

Bullies

IS EVERYONE HAVING FUN?

One of the rules—more of a principle—in our home is: *“If it is not fun for all, it is not fun at all.”* Where there is more than one child, good, honest sparring sometimes degenerates into bullying. We kept our hands off as much as possible. If the kids were having a social conflict, we tried to let them work through it. A pecking order is inevitable, but if it got out of hand or they came to us, then we would step in to arbitrate.

BLOWING UP

Let’s create a likely scenario: One of the girls is trying to blow up a balloon while the brother, several years older (who is normally very congenial with his sisters), is preventing her from accomplishing her task and laughing at her helpless protests. It starts out with her involved in the game, but she soon tires and starts to earnestly resist. He is having such fun that he continues, with increased vigor, to thwart her efforts. She is getting aggravated and is now complaining. He laughs louder. She starts physically resisting, jerking away, swinging her elbows, and yelling, “Stop it!” He doggedly pursues his goal of proving his prowess as chief-balloon-deflator. “OK, What’s the problem?” Father asks. “Oh, nothing, we’re just playing,” the brother says. She protests, “He won’t let me blow up my balloon.” So, it is time now for a little training and reproof.

THE WRONG APPROACH

The wrong way to handle this would be to impatiently yell, “Give her the balloon so she will shut up, and get out of here; I can’t hear myself think!” The brother would toss it over with an “I beat you” sneer, and she would try to blow it up in his presence to prove her victory. They would continue to silently compete until another opportunity for mischief arose. This would happen between them as many as thirty times a day. You might try switching each of them two or three times, to no effect. She would become a whining tattletale, and he would become a sulking bully. You are functioning like a referee who came expecting a fight, and you are there to keep it fair. Instead, you should be functioning as a teacher of righteousness.

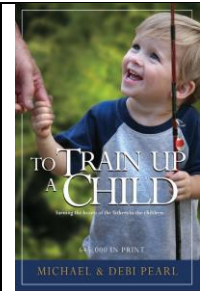
THE RIGHT APPROACH

Try this approach. Calmly say, “What’s going on here?” The brother responds, “Oh, nothing, we’re just playing.” Daddy says, “Sister, are you having fun?” She says, “No, he won’t let me blow up my balloon.” Daddy says to the boy, “Are you having fun?” He looks abashed and says, “Well, we were just playing.” Daddy asks, “Brother, was sister having fun?” “No, I guess not.” “Could you tell that she wasn’t having fun?” “Well, I guess so.” “What do you mean, you guess so? Did you or did you not think she was having fun?” “Well, I knew she wasn’t having fun.” “Were you having fun when your sister was suffering?” Silence. “Can you have fun by making someone else unhappy?” Silence. He looks at the floor. “Look at me. How would you like it if someone bigger than you treated you like that?” “I wouldn’t,” he answers. Then I would say my famous lines, “If everyone is not having fun, then it is not fun at all. Son, you know Hitler and his men had fun when others were suffering. They laughed while boys and girls cried in pain. Do you want to grow up to be like Hitler?” In complete brokenness, he says, “No, Daddy, I don’t want to be like Hitler. I didn’t mean to make her unhappy. Sister, I am sorry.” What great training! The brother and sister will go away bonded and sympathetic. The sister forgives because she has seen his repentance and feels sorry for his grief. She is drawn to him. He will be more protective of her. They both have been restored.

Your reproof will produce repentance only if the boy sees genuineness and fairness in you. If he detects in you any lack of the benevolence you advocate, he will not repent. He will just become hard and bitter.

If he has ever taken offense at the way you have talked to his mother, he will not experience repentance until he sees you express the same. If the boy does not show repentance after it is clear he understands the issues, a spanking would be in order, followed by further reproof and reasoning. If there is still no repentance ensuing in forgiveness and love to his sister, then it becomes clear he has a deeper, more long-term problem, one that requires rebuilding of relationships and careful management.

The above material was excerpted from Michael and Debbie Pearl’s book, *To Train Up a Child*.



