

Three Reminders for Parents in the Trenches with Young Children

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When my mom walked into the room there was dust in the air. Draped over the ceiling fan, filling the curtains, imbedded in the carpet and all over my little brother and sister. It was soot from the cast iron stove—lots of it, strewn all across the living room. They had decided it was fun to throw. She sat them down and told them with white-hot clarity not to get up, and she went out and found my Dad. I'm sure she said something like, "Go in there and see what your children have done!"



That was extreme, but you've been there, right? You're in the thick of it. Your kids are relentless. You are tired. They don't get it. You may have even been tempted to institute a 6:00 PM bedtime for the foreseeable future! And yet, your deeper desire is to guide your children to Jesus himself, and so you have not given up. Let me encourage you with three reminders:

1. Don't confuse but **be clear** with your instruction

Clear parents draw visible lines and create obvious standards for their kids. As a result of consistent application, children learn what to expect from you and what you expect from them.

To me, nothing is more aggravating than moving standards. What if you drive down the highway only to learn that the speed limit was changed to 55 mph overnight without the signs being updated? What if you are stopped by the police? Would you be happy? How were you supposed to know? In the same way, how will your children know if you are inconsistent or muddled with your words or application of discipline?

For example, if you require first-time obedience from a child on Monday and then allow them to ignore you until the second or third attempt on Tuesday—you are confusing them. And if you then quickly re-establish your authority through an outburst of anger on Wednesday because you're fed up with insubordination, they are now confused *and* nervous. How will they know which version of *you* is going to show up?

2. Don't be harsh but **be compassionate** in your instruction

Compassionate parents see their children as humans with very little experience and knowledge. So many times, Jesus was said to have compassion on the crowds of needy people who followed him. Do any of your kids follow you needily—to your room, to the kitchen, to the bathroom? Does

that frustrate you? Do you want to snap at them sometimes? Are they unreasonable? My boys sometimes express that they are near death with thirst before bed. It is easy to correct these ridiculous words with an obvious, "You're not going to die," and then tell them to just go to sleep. However, it may be that they are actually thirsty and are just exaggerating. I can only see it that better way through the eyes of compassion.

Exercising compassion will be difficult if we have unreasonably high standards in place because we will most likely have to compromise to show kindness. On the other hand, we will have equal or greater difficulty showing compassion if we have standards that are too low because we will be overrun with neediness and whining. If we don't clarify reasonable expectations, children will choose their own, and tempt us toward exasperation.

Compassion remembers the frame of our children like God remembers that we are dust and prone to weakness. They are no different than us and much more inexperienced. Your kindness matters.

3. Don't give up but **continue** in your instruction

Continuing parents keep pressing on in difficulty and failure. This is necessary because children will not get it the first time—and you will mess up too. Will their life be difficult? Will they fail? How will they learn to come back to the Lord if you don't model it for them? How will they develop an attitude of endurance if you quit?

Continuing may mean that you stick it out at the dinner table all evening with the chipmunk-cheeked rebel, or that you nail the word compassion to your forehead because of your tendency toward harshness. It may require repentance that leads you to pick up the pieces of unfulfilled good intentions and start fresh with purpose to be clear and compassionate.

To do this we must consider Christ who loves us to the end, never fails, and teaches us endurance through trials. He hasn't given up on you and you must keep close to him.

As you go, there will be temptations to rehearse those past and even present failures. These can easily overwhelm and paralyze. In those moments, remember that your parenting failures haven't surprised Jesus and they haven't soured him toward you either. He isn't waiting for you to finally get it together so that he can help you be a good parent. That isn't how it works. Just as you lean down to help your child out of the mess they've created, he is right here, right now, waiting for you to return. Keep coming back to him and you will find strength to continue.