

Ignoring Tantrums

I recently was listening to a radio personality on a popular Christian radio station. She was really excited about how her child's physician had told her that she could just ignore her child's tantrums. She was excited to try this and went on to explain how her pediatrician explained something to the effect of how attention fuels tantrums and that if you remove the attention the tantrums go away. He also went on to explain that children will often outgrow this and other similar behaviors.

This advice has been practiced for many decades. Sometimes you even get the opportunity to see parents putting this technique into (in)action. A child will be throwing a fit in the middle of a store and his parent will continue shopping, walking along as if nothing was wrong. If you haven't seen this, you might want to view the classic video that shows a toddler following his parents from room to room so his parents can witness his portable tantrum (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NM8vKTFbMzM>). This practice is so readily embraced in our society, that most people play along and few parents seem to weigh out alternatives.

Is this really the best way to deal with tantrums and other forms of attention-getting misbehavior? Let's think this through.

While it is true that children will outgrow many childish tendencies, wrong behavior should not be ignored because ignoring it doesn't deal with rebellion, it doesn't teach right and wrong, and does not bring peace to the home.

When children misbehave, they act in defiance of the standards they've been given by their parents. Understanding this is critical to grasping the importance of discipline. Sometimes parents may think that the goal of discipline is to get children to stop certain behaviors. This is a grave misunderstanding. Children will almost certainly outgrow throwing tantrums and many other disobedient acts. When they are adults they won't color on the wall, leave Legos on the floor, or steal candy from Wal-Mart. If your only goal was for your kids to stop such behaviors, you could simply ignore them and eventually, over many years' time, they will mature and act more adult-like. However, that is not the goal.

The goal of discipline is to change their hearts. Correctly motivated discipline does lead to better behavior, but it also leads to a yielding of the heart. Children are commanded to obey and honor their parents. This is what proper discipline should produce—obedience and honor. Children must be taught how to yield to authority. The simplest way to do this is to instruct and discipline them when they misbehave. A failure to do this will surely lead to further rebellion and disobedience.

When children are not disciplined for misbehavior it teaches them to only do what is right when it works out. Instead we should teach them to do right because it is right. By the parents ignoring misbehavior, the children are taught that if their misbehavior does not benefit them, then they should stop their actions. In essence, they become their own judge of what is beneficial and acceptable. We may hope they are learning lessons like these:

- If I throw a tantrum, no one pays attention. So it's not worth it.
- If I don't behave at dinner I don't get dessert.
- If I demand what I want instead of asking politely, I don't get it.

These are fine lessons for a child to learn, but when are they going to learn to obey because dad or mom says so, and not because obeying somehow seem to be to their benefit? Where is the sense of right and wrong in that? When they get older will they be honest on tests in school because that is to their benefit? Will they wait until marriage to have sex because that is to their benefit? Will they not go out drinking with their friends because that is to their benefit? Sure, in the grand scheme of things, it is to our benefit to do right, but I don't think most kid and young adults see things that way. They need to

be taught right and wrong, and the consequences that go along with both. This is best taught by disciplining misbehavior, not ignoring it.

Proper discipline brings peace. And in my experience, it brings it rather quickly.

Proverbs 29:17 Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul.

Putting up with a misbehaving and defiant child is not peace producing. Instead of producing peace, it creates stress and irritation for parents and all who are within earshot of a child whose behavior is not corrected. It certainly does not produce peace in the short run, and since it does not train a child to obey, ignoring misbehavior does not produce peace in the long run.

So what is the solution? It is the same as for other types of misbehavior and it is right in the above verse. Discipline your child.

If our child threw a tantrum we would spank him. If we were in public, we would remove him from the situation (perhaps to the car) and we would spank him. If he threw a fit about not getting a toy in the store, we would spank. Does this sound extreme? I hope not. Discipline works wonderfully. Behavior that is corrected consistently, immediately, and memorably, will not be continued because that type of discipline works. We treat fits and tantrums the same way we would treat lying, stealing, or violence. We lovingly correct them with a spanking and we move on. And, as a result, all these behaviors are almost non-existent in our home. Biblical discipline works!