

Blended Families - Part 2

By Jenny Basson

Within the remarriage context this particular area is one of the main contributory factors towards parental conflict. It would seem that the biggest failing with couples preparing for marriage, is that more often than not, the whole aspect of disciplining children is not discussed beforehand.

Each parent comes into the marriage with a preconceived idea of how they are going to discipline their own (and of course their spouse's children as well!) Perhaps these ideas have come from a family of origin in the way they themselves were disciplined by their own parents or perhaps they might even have developed a discipline mode that is contrary to their own upbringing as a reaction to harsh punitive methods used on them as they were growing up.

Parents often have an unrealistic expectation that their step children will adhere to a 'one and only' method of discipline. A child that resides primarily outside the home is more often than not exposed to two or three different discipline systems. The parent in the primary residence will use discipline measures different to the parent that does the intermittent parenting, and the step parent in turn will most probably use a contrary measure to her/his spouse. The bewildered child, more often than not, will react with bad behaviour as he/she tries to make sense of these systems.

Firstly, parents need to look at the motivation behind their disciplining. Are they disciplining because the child has not adhered to their rules and needs to be taught a lesson and be put in their place? Some times when the children do not respond with the expected obedience and respect, stepparents can react by tightening the reins to show who is in control. Discipline, in this case, can become a way of protecting the parent's position in the family, rather than a way to bring about training, instruction and correction for the betterment of the child. In this scenario discipline can become an oppressive tool. Discipline is also not to be used as a weapon of vengeance. As a stepparent we will suffer wrongs caused by our

stepchildren but the heart of discipline still has to be for instruction and correction, and not for ‘pay back time’ for the so called turmoil they cause us.

Secondly, parents have to become aware of the three major discipline styles so that they in turn can make style changes to bring out the best in each situation. The styles are the following:

- **AUTHORITARIAN** discipline. These parents rigidly enforce their standards on their children with little regard on how it impacts on the esteem and uniqueness of the child. They expect high standards and as long as the child is well-behaved and order is maintained then the parents feel they have done a good job. The kids grow up fearful and desperately try to please in every way.
- **PERMISSIVE** discipline. These parents set very few rules or standards for the children. The children are often left to their own devices and have to use their own discretion when making decisions. Children from these homes are found to be the least competent, the least self-controlled and are often immature.
- **AUTHORITATIVE** discipline. These parents balance a firm control of a child’s behaviour whilst at the same time allowing and encouraging individuality. They expect high standards but provide support for success. The children from these grow up self confident, self controlled and more competent.

Unfortunately the authoritative style is less likely to be used in a remarriage situation as more often than not a more lenient style of parenting is used. As an example if a father only sees his children once in two weeks he will not want to alienate them in any way or give them any reason for not visiting him so it is therefore likely he will be extremely lenient with them when they visit him. Take for instance the scenario of a mother with her own children marrying a man who only sees his children on the weekends. Imagine the frustration as this mother disciplines her own children but sees her step children getting off scot-free for the same transgression.

Thirdly, before couples marry, but even afterwards the couples need to continually assess their methods of discipline and the expectations they have of the children. These expectations and methods need to be re-evaluated as the children go through the various stages of life, for example: as toddlers, pre-schoolers, school goers, adolescents etc.

Some guidelines for discussion regarding the discipline of children

1. Do we both use corporal punishment or do we agree on another system of discipline?
2. Do we both agree to use Biblical principles when disciplining the children? What is our understanding of these principles?
3. Do we agree or not agree with the principle of physical or corporal discipline and that this form might be the best way to impart correction in certain cases and circumstances?
4. Do we incorporate our children in the decisions regarding discipline?

To the parent whose child comes from a primary residence other than your home:

1. When do you feel constrained about disciplining your child?
2. When is there reticent regarding discipline because of the possibility of alienation?
3. In what areas do you not treat your stepchildren the same way as you treat your own child?

Discuss with your spouse if possible.

To the parent of the child who lives with the family:

1. When do you find yourself feeling resentment in the way your spouse deals with your child?
2. In what ways do you find your spouse unreasonable in the area of discipline?
3. Do you sometimes feel resentful in the ways that your spouse treats his/her children compared to yours? Why?

Discuss with your spouse if possible.

General tips for handling the discipline issue

1. Goals for disciplining must be explored. Is the goal to punish or to train? The Biblical principle is: "Parents do not treat your children in such a way as to make them angry. Instead raise them with Christian discipline and instruction" (Eph. 6:4).
2. Boundaries must be agreed upon in regard to the children.

3. Each parent should be encouraged to discipline their own children and “the other parent” is there to support them.
4. The couple should be encouraged to support each other no matter what decision is made regarding discipline.
5. The couples should determine never to have a major quarrel regarding discipline in front of the children.
6. Once you have determined your discipline style then discuss with your spouse how you can both compromise for the benefit of your child.
7. Realise that the child’s behaviour is not going to change overnight. Work together, make a plan, communicate the plan to your children, and follow through on what you decide and in time if your consistent you will see a change in the child’s behaviour.

Do not allow yourself to become discouraged because things don’t work out ‘first time’. Perseverance, consistency and trusting God to guide you, will reap the benefits.

