

Shaping The Will

Ryan Goodwin

“Our objective... is not simply to shape the will, but to do so without breaking the spirit. The will is malleable. It can and should be molded and polished – not to make a robot of a child for our selfish purposes, but to give him the ability to control his own impulses and exercise self-discipline later in life. On the other hand the spirit of a child is a million times more vulnerable than his will. It is a delicate flower that can be crushed and broken all too easily. The spirit, as I have defined it, relates to the self-esteem or the personal worth that a child feels. It is the most fragile characteristic in human nature, being particularly vulnerable to rejection and ridicule and failure” (**The New Strong-Willed Child**, Dr. James Dobson). Similarly, God has directed parents to shape or direct the will of their children, even when a child’s will seems unyielding:

- *“Discipline your son while there is hope, and do not desire his death”* (**Proverbs 19:18**).
- *“He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently”* (**Proverbs 13:24**).
- *“Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him”* (**Proverbs 22:15**).
- *“Do not hold back discipline from the child, although you beat him with the rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with the rod and deliver his soul from Sheol”* (**Proverbs 23:13-14**).

The verses all illustrate similar thoughts when it comes to discipline:

- In no way should we under-prioritize rules, boundaries, and consequences. This is not a matter of personal taste or preference, but part of our work as God’s people;
- No matter how inconsistent life becomes, we should remain consistent as parents. Our kids are depending on this fact, even when they express their displeasure with the boundaries we set for them;
- The “will” is what needs to be shaped – actions will follow once we have won our children’s hearts to the side of what is right;
- Be afraid of the right things – rather than being afraid of making children unhappy, not being their buddy, or being unpopular with their peers, we should be afraid of the eternal consequences of an unrepentant lifestyle!

How to handle the fragile spirit

While discipline, correction, and rule enforcement are necessary, what should always be off limits is any accusation that assaults the worth of a child. Phrases like:

- “You have been a pain in the neck ever since you were born”
- “I never wanted you in the first place”
- “You are an embarrassment”
- “You are a burden”

We never want to send the message that our children are unloved or unnecessary. They should never be seen as an embarrassment or a mistake, for this cuts right to the very core of any human's sense of value. Our children may do dumb things, but they should never be made to feel inherently dumb. In the same way, we may all commit sins (**Romans 3:23**), but that does not mean we are inherently, or totally, sinful, since Christians are described as "holy and blameless" in **Ephesians 1:4**. Perhaps what we can say to our children when they make mistakes is, "That was a bad thing you did, but you are capable of far better."