

5 Dangers to Avoid in Parenting

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“Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.”(Colossians 3:21)

It is tempting to blame children for our family problems. But Scripture does not allow us to do this. Children bear the responsibility to obey their parents. But God commands parents to raise their children with godly nurture, being careful not to frustrate them. Inestimable damage is done by parents who provoke their children, and cause them to become discouraged.

While specifically addressing fathers in Colossians 3:21, God is speaking to both parents. The word translated, “fathers” is elsewhere used to mean “parents” (Heb. 11:23). Additionally, fathers are spoken to as covenant heads of the families. Fathers are to see that neither parent provokes the children. Fathers cannot stand idly by if their children are being provoked by their mothers.

What Does it Mean to Provoke?

The word used in Colossians 3:21 means to agitate, often to anger. Matthew Henry explains that parents provoke their children by treating them with rigor and severity, by holding the reins too tightly and thereby raising their passions, discouraging them in their duty.

Years ago I was invited to participate in a long and strenuous horse ride. Due to fear and inexperience I held the reins so tightly that the bit began to agitate the horse's mouth. Before long the horse grew restless and threatened to throw me. I was provoking him to anger by holding the reins too tightly. He was willing to be directed. But I was undermining his willingness by my heavy hand.

In Ephesians 6:4 Paul contrasts two approaches to parenting. On the one hand parents can provoke their children to wrath. On the other, parents can bring up the children in the training and admonition of the Lord. Failing to patiently, and constructively train our children in the things of God, we often substitute more fleshly methods of parenting which provoke our children's anger.

What Is Discouragement?

The word literally means to lose energy or passion. Discouraged children lose hope, stop trying, and give up. When children say, "I don't care" or "It doesn't matter," they are often conveying discouragement. It is tempting to dismiss a dispirited child's behavior as being teenager-ish or childish. But parents must resist assuming that their child's indifference is normal. In fact, there are hosts of young people who are passionate about life and enthusiastic in godliness. But sometimes this passion is squelched by parental provocation.

5 Dangers to Avoid

1. Mishandling the Rod of Discipline

Surely the Rod can be used too little. “He who spares his rod hates his child...” (Prov. 13:24). Children need to be taught that sin hurts. If they don’t, they may lose interest in pursuing godliness because they don’t see the danger of sin.

But the rod can also be used too much. The Apocrypha says: “He who loves his son will whip him often... bow down his neck in his youth, and beat his sides while he is young” (Ecclus. 30:1,12). This is not Christian discipline. Sometimes a wise rebuke is better than the rod (Prov. 17:10). This is particularly so as a child moves past the early years of childhood. Matthew Henry urges parents to exercise authority not “with rigor and severity, but with kindness and gentleness.” If your children can forget that you love them, either during or immediately following discipline, you might be doing it wrong.

2. Maintaining a Disorderly Home

God is a God of order (1 Cor. 14:33). He has created us in his image to promote order and thrive in the context of order. A disorderly home can discourage children. A perpetually messy, or especially an unsanitary home can help produce poorly adjusted children. A lack of regularly scheduled meal times and bed times can frustrate children’s God-given desire for order.

3. Holding Inappropriate Expectations

Some parents expect almost nothing from their kids. In such settings, children can lose energy or passion because they are never helped to “reach forward to those things which are ahead” (Phil 3:13). In other

homes too much is expected. Experience teaches that unreasonable expectations are the ideal breeding ground for discouragement. If your children regularly fail to measure up to your standards, you might be expecting too much.

4. Building a Joyless Home

In some homes children are not treated with the dignity that God requires. Some parents rarely congratulate or encourage their children, focusing instead, on their faults. Parents must never forget that their children are people created in God's image. Children of believers are even included in God's covenant (1 Cor. 7:14).

5. Failing to Speak as "One Flesh"

Too often, dad and mom are not operating by the same rules when it comes to interacting with their kids. One parent might be more lenient. The other might be more demanding. But such "accidental doublespeak" is dangerously confusing to our children. In irreconcilable disagreements the wife must graciously acquiesce to her husband's leadership (Col. 3:18).

There are many more potential causes for childhood discouragement. Like good physicians, parents should evaluate the spiritual health of their children and, where applicable, diagnose the source of their children's discouragement. Sometimes the answer will be found by looking in the mirror.