correction happens just as *life* happens in your household. Any lesson you can stop and explain when your child is off course (misbehavior or simple foolishness as opposed to direct disobedience), is time well spent.

I have a friend who has seven children. He talks about discovering a simple little trick only when he got to his *last child* that illustrates this "earlier the better" principle. He used to sit his youngest child on his lap in church when the child was just under a year old. In case you don't know, that's a very "talkative" age. They're discovering they can make noises that sound like words and they love to hear themselves.

My friend discovered that when his young son made a noise, he could just lightly tap his son's lips with his index finger and whisper "shhh" so only his son could hear it. It didn't cause any pain, but it was just enough discomfort to quiet the boy. When his other children were that age, he had to take them out of the building several times in an hour because of their noise. But with this very slight correction of this very young child, he found that he hardly ever had to take his son out to quiet him down. Within just a few weeks, he never had to do it again. His son would sit quietly for over an hour.

It was a combination of *correction* ("no, that's not what we do here...we remain quiet instead")...and *training* (repeating the lesson until the boy learned that this particular setting was not for talking).

CORRECTING OLDER CHILDREN

The "finger on the lips technique" sounds like it would work with a young child, but that is a very short window of opportunity. Once you're dealing with children above the age of five, your experience of correction will depend largely upon how you handled earlier years.



If they don't listen respectfully and obey your words by age five, then you'll be correcting them differently than you would if they already have those basic skills.

Most of the time, the need for correction will come from childhood foolishness (things they don't know). You will need to get their full attention, walk them through the foolish behavior, and point out what would have been correct. This works well as long as a rebellious attitude has not been allowed to manifest itself in their earlier years.

If your child is displaying an openly rebellious attitude, correction will be very different. (By definition, your child is indicating that he is not interested in your correction or guidance.) That's where "punishment" enters the picture. (See below.)

TRAINING A CHILD

The "No" Strategy

Another friend used a similar strategy with her very young children. She wanted to teach them what the word "no" meant very early (so if they were approaching danger, they would be trained to respond to just a single word and to immediately stop). She sat at a table with her nine-month-old on her lap. There was an object on the table right in front of the child. As expected, the child reached to grab the object.

My friend would quietly say "no" and then gently thump the back of the child's reaching hand. It wasn't painful, but it was uncomfortable for the child and broke the child's concentration, causing him to withdraw the hand. Soon, of course, he tried again. And again my friend would repeat the "correction lesson," quietly saying "no" then thumping the back of his hand. She said that it didn't take but a few times until the child would hear the word no and withdraw his hand before getting the thump. According to her, it took several of these sessions (but only a few) until the child had learned that "no" meant to stop right away.

Imagine the comfort of knowing that your child will respond quickly and appropriately to “no” when you say it! But it doesn’t just make parenting easier. It’s an example of correction *and* training. It builds into the very youngest mind some of the most valuable lessons...lessons that eventually become a permanent part of that child’s habits. Lessons like “mama’s words are important,” and “there are limits I shouldn’t cross,” and “I don’t always get my way, yet life continues,” and maybe most importantly, “I can decide not to proceed into trouble even if that trouble looks enticing.”

Do you know any adults or teens you wish had built those lessons into their lives earlier? I certainly do.

H. Clay Trumbull wrote a book in 1890 called *Hints on Child Training*. He said, “A man who was not trained in childhood to self-control is hopelessly a child in his combat with himself; and he can never regain the vantage-ground...”The key point is that this way of thinking is *preemptive* and *proactive*. It gets you ahead of the curve so that you give your child advantages that accrue their whole life long. Self-control when you’re 10 months old is a very easy, almost painless lesson. Self-control when you’re 35, addicted to nicotine, and 25 pounds overweight is one of the toughest pursuits known to man. Gentle **correction** and **training** at the very youngest of ages will save mountains of grievous effort later and will pay huge dividends in the life of your child.

The “Come Here” Strategy

This is another exercise that seems to have given a lot of parents great comfort and peace. It’s similar to the “No” strategy in that it uses a simple, repetitive lesson to further teach your young children to respond to your words alone. It’s easy to do and your children will even find it fun if you do it when they are young enough. Ages two and three are not too young for this strategy.

You sit your child down and explain that “we are going to do some training now.” You tell them that we’re going to try something fun. You take them into the next room and say, “Now you stand here and I’m going to go into the next room.

