

Reflections on Parenting a Difficult Child



by JULIE LOWE

Do you have a child you find hard to parent? If so, have you wondered if the problem is your parenting? Have you struggled to stay positive and faithful with your child in the midst of the day-to-day battles? I have grappled with both. Here are a few brief reflections that have helped me stay oriented to God as I parent.

First, I will begin with the question: Is it me? Is my parenting the problem?

Some of the most burdensome moments for a parent are when it is clear to those around you that your child is defiant or difficult. When family problems are out in public, you become more self-conscious. *What does this say about me as a parent? Am I doing something wrong? And now that other people know, what are they thinking?* Maybe they assume your child's behavior is a result of inadequate parenting or something else amiss in your home. Some may even be bold enough to share their views, without any sense of the shame they are heaping upon you. You feel marked, and even judged, by your child's personal struggles. You hang your head around people who "know" about the problem. You assume they see you as a failure and wonder if they are right. If you were a good parent, surely your children would be well-behaved, love God, and have good manners. After all, *their children* are not insubordinate.

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If you feel defeated by your child's behavior, then you (and your critics!) have bought into the belief that good parents produce good children and bad parents produce bad children. This might seem downright biblical. If you raise a child in the way he should go, he won't depart from it, right? So it follows that if you were godly enough, wise enough, and patient enough, then your child would not be so rebellious. It seems that the right formula is:

Love + Discipline + Godly Instruction = Good Kids

And because, at times, this formula *does* seem to work, you determine the problem must be in your parenting.

I've heard many parents say, "We've exhausted all options, all approaches, all forms of consequences...and nothing worked. I tried being calm. I tried consistent discipline. I tried appealing to my child's conscience and praying with and for my child. Nothing helped. Nothing changed." What these parents mean is that their efforts did not produce the desired behavior or a visible change of heart in their children. The assumption is that, once again, the formula was applied, and it proved useless.

But this is a faulty, unbiblical approach. Good kids can come out of horrific family backgrounds, and rebellious, willful kids can come out of loving, Christian homes. Children do not come to us as blank slates. They come with their own personalities, strengths, weaknesses, desires, and temptations toward particular sin. Of course, the way you parent is a significant factor. But to assume that good parenting will produce well-behaved children incorrectly places all the responsibility for what happens and blame for your child's behavior on you.

Children are born with hearts that are wooed by their own desires and fears. They exercise volition to choose for themselves the type of person they will become. There is an active moral responder on the other end of your parenting—one who chooses whom he or she will serve. And there is no way a parent can ensure the outcome. The burden of thinking that you can might tempt you to give up or resort to poor or ungodly parenting (e.g., anger, yelling, harshness, despair, backing down, or backing away completely) because it might appear to work in the short run.

What then are you to do? Here are two recommendations.

1. *Evaluate your motivation.* Though you are not responsible for your

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The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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