

The Summer Garden (PART 2)

The Role of Corrective Discipline in Preparing Your Child's Heart to Receive the Gospel

By Daryl Wingerd

Children are born with a fallen nature and an unregenerate heart. Before salvation they are “by nature children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3). This natural condition amounts to a worse state than being born as a “blank slate” (as many unbiblical thinkers believe to be the case with children). Their fallen nature produces more than just a reflection of life experiences; it actually *produces* the sinful inclinations that result in sin.



Think of a newborn child's heart as fertile soil for sin, with the seeds of sin already planted, watered, and germinating, sending roots downward into the soul. As the child grows, the “weeds” of sinful actions and attitudes come out into the open where others can see them. Parents cannot recreate the soil and make it good; only God can do that when he grants new birth (John 3:3, Ephesians 2:5). But in the meantime, as the seeds of sin sprout and become evident in the child's life, parents can help their children identify them and keep their roots from growing deep. This is the function of corrective discipline—the exposure of sin and the battle against it entangling the child's heart through neglect.

Anyone who has planted and cultivated a summer garden knows five things:

1. When you first plant the garden, it looks clean and beautiful, with neat, cultivated rows and no visible weeds.
2. You have a limited window of time, from the germination of your garden plants and then through the summer, to have the desired effect on your garden's end-product.
3. You'll never have a weed-free garden, no matter how much weed control you practice.
4. If you don't get started weeding early in the summer and stay on it diligently, you'll lose control of the garden altogether.
5. A well-tended garden, though having the same soil as the one overcome by weeds, will be much more fruitful and easier to work with later.

With unregenerate children it is much the same:

1. When they are born, parents see no visible manifestations of sin.

2. You have a limited window of time, beginning when your child is very young, through his formative years and into his teens, to have the desired “proverbial” effect on him in terms of preparing his heart for salvation.
3. You'll never produce a sin-free child. That's not even your goal in enacting corrective discipline.
4. If you don't get started early with corrective discipline, and stay diligent throughout the formative years, the roots of sin will grow deep. Your child will become increasingly entangled in sin and resistant to correction, and you're more likely to lose control of his heart altogether.
5. A well-disciplined child will be easier to work with and teach, more open to godly influence and counsel, and therefore more likely to produce the “harvest” of repentance and faith in Christ.

Through corrective discipline you help your child identify his sin, suffer temporal consequences for his sin, learn to hate his sin, and prepare him for the only source of deliverance from it—the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The sorrow and discomfort your child experiences due to consistent and firm discipline may be the very thing that leads him to realize that his heart is corrupt and in need of replacement.

God doesn't save every child brought up in the right way, nor does he refrain from saving many who were not blessed to be raised in this way. Even so, wise parents who understand God's proverbial assurance of good things will bring up their children accordingly, while anticipating the desired results. As the proverb says, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). “Discipline your son, and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your heart” (Proverbs 29:17). Sadly, parents who neglect discipline should expect to experience the only “proverbial” outcome associated with the lenient approach—“a child left to himself [i.e., without discipline] brings shame to his mother” (Proverbs 29:15).

If you are a new parent, get started early! If you are a more experienced parent who is only now understanding your God-given obligation, get started now! God is merciful, and in this case the phrase, “Better late than never,” certainly applies.

(Parts 3 and 4 will address specific types of behavior to watch for in your children and some thoughts on how to best address them. Parts 5 and 6 will address the various modes of discipline, along with a few parenting pitfalls to avoid).