Training Children in Righteousness

It is important to rebuke our children when they do wrong, but it is equally important, if not more important, to walk them through what is right—to put off as well as to put on. Ephesians 4:22–24 says, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” Basically, we are to stop seeking after sinful desires (passions of the old self) by seeking after holy desires (passions of the new self). When we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior, we are made new in him. We are to put off our old self, our life before we accepted Jesus, and put on our new self, our new life as a child of God. (See Appendix A: How to Become a Christian.)

How do we do this with children? First, work through what a biblical response would have been. Second, have the child follow through with it. I cannot stress how vital this is in training. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says that when you are tempted, “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” When we correct our children for wrong behavior but fail to train them in righteous behavior, we will exasperate them because we are not providing them with a way of escape. This sort of neglect will provoke them to anger. There will never be a situation where this does not apply. As a rule, anytime you correct your child for wrong behavior, have him walk through right behavior. This is how we train our children to walk in the righteousness of Christ. This is what the Bible means when it says to “train them in righteousness.”

Let’s go back to the scenario of the brother hitting his sister. Josh hit Lindsey because she had made him angry. But the Scripture says, “Man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” (James 1:19) Josh sinfully took his anger out on Lindsey then proceeded to tell his mom what Lindsey was doing. Josh needed to take the Mathew 18 way of escape.

In Matthew 18, God’s Word provides us with instructions for how to righteously handle a conflict such as this. Matthew 18:15 says, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.” Here we see that being a “tattletale” is wrong. Josh should have been taught to first try and resolve the matter with Lindsey in private. Josh could have promoted peace by telling Lindsey in a calm, kind, and self-controlled voice that she was offending him by interrupting his joke. This allows the offender an opportunity to repent before it is brought before the judge (Mom).

If the offender repents, then Ephesians 4:32 tells the offended child to grant forgiveness. If it works out this way, then Mom should never know anything about it. Your goal is for them to gain the experience of solving conflict according to God’s Word on their own. This is how they learn to biblically govern their own behavior.

But, what if the offender does not repent? Then the offended child should knock his block off! No, I’m kidding. The next verse, Matthew 18:16, reads, “But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’” If others are present, the offended child can appeal to them to confirm the offense. However, in most cases with children, the only option will be to move straight to Matthew 18:17a, “If he

refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church,” which is the authority, or applied in a home the authority would be the parents. So if Lindsey rejected her brother’s rebuke, rather than hitting her (returning evil for evil), Josh could have taken his way of escape and brought the matter before his mom.

At this point, Mom said, “Josh, if you would have responded to Lindsey’s sinful tactics with self-control and in a biblical manner, you would not be getting a spanking. Lindsey would be the only one in trouble.” However, Josh didn’t choose the way of escape, so he suffered the consequences.

Understanding the Issues of the Heart

Allow me to give one more example of how important it is to train children in righteousness and how you can walk them through that process. A while back, Wesley was going through a time where he was intentionally aggravating his sister. He would get down on all fours like a lion, snarling, growling and drooling, as he charged after her. (I don’t know why in the world she wouldn’t like that, but she didn’t.) He would also come up with other “games” that were entertaining at her expense. I sounded like a broken record all day long! “Wesley, stop!” “Wesley, quit!” “Wesley, Alex doesn’t like that!” He would stop, but then he would move on to something equally irritating. His verbal response to me was the same every time, “Yes, ma’am, but I was just playing with her.” It became a never-ending cycle all day every day: “Wesley, stop!” “Yes, ma’am, but I was just playing with her.” “Wesley, quit!” “Yes, ma’am, but I was just playing with her.” “Wesley, she doesn’t like that!” “Yes, ma’am, but I was just playing with her.”

The problem was that neither of us was not looking at it as a heart issue. And the reason why the problem continued all day long and manifested itself in different forms is because the outward behavior was the only thing ever addressed. He would obey and stop the particular behavior that I told him to stop, but he would just move on to a similar behavior. I saw the common denominator of each behavior but he lacked the skill to evaluate what was in his heart; therefore, he could not discern the wrong in what he was doing. I had failed to probe his heart. I had failed to draw out the sin that was causing him to constantly aggravate his sister, and I became frustrated with telling him over and over “the answer” (to stop aggravating her!). But that was the problem: I kept giving him the answer without teaching him why it was the answer. If he understood his own sinfulness and repented of it, he would be able to govern his own behavior rather than me always having to tell him to stop.

