

## Aim of lesson

To encourage the young people to think about the importance of bringing up children in a Christian home.

## Bible background

Proverbs 22:6

## Preparation required

Think through the lesson in relation to the young people in your group. If they are already committed to following Jesus themselves, you will be able to emphasize the importance of wanting their own children to worship God as well. If they are still a little uncertain you can still assume they would wish their families to grow into well adjusted individuals and good citizens and we trust they will see that a Christian upbringing is the best they could get. You may also need to think whether the references to their own parents may cause any awkwardness. You may need to emphasize that parenting is a difficult job and no human parent gets it all right and that you are not condemning anyone. Also, they need to be able to trust you if they do want to say something they would rather wasn't published round the ecclesia.

## Suggested outline of lesson

God has given us the principle in our dealings with children in that he first called us his children. He created families so that we should know how he feels towards us. This gives us a perfect example but also shows us what a responsibility parenthood is. Parents are to reflect God and the example they give should teach children what God is like. If your children don't obey you, how can they learn to obey God? If they can't trust you, how can they learn to trust God? If they can't talk to you or ask you for something, how can they learn to pray?

This may be the time to say that God knows we are frail and as parents we can only do our best and ask him to supply where we fail. It is important to God that we take the job of parenting seriously (1 Samuel 3:11-14) but that having done our best we do sometimes have to accept that things do not always work out the way we would like them. In 1 Samuel 8:1-3, Samuel does not seem to be condemned for his children's behaviour.

## Bringing up

Get the young people to think what this expression means.

To 'bring' is an active thing to do; if you bring a book to school, then firstly it is you that is in charge; secondly you have to make the journey yourself. It's no good telling the book to go to school then going back to bed. In the same way, bringing up a child is an active thing, with the parents in charge - and they have to make the journey with their children, not expect them to travel on their own. Think of God in the wilderness, guiding the children of Israel.

Secondly it is to bring 'up'. It is not that children start off good and have to be left on their own. They have to be lifted up from, and out of, normal human behaviour, and brought to a higher way of life.

### **What sort of parent is God?**

Ask the young people to answer the first question in the students' book. They may suggest God is patient, loving, consistent, trustworthy, forgiving, authoritative, compassionate, wanting their good, prepared to make sacrifices. Importantly, God is willing to deny his children what they would sometimes like (Deuteronomy 8:3): they don't always have to have the latest toy or football shirt. The list is endless. Just make sure they have understood the principle and have covered the main aspects.

Ask the class whether they would expect a 'good' human parent to exhibit these qualities. This may be a good time to look at the passage entitled 'Children learn what they live'.

### **What qualities would you like your children to develop?**

Having thought about the basic qualities of a good parent, ask the class to answer the second question. They will probably say things like: honesty, respect for authority, love for God, love for others, trustworthiness, hard working. These are all good values. Ask them whether they would want their children to be clever, successful, influential, better than other children. The answer to these may be 'yes', so discuss the value of these things, the dangers that may accompany them and the importance of putting godly values first.

### **Does the Bible say the same?**

Now ask the class to look up what the Bible says about parenting. There are not many specific instructions but it is clear that parental control is a constant feature. It is important to understand this in times when the world encourages children to 'do their own thing' and family life is deteriorating. If parents want their children to grow up with godly values it is they who must be in control - not teachers, not child minders, and certainly not the television.

### **Discipline**

Ask the young people what they think discipline is. Commonly it is simply thought of as punishment, in particular corporal punishment. In fact, the word has the same

English root as 'disciple', and it includes everything involved in teaching a child. First, and most important, it must include positive teaching.

Ask the young people how they would teach a dog to sit. It would involve:

- Teaching the dog by saying 'sit' whenever you wanted it to do so.
- Demonstrating what the word meant, perhaps by pushing its back end down.
- Praising the dog, at every opportunity, whenever it obeyed.

Only when all this had been done many times, and you knew that the dog understood perfectly well, would you think of punishing it for not sitting. It would never occur to anyone in their right mind to begin with punishment. Yet that is often the approach adopted by parents with their children.

So what are the elements of discipline?

### **Teaching**

In Psalm 94:12 the word 'chastening' (in the AV, 'discipline' in the NIV) is parallel to teaching. There is no substitute for quietly and calmly explaining to a child how he or she should behave, in the same way as the Lord God does for us in his word.

### **Praise**

Leviticus 26:3-13 is just one example of how God blesses his people if they obey him. This was not God saying 'if you scratch my back I'll scratch yours'; it was intended to reinforce his teaching by showing the people that he was pleased with them when they obeyed him.

### **Correction**

Even though it is commonly used to imply punishment, the word correction simply means 'to make correct'. Proverbs 12:1 in the AV speaks of 'instruction' and 'reproof', the NIV has 'discipline' and 'correction'. It means explaining to a child why what they have done is wrong, and teaching them what would have been the right way to behave.