Listen for my voice. I'll say your name and *right when you hear your name*, you shout out "yes sir," and then run to where I am and stand in front of me."

You go try it a few times and make sure to celebrate the child's successes. Then explain that you are going to go further away, so you may not be as easy to hear, but it's the child's job to still be listening so he can do his part and come find you. Go a couple of rooms away and try again. Later, go even further.

Your children will find it fun and learn a couple of valuable lessons that will really stick. They will learn to address parents with "sir" or "ma'am," but more importantly, they learn to *tune their ear* to hear their parents' call. This will save them (and you) from many frustrating situations as they grow older.

TRAINING OLDER CHILDREN

Starting at about age five, you'll begin to introduce your children to the concept of responsibilities that go along with growing older. You'll be having them do just about anything their little hands can handle in the way of labor, just to give them the important connection between a job well done and their real self-esteem. Real self-esteem is based upon character and good behavior. Convincing children they are great simply because they exist isn't real at all. It's puffery.

When your child is trained to do chores, it's not just to make your life easier. It is supremely valuable to the child. This is where a work ethic is established (or not). Generally speaking, the easy way to build a good work ethic in a person is to do it during childhood. It is said that a work ethic is built early, or not built at all. This is not totally true, of course. There are multiple examples of those who developed a work ethic as adults. Most of them, however, will admit that it was not a pleasant experience.

Here's the good news—if you start as early as possible, your children will likely welcome and even get excited when you train them to do "grown up" activities, like picking up their toys, or folding laundry with mom, or even sweeping the kitchen floor. Of course, when you're training them, work alongside them at the beginning.

DISCIPLINE AND PUNISHMENT

I don't even like the sound of the word "punishment"...but here it is...It shows up here because it is part of the dictionary definition of "discipline," remember?

Hopefully you can see that *correction* and *training* are the FIRST LINE OF ACTION toward building character, self-control, and good habits in your child. And the earlier the better.

But when a child directly disobeys or demonstrates a poor attitude (whining, sulking, or speaking disrespectfully, etc.), then you will have to discipline the child. Of course, *how* you discipline is where the S and NS differ the most.

As I've stated, I won't be weighing in on whether or not to choose one or the other, but there are principles that would apply to either one.

First of all, discipline is, by definition, unpleasant. You will be exacting a cost on your child that identifies the undesirable nature of their actions. When they are acting in an unacceptable manner, in that moment, they are often too unaware to care.

By the way, this goes for adults also. Just recall how you felt the moment *before* the blue lights started flashing in your rear view mirror. All was well with the world. You were speeding, but you didn't really *care* that you were speeding. Once the policeman started up his flashing lights, your previous state was totally broken and you were brought to the verge of caring about the speeding. Once you found out he wasn't going to "let you off with a warning," it really started to *matter* to you that you were speeding.

Likewise, with children, it will have to cost them something (which will cause them to *care* about their previous bad behavior). That cost, whatever form it takes, gets pointed out to the child (verbally) and identified as a direct consequence of their bad behavior. It is not fun (and shouldn't be) for either parent *or* child. It is serious business with a serious aim—stopping your child from treating a behavior as acceptable, as well as preparing his mind for correction (instruction on what *is* acceptable). You are saving that child from the tragedy of an undisciplined life.

Another principle to remember is that you *must* discipline a child who needs it *before* you get angry! Your anger (which demonstrates your *own* lack of self-control) will only add confusion and anger to the heart of a child. When it's time to discipline, don't wait until you feel adequately provoked. Say, in an even tone, "You know that was unacceptable, so now I'm going to have to (name the appropriate consequence)."

This is a very real problem in many young parents, especially when they put off confronting a bad behavior because it's just no fun to confront. At first blush, this seems like an act of patience on the part of the parent. But it is not. That same "patient" parent will eventually get enough of the bad behavior, and then explode in anger at the child.

Each time that happens, the child is further trained to wait for the fuse to get low before obeying his parent. That same child also learns to dread that terrible outburst from a parent who is out of control. And this is the wrong thing to dread!

The last principle I want to point out is that once you've disciplined a child, you should restore that child to your good favor. There is no place for holding something over a child after he has gone through the punishment for it. There is no place for berating the child over and over, bringing up old offenses to remind the child "how bad they are." It may work (in a manipulative way) in the short run, but it clouds the child's judgment and eventually kills his spirit.

