



Healthy Conscience, part 1 of 2—

Helping Children Develop a Healthy Conscience

by Richard D. Dobbins, Ph.D., clinical psychologist and founder and clinical director of EMERGE Ministries, Akron, Ohio.

By the time your children become adults, they'll be grateful for many of the things you're doing for them today. But don't expect much gratitude before then. Parenting and teaching are delayed-gratification tasks. Remember, your experience is similar to that of every other parent and teacher. Keep doing your best to "train up [every child in your care] in the way he [she] should go" (Proverbs 22:6).

There are no perfect children because there are no perfect parents. Get out from under that burden. There's no way you can make them perfect, anyway. All you have to be is "good enough." You do that by modeling a relationship with Christ that brings more peace than confusion, more pleasure than disappointment to your life.

Your first priority as parents and teachers is to create a thirst in your children for the things of God—a thirst that will encourage them to follow you into healthy Christianity. Your children will watch you more closely than anyone else. They will be checking whether you practice what you preach. The life you model for them will speak louder than anything you say.

As your children see how your relationship with Christ gets you through hard times, they will not forget those lessons. As they see you finding



pleasure in reading your Bible and praying, through good times and bad, they will begin to realize that this spiritual discipline is a major source of your strength.

A Healthy Conscience

One thing that will help your children toward responsible adulthood is a healthy conscience. This is developed over

a child's first 18–20 years, as life controls are gradually transferred from an external source (the parents and teachers) to an internal source (the growing child's own moral-management skills).

God has provided each of us a conscience, but our family and cultural environment determines the nature and content of that conscience. We learn what is right and what is wrong in our national culture, in our denominational Christian culture, and in our family culture.

Punishment Vs. Discipline

Among the first tools we use to help our children toward a healthy conscience are punishment and discipline.

Punishment is control from the outside; it teaches the child what not to do. If he touches the electrical outlet on the wall, he'll be punished. If she hits her brother or sister, or breaks one of their toys, she'll be punished. Running into the street or inappropriate language are all things that should bring punishment to children when the behavior is repeated after a reasonable warning.

Punishment applies a meas-



Healthy Conscience, part 2 of 2—

Healthy vs. Unhealthy

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(Continued from part 1.)

Punishment Vs. Discipline

Discipline develops gradually over time as the child learns to exhibit appropriate behavior according to a set of guidelines initially instilled by the parent, but which now come from within the child. Discipline is a function of the child's conscience. It occurs from the inside out.

In teaching children to be disciplined, try to set fair limits and enforce them in a firm and friendly way. Fair limits are based on what you can reasonably expect of each child, given his or her age and developmental level. Once you have established fair limits, be firm in enforcing them. Try not to let your mood dictate your children's limits. Your firmness, though, needs to be tempered with mercy; after all, you are modeling healthy Christian adulthood. Your children's early images of God will be intertwined with their early images of you.

Finally, stay friendly. You don't need to be angry to be firm. If your decisions are fair, remain friendly during your delivery. You may need to remind your children that they don't always have to like what you say, but they do have to listen to you. If your child seems

to have legitimate reasons for asking you to change your mind, let him know you will consider his request. However, your decision is the final one because someone has to be in charge, and right now it's you. God made you the parent. For older children and teens, be prepared to explain many of your decisions.



Your fairness allows the child enough space to make him comfortable without overwhelming him. He is free to make some decisions, some mistakes. Your firmness provides security. He knows where the boundaries are and what will happen if he gets outside them. When you enforce the limits in a friendly way, you spare your child the frustration of living with a harsh and angry conscience for the rest of his life.

Healthy Vs. Unhealthy Conscience

Another area is a healthy versus an unhealthy conscience. A healthy Christian conscience protects one from threatening or unwise decisions, and helps its owner live an integrated, productive Christian life. An unhealthy conscience is too narrow, too wide, or unreliable. It comes from limits that are too confining, too relaxed, or unpredictable.

Perhaps the parents of a child with a too-confining conscience were raised by overly strict parents. Maybe they resent the time it takes to care for a child. Or perhaps they've decorated their home with expensive furnishings and are afraid the child will ruin them. Normal childhood behavior finds these children frequently beyond the limits of their parents' approval. And they are far more likely to be confronted with their disapproved behaviors than they are to be commended for their approved behaviors. A too-narrow conscience leads to frequent feelings of guilt, depression, and inadequacy. It produces a person who can't stand him or herself.

A conscience that is too wide produces a child no one else can stand. Healthy parental love does not tolerate the kind of behavior from a child who hurts people or destroys things. Children need to

learn that we love *people* and we use *things* (rather than loving things and using people), and we don't abuse either one.

The most damaging kind of unhealthy conscience is one that is unreliable. This generally comes from being raised by parents who punish the child according to their moods rather than the child's behavior. This is the parent who lets the child get away with almost anything when the parent

is in a good mood, but clamps down on the child if the parent has had a bad day. This leaves the child confused about where the real limits are on any given occasion. It does teach the child, however, to be an excellent predictor of others' moods, and a manipulator of people and circumstances. Of all three kinds of unhealthy conscience, this is the most damaging.

A damaged conscience is diffi-

cult to correct. However, with God's help, it is possible to restore one's conscience to healthy Christian limits.

As Christian parents and teachers, concentrate on being "good enough" for your children. Train each child "in the way he [or she] should go." Model a life that brings you more peace than confusion, more pleasure than disappointment. This is discipling at its best.

Questions For Further Study—

1. On what should you base "fair limits"?
2. What is the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy conscience?
3. How can you as a children's ministry leader help develop a healthy conscience in each child under your care?