"10 Ways to Correct Behavior Without Crushing Character"

by Jim Burns, Ph.D.

Have you ever noticed how many life lessons you can learn in a garden?

In a few cubic yards of dirt, rocks and bugs, you can see the whole life saga unfold before your eyes – prepare the soil, plant the seeds, nourish them so the plants will grow and then harvest the crop (or enjoy the flowers).

Sounds so simple, doesn't it!

That is, of course, until the crabgrass creeps in . . . or the weather turns harsh . . . or your interest in tending wanes. How easy it is for a growing garden to turn into wasteland of weeds.

At that point, you have two choices – either trash the garden and start again; or remove what shouldn't be there and replenish what should.

If you're a parent, congratulations . . . the Creator has blessed you with a "garden" of sorts. The "crop" consists of children – curious, creative creatures who are prone to making mistakes.

When these "weeds" crop up in their character, however, you do *not* have the option of trashing the entire "garden." The key is to learn how to correct the behavior and salvage the spirit of the child at the same time.

Over the years, I've developed 10 ways you can do so. They aren't perfect, and they may need to be modified somewhat to adapt to certain personality types. But, by and large, they're effective.

1. **Discipline with Consistency** Remember how many times you fell off that two-wheeler before you finally got your balance? Same holds true for your kids. Little ones may repeat the same bad behavior time after time after time. Remember Ephesians 6 (especially you, Dad), and consistently show them the right behavior. No need to lose your cool doing so, either.
2. **Clearly Express Your Expectations** More often than not, children generally want to please their parents. When they do, they feel a great sense of security. But when they don't, they'll react in one of two ways. They'll either feel miserable for disappointing you, or defiant and defensive because they know you're upset. They need to know

that they've broken a rule, nothing more. They're in no danger of losing your love. Clearly expressing a consistent standard goes a long way toward helping a child correct bad behavior on his or her own.

3. **Involve Your Child in Consequential Decision-Making** If you're already putting the first two principles in action, this one's a no-brainer. You've established the rules. You correct bad behavior consistently (in other words, there's no getting around the consequences). Now, you give the child the opportunity to take real ownership for their actions by determining their own consequences (or helping to establish them, at least).
4. **"Let the Punishment Fit the Crime"** As obvious as this might sound, I'm always amazed to hear of a parent who grounded his daughter for a month because she forgot to set the table for dinner . . . *once*. A missed homework assignment might be grounds for a night without television; coming home four hours past curfew should warrant a more serious consequence.
5. **Discipline Calmly** Ever heard the expression, "Perception is reality?" Well, it is – especially when you need to discipline your kids. When you're upset, you're in no shape to mete out effective discipline. There's a difference between punishment and discipline . . . and the difference is control. The out-of-control parent punishes a child out of anger; the parent in control disciplines to correct bad behavior.
6. **Draw Up a "Family Contract"** Having trouble getting your child to remember to keep his room picked up? Get it in writing! Family Contracts are excellent tools for helping your kids to learn what family rules are most important. You can make them for any of a number of desired responses (eg homework, curfew, television viewing, music listening, etc). ***Click here for a sample contract – but not until you get to the end of this list!***
7. **Remember "the 3 R's"** When it comes to keeping a child's spirit open in the midst of discipline, remember – *"**R**ules without **R**elationship leads to **R**ebellion."* After all . . . we're trying to correct behavior without crushing character here, right? Parenting involves more than "laying down the law." The kind of relationship your children have with you will determine the way they interact with everyone else they meet in this life.
8. **Communication is the Key to Keeping the Spirit Open** When the discipline is done, chances are your kids will want to hole up in their rooms and sulk. Don't let 'em. Scripture commands us to talk about our faith with our children "when we're lying down and rising up." Discipline is just one part of the faith journey. While your child might need a good "pout" every now and again, resist the temptation to let them stew too long. (And remember, Mom and Dad – no pouting from you either. I know parenting can be tough. But hang in there – it's worth it!)
9. **Your Words Can have Power** – so use them wisely! Your words can either build up or destroy your children. When a child's spirit is broken because of bad or inappropriate behavior, make sure you attack the behavior – not the child.
10. **Choose Your Battles Wisely** If you're finding yourself growing more and more defensive when your kids act up, chances are you're trying to manage too many battles on too many fronts. Now, I'm not saying you should ease up on your kids when they really need your discipline – rather, make sure you do battle over things that are really worth fighting for (eg sexual purity, performance in school, etc) instead

of those where a healthy compromise will do (eg keeping the room straight, cleaning up after the family pet).

Children can be unbelievably resilient . . . but they're still precious cargo. Handle them with care. Correct behavior when necessary. Pray like their lives depend on it – because, when you get right down to it, they do!

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