(This isn't to say that you must *trust* the child who has "paid for his crime" if that child has broken your trust. Trust must be built back by trustworthy actions. Hug the child and reassure her that you love her after any form of punishment.)

DISCIPLINING YOUNG CHILDREN

Children from one to five years old can be taught much through early discipline. If a child throws tantrums, whines, or acts in any way you know is unacceptable, it is perfectly fine to tell the child, "We do not act like that."

He will pick up your meaning in no time at all. When you take even a very young child out of the playpen because he is throwing a fit and you say, “No Johnny, we do not act that way,” then put him in his bed for some alone time, he will almost instantly figure out exactly what’s going on.

It is critical for the future of your child that you effectively teach that “no matter how you feel like acting, you can choose how you act.”

The younger you discipline children (down to even less than a year old), the more immediate that discipline needs to be. Don’t let time pass until you administer the discipline. They must connect their bad behavior easily with the “cost” of that bad behavior. As they grow older, you will be able to point out a result of an earlier bad behavior and they will understand that the punishment is connected to the “crime” (for instance, your three-year-old marks up the wall with crayons for a second or third time after being warned and you find the evidence sometime after it occurs).

So let’s talk about why you would a) command, then discipline/punish a child for disobedience, rather than b) just take the child in your arms and force or manipulate the correct action.

Many parenting “experts” suggest that when a child is determined to go his own way, you should distract him with some other positive desire. Here’s an example: Your two-year-old is grabbing a toy from another child. Instead of commanding and teaching your child to refrain from stealing the toy, you would grab another toy and try to interest her in that toy instead.

Why is that a bad idea? It certainly seems easier than option “a.” Here’s why it’s a bad idea. You are failing to train your child’s will (her ability to decide between an action with a good consequence and one with a bad consequence). It is that power to choose that actually gives a child her personality or what you might call her “personal power.” Without a good strong “chooser” which has been trained to sort out good choices from bad, the child is not fit for grown-up life.

Distracting a child doesn't give him an understanding of wisely choosing between good and bad behaviors. It only helps him choose between different ways to please himself. Remember, the main reason we discipline is not simply to arrive at acceptable behavior in the child. It is to arrive at good behavioral choices in the adult he will become.

DISCIPLINING OLDER CHILDREN

Once a child reaches age five, discipline will hopefully be less frequent if you've been diligent with it during the younger ages. But even then, you will still need to apply it from time to time.

In any case, your aim with discipline is to attach a cost to unacceptable behavior. This trains the child to “do the math” and make wise choices after suffering the consequences of unwise choices. You should make the unwise choice cost as little as possible, yet still be costly enough to make the child *care* about the action and consequences. Another advantage as children get older is the ability to explain using words, so that they understand the consequences of certain behavior.

If you cannot bring yourself to do this while the child has the safety net provided by your household, he will eventually leave that safety net and the consequences of unwise decisions will skyrocket in adulthood.

Once a child approaches 13, discipline should be very rare. You are moving into a new phase where discipline is starting to be provided by “life.” You are becoming less a *commander* and more an *advisor*. You must keep in mind that this is what you were aiming at all along: a child who makes decisions and lives with them. By age 13, the child has seen life hand her some consequences already. She has seen grades go up and down as a direct result of her time spent studying (or lack thereof).

She has seen other children honor or dishonor her as a result of her selfishness or unselfishness. She has experienced “costs” of bad behavior that aren't connected with her parents' direct involvement. Of course, she will always remember that if she does something foolish enough, *you* are still in charge of most of her circumstances.

When a kid is used to freedom of movement and the host of privileges that go with being your child, he can be disciplined when necessary simply by the restriction of those freedoms and privileges.

As I said, these episodes should become rarer as they grow older. But your teenagers will test the fences every once in a while. Your job is to make sure they find those fences still in place and well maintained.

CONCLUSION

Training, Correction, and Discipline are all necessary, no matter how much trouble and grief they seem to be in the short run. The earlier you establish order and discipline in the lives of your children, the easier it will be on everyone and the longer lasting the rewards will be *for* everyone. Remember, you are not trying to raise a great kid...you want to raise a kid who becomes a great adult. And this is a large part of how you will do just that!