Eventually I realized that I had to work backwards from the behavior to his heart. Each time he began to aggravate her, we would go through a very simple line of questioning.

Mom: “Wesley, judging from your laughter you seem to be having a great time growling and chasing your sister. Are you having as much fun as you look like you are having?”

Wesley: (raises one eyebrow in curiosity) “Yes, ma’am”

Mom: “Is Alex having as much fun as you are?”

Wesley: (squirming a little) “Well, no, ma’am”

Mom: “Tell me, what is Alex doing?”

Wesley: (pausing for a moment and looking down) “She’s screaming and crying.”

Mom: “Honey, are you delighting in Alex’s suffering? Because love does not delight in evil.” (1 Corinthians 13:6)

Wesley: (with a look of understanding followed by a look of sadness) “Alex, will you forgive me for making you cry?”

I'm not going to tell you that it never happened again, but there was a tremendous improvement. When it did happen, I would guide him in pulling out what was in his heart. And there have been many times that he began to aggravate her and as soon as she became unhappy, he would apologize and stop the behavior on his own. He was able to draw from the understanding he had gained by evaluating his own heart. It is a process but I am seeing the fruit of him learning how to govern his own behavior through understanding his own heart. Now that I had reached his heart, my next goal was to show both of them how the conflict could have been handled biblically and without being a tattletale. I accomplished this goal through the use of role-playing.

The Importance of Role Playing

Role-playing is an extremely effective tool in training children how to put what they have learned into practice. When they put the knowledge gained into practice, it actually becomes part of their lives. The training will stick better because they learn how to use it in a hands-on situation. It is similar to the fact that learning all the book knowledge for a particular field of employment is of much value, but actually learning how to put that knowledge into practice can only be obtained through “on the job training.”

Let me demonstrate how I used role-playing in the scenario that I just gave you. Although Alex started out as the victim in this situation, she was sinful in how she responded. As she was being chased down the hall by the ferocious lion, she cried and led the Lion right to Mama's feet. Her voice was amplified as if I were at the other end of the house rather than right in front of her. “Wesley's being mean to meeeeeeeeee!” She had become what the Bible calls a tale-bearer, or as we say, a tattletale, and it seemed that she would very much like to see her brother in serious trouble.

Here again is where you can teach them how to apply Matthew 18. Once again, I simply used questions to probe her heart. “Alex, Honey, have you asked your brother in private to stop chasing you?” With a pitiful face and a quivering lip she answered, “No, ma'am.” “Would you rejoice in seeing your brother get in trouble?” She looked as if she were considering that question and leaning toward the “yes” end of it. I reminded her that God says, “He who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished.” (Prov. 17:5)

My next step was to walk them through how to replace wrong behavior with right behavior through the use of role-playing. Rather than just telling her what she should have done and leaving it at that, I took it a step further, and had her put the verbal training into practice. I had both of them go back to where the Lion fist began the attack. And I put the words into Alex's mouth. I said, “Alex, tell Wesley, ‘Please don't chase me and growl at me.’ Now Wesley, you say, ‘Okay Alex.’” That's it! It's that simple!

By having them go back and do it the right way I am training them in righteousness rather than just rebuking them for wrong. I am giving them a means of escape. I am teaching them to “put off” corrupt and deceitful desires and to “put on” the righteousness and holiness of God.

Dear parent, I encourage you to pull out what is in the heart of your child, work through how your child can replace what is wrong with what is right, and then have your child put what he has learned into practice. That is how you train them in righteousness. Remember that this is a process. Mine will take off with the training one week and do great with it and then out of nowhere act as though they have had no training at all—usually when we're out in public! The days that our children really struggle and we become weary from training over and over again, we can be encouraged with Galatians 6:9, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

The above material was excerpted from Ginger Plowman's book, *Don't Make Me Count to Three!*

