



Parent Pages



Resources for Christian Parents in the 21st Century

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Who is in Charge Here?

Even if babies came with an instruction manual, parents wouldn't have time or energy to read it. One of the challenging things about parenting is that the job is constantly changing. From time to time, it is important to evaluate your parenting style to see if it matches your child's development. One way to examine your style is to determine where accountability lies between parent and child. Who is in charge of evaluating behavior, predicting outcomes and making plans for change? In other words, do you practice top-down parenting or a bottom-up parenting?

Top-down parenting has expectations for child behavior and applies consequences. This style works on a system of rewards and punishments. It works well when children are young and is especially effective in simple situations. The benefit of this type of system is seen in that expectations and the responses are both clear and consistent. The downside to this system is that it doesn't encourage the development of thinking skills. As children grow older, they spend more time away from you, and you want them to make safe and moral decisions on their own. Now is the time to teach them how to think.

Bottom-up parenting also involves expectations for the child. Though usually relying on natural consequences, it is not opposed to the use of punishment or reward. In this type of parenting, children are involved in the evaluation process. This process takes more thought and time, but in the long run may reap more benefits for the child and the family.

Both parenting styles can be used appropriately. The key is to evaluate which is appropriate for a given situation and to understand the benefits of each.

Suppose you want to teach your child to remember a simple task, such as hanging up clothes. This is not a situation that requires a complicated process; you need simply to create a good habit. Here, a top-down parenting approach is highly effective. The rule is established: "At this house, clothing does not stay on the floor or furniture." Then the parent watches for the expectation to be met ("I am glad to see your coat on



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the hook. That will make it easier to find later.") or applies the consequence when the expectation is not met ("The television is off until clothes are put away.")

This technique is short and effective when applied consistently. In this parenting style, the responsibility rests primarily with the adult. The parent sets the expectation, evaluates when it has been met, and applies the appropriate response. This is top-down parenting at its best.

Not all parenting situations are this simple. A more complicated circumstance can require a different response. If your child has developed a habit of procrastinating on homework, the solution may not be a simple consequence. There may be a complicated set of reasons behind the behavior. If a simple solution is applied, but the behavior continues, making the punishment more dire or the reward more enticing may not affect the situation. Bottom-up parenting can help shed some light on the problem and achieve the desired goal.

This style of parenting is more effectively used with children as they grow older as they learn to evaluate their own behavior and predict the consequences. In bottom-up

parenting, it is still your job to set the expectations, but you try to involve the child in other steps of the process. You may start by discussing the natural consequence of the undesired behavior. For example, in the case of procrastinating on homework, discuss the note on the report card that explains the poor grade with the words “missing homework.” The expectation of the grade has not been met; now the child needs to work with you to trace things back and discover why. The next step is to work with your child to develop a plan for improved behavior. This strategy not only causes the child to think but also gives you a chance to discover the reasons behind the behavior.

It is tempting to step in and solve the problem for your child. Whenever you can work with your child and include him in the solution, you will be teaching your child how to evaluate his own behavior. This skill will be used in many other situations. When a child begins to understand the full consequences of behavior, not just how it affects her right now but how it affects her future, then she begins to learn abstract thinking.

Children feel safe and secure when they know their parents are in charge. No good parenting style would ask you to drop this responsibility. A good parent learns to adjust strategies to suit the child and the situation. As your child grows and becomes more independent, it is important to teach him how to evaluate a situation and make a good decision. This skill is learned when adults provide guided practice.

“For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk-in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:11–12).



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Our heavenly Father models good parenting when He charges us to walk with Him. Know that He is with you as you parent your children.

For further study: There is great food for thought on Jill Hasstedt’s blog: www.loveandblogic.com

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