### **Punishment**

Punishment has its place in God's dealing with his people, and in a parent's bringing up of a child (Hebrews 12:8), but there are some things that punishment is not.

- It is not taking it out of a child because you are embarrassed at how he has behaved.
- It is not losing your temper.
- It is not getting your own back because he has broken your best vase.

The purpose of punishment is to make a child sorry that he has done something he already knew to be wrong. It may take several forms, and you should discuss them with the young people. A good parent will choose something appropriate to the child, to the wrong committed, and to the situation.

The punishment should hurt, and you should discuss with the young people the merits of smacking. On the one hand, appropriately administered, a smack can be an effective way of chastising a child; it is a quick punishment, and the pain is soon forgotten, though the lesson should be remembered. On the other hand, the line between a loving smack and an angry assault is not always clear, and in practice a smack should be regarded as a last resort. Being made to go without a treat, or some other form of punishment (contributing to the cost of a new vase!), is normally preferable.

The important ingredients of punishment are that

- The child should know why he is being punished, and it should come as no surprise.
- He should realise that he is being punished because he did wrong, not because you love him any less.
- It should lead him to be sorry for what he did and to decide not to do it again.

The use of the word 'he' above is not meant to imply that only boys break vases, or that girls should necessarily be treated differently; on the other hand, girls may sometimes be more susceptible to a stern word than boys, though this is not always true.

## **Practical Questions**

Having established the principles it is worth thinking about how to put them into practice. The questions in the students' notes pose some practical problems. Sometimes the answers are obvious but worth thinking about because they are frequent pitfalls. Others may not have right and wrong answers but can teach us how important the principles are as a starting point in deciding what to do. It may also show that there are different ways of handling things and parents will differ depending on the child and their own strengths. You may prefer to substitute some questions of your own and it would also be a shame to curtail any useful discussion just to get through the set questions.

Some thoughts on these questions.

1. All good habits are started as early as possible. Example is very important. Get into the habit of doing the readings together and praying together as a matter of course before you have children.
2. Example again - show that you respect God. Don't moan about the meetings. Show that you enjoy the company of people that believe the same as you and give your children every opportunity to do the same.

3. It is the example of what you want him to do. He will soon find out that you are fallible anyway.
4. He will not come to you with his problems and will not have time for you when you need him.
5. He will learn to be self-centred and unable to make his own decisions.
6. Should you expect a child to know that you didn't want him to do something, without being told? Is it fair to punish him for clumsiness, or for being too young to cope with something? It may be difficult to decide whether forgetfulness or being uncaring counts as disobedience.
7. You must respect honesty. If he realises his fault there is no point in punishment. He should be encouraged to put things right.
8. Suggestions:
  - Agree together the boundaries beforehand;
  - When challenged, don't waver. If the boundaries are right you can be confident. A child soon learns when he can get round you;
  - Distinguish between wilful defiance and childish irresponsibility;
  - If you say you will punish, punish;
  - Reassure and teach after the confrontation;
  - Avoid impossible demands;
  - Let love be your guide.
9. The Bible does not think it is wrong. However there are other sanctions and children are very different. It is important to distinguish between smacking and hitting.
10. A child should be encouraged to make his own decisions as he becomes old enough but only then. He should learn that he can trust your advice and take the consequences of his actions.
11. Children should be able to tell you what they think about things and know that you respect their wishes, but it is foolish to let children have all their own way.
12. Be careful of arguments like 'He's got to decide for himself what the world is like'. It is usually a substitute for being strong or planning something else for him to do. The best way is to teach the child to choose for themselves what is right; you will not always be around.
13. It would depend on the situation. It is important that children respect their teachers and work conscientiously at school, but their faith is even more important; so, potentially, yes.
14. Enough to decide whether you have the same ideals.

## **Relevance to our lives**

It really is important that children should be brought up in a good family environment in the love and fear of God especially in a time of family decline. Our young people should have a chance to think through the issues before being landed with a situation they can't handle.

It should however be said that bringing up children is a great joy (although it has its moments) so we should not be gloomy - just realistic.

## **Prayer**

Thank you, Lord God, for being a perfect father. Help us truly to appreciate the way you care for us and accept your discipline. Help us also to understand what it means to be a parent so that if the time comes for us we may realise the importance of the task and also experience the real joys of being a mother or father.

## **Other suggestions for activities**

Suggest that during the coming week the class listen for parent/child confrontations in the supermarket, bus etc., and discuss together who was in charge, how the situation could have been handled better, what might be the result of such decisions, why the parent responded the way they did, etc. Encourage them to record good confrontations as well as bad especially if the families are ones they know.