

“DID YOU KNOW . . .”

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That discipline and punishment are two different things? Often, the words are used interchangeably, but in the world of child development, they mean different things.

Discipline is an intentional consequence, given by the parent or caretaker, for inappropriate action and designed to be a teaching moment for the child. It is not an emotional or angry reaction. For example if a two-year-old who insists on throwing food at the table has been warned that continuing to do so will result in the food being taken away, and the child throws the food anyway, taking the food away calmly is both a logical consequence and a disciplinary action. The intent is to teach the child that throwing food is not acceptable and that there are consequences to such behavior. If the child is very young, such as the age given in this example, the parent and child can have a “snack” an hour or so later. This will still teach the child the lesson and also ensure proper nutrition.

On the other hand, if the parent were to scream and hit the child for the same behavior, that is considered punishment. It was administered by a parent who was not in control of his or her emotions and it has very little ability to teach a child about appropriate behavior. It only teaches the child to expect pain if the child throws food.

Countless other actions by a child could be substituted in this scenario, but the important issue here is the attitude and intention of the corrective action. If correction is given while the caretaker is in an emotionally reactive state and lashing out in anger, that is not discipline that teaches the difference between right and wrong. Instead, it can teach a child that yelling and hitting are appropriate behaviors.

Of greater concern is the potential for abuse in such situations. A parent’s or caretaker’s acting out in anger can easily escalate to hitting with an intensity that causes welts, bruising or worse,

and that is reportable child abuse. Most importantly, while the physical pain will eventually heal, the emotional pain is much more difficult to overcome. If such punishment, or abuse, continues, the relationship between the parent and the child can be seriously damaged over time.

There is more than physical care involved. Since parents are the first teachers their children will know, it is parents who are the first ones to demonstrate the love of Christ to their children.

Unlike Jesus, however, parents are not always perfect, but they can commit to always keeping their children safe. Any parent of a baby with colic will likely agree that there are moments of extreme stress and frustration. Parents of toddlers who are testing their independence; parents of school children who want to do what their friends do, no matter how unsafe it is; and parents of defiant teenagers all know this stress too. During those times, parents need to stay in control of their tempers. If you feel like hitting your toddler, which every parent does at some point, you need to walk out of the room. If you feel like shaking a screaming baby, put the baby in the crib where there is safety and walk away until you calm down. The key is to remove yourself or the child before the situation becomes explosive.

Often parents who do abuse think that they are the only ones who get angry with their children, yet ALL parents get angry and want to react in anger. The primary difference between the parents who abuse and those who do not is the ability to remain in control.

Parents need to allow themselves a time out if needed. If there are young children involved, the only caveat is to ensure that the child is safe before walking away, which may mean placing the child in a play pen or some other place of safety while the parent has time to cool off.

There are ways to lessen pressure for any parent feeling stressed by child care. Help can come through utilizing daycare, even if just one or two days a week. Working with other parents whom you trust to form a group and share childcare, taking turns watching the children, is another. Some communities offer crisis nurseries, where parents who are in need of a break to prevent abuse can access free services within certain guidelines. In other areas, parents can identify adults whom they trust who can take the child if the parent feels as if he or she needs a break to

prevent possible abuse. Certainly there is no shame in reaching out for help. The problem lies with not asking for help and abusing instead.

Good parenting calls for planning and involves thinking about calm, rational, teaching responses to a child's inappropriate behavior and mentally rehearsing using that strategy the next time the child acts out. It also means asking what you can do the next time you feel yourself getting out of control. If you have a plan in advance, then the next time you need it, you will be much more likely to respond with a plan rather than with anger.