

The background of the book cover is white, decorated with various colorful crayon strokes in shades of purple, green, yellow, blue, and red. Two crayons are visible: a red one in the upper right corner and a blue one in the lower left corner. The author's name is centered at the top.

Sam Crabtree

Parenting with *Loving* Correction

Practical Help for
Raising Young Children

“In a permissive culture that leaves parents unsure of their authority and confused about discipline, this book speaks with clarity, not only reminding parents that discipline is a critical element of parental love, but also showing parents how to practically discipline their children in a way that is consistent, God honoring, and productive.”

Paul David Tripp, President, Paul Tripp Ministries; author, *Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family*

“My wife and I were fortunate to attend a seminar on parenting young children featuring Sam Crabtree. He revealed the inconsistency and lack of logic often found in parenting young children and offered better alternatives. We were fortunate because we were able to take his wisdom and apply it to our children at just the right time. I have no doubt that many (if not all) parents experience the same sort of exasperation we did with our first child. And I have no doubt they will find Sam’s wisdom in *Parenting with Loving Correction* as helpful as we did.”

Paul K. Lim, MD, Trustee, Bethlehem College and Seminary; surgeon

“When my wife and I read this book, we immediately saw its value and wanted others to read it, so I was pleased when our small group agreed to go through it. But I was also a bit nervous—would the subject of parental discipline create conflict during group discussions because of differing parenting styles? Would the concept of correction (which is often considered in our culture to be overly negative) result in gloomy conversations? I needn’t have worried. Sam Crabtree uses definitions, Scripture, and helpful anecdotes to get everyone on the same page. His pastoral heart is shown in each chapter as he writes with care, grace, and humility. I can tell you from personal experience that this book yields fruitful discussion—and parenting. Chapter 3 ends with this statement: ‘There is great hope. And there is help.’ For the believing parent, there is. And you will find both in this book.”

Scott Jamison, small group leader

“As parents, it can seem like we’re constantly training, correcting, and disciplining our children. Thankfully, Sam Crabtree has given us a gospel-infused framework for the kind of loving correction that will help all of us train up a child in the way he or she should go.”

Bob Lepine, Cohost, *FamilyLife Today*; Pastor, Redeemer Community Church, Little Rock, Arkansas

Parenting with Loving Correction

Parenting with Loving Correction

Practical Help for
Raising Young Children

Sam Crabtree

Parenting with Loving Correction: Practical Help for Raising Young Children

Copyright © 2019 by Sam Crabtree

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover image and design: Derek Thornton, Faceout Studios

First printing 2018

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked HCSB have been taken from *The Holman Christian Standard Bible*®. Copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-6061-3

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-6064-4

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-6062-0

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-6063-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Crabtree, Sam, 1950– author.

Title: Parenting with loving correction : practical help for raising young children / Sam Crabtree.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, [2019] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018021695 (print) | LCCN 2018041958 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433560620 (pdf)

| ISBN 9781433560637 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433560644 (epub) | ISBN 9781433560613 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433560644 (epub) | ISBN 9781433560637 (mobipocket)

Subjects: LCSH: Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Child rearing—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Discipline of children—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4529 (ebook) | LCC BV4529 .C73 2019 (print) | DDC 248.8/45—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018021695>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB	29	28	27	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

To my father and mother,
who modeled justice and mercy
in loving correction

Contents

Introduction: A Parent's Longing	11
--	----

PART 1: WHAT'S AT STAKE?

1 Why the Struggle?	15
2 When We Fail to Correct Our Children	27
3 When We Faithfully Correct Our Children	35

PART 2: ESSENTIALS OF CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE

4 Clarifying Our Aim	45
5 Keep It God-Centered	49
6 Speak Truth	61
7 Reward Obedience, Not Disobedience	77

PART 3: GETTING PRACTICAL

8 Before You Correct	87
9 In the Moment	99

Appendix: Questions from Parents	107
--	-----

My Prayer for You	119
-------------------------	-----

General Index	121
---------------------	-----

Scripture Index	123
-----------------------	-----

Introduction

A Parent's Longing

I was observing a scene that blocked the aisle in a busy grocery store. A mother with three small boys was showing a mixture of embarrassment, frustration, and hopelessness. Two of her boys were running here and there, then rushing to her side with loud demands that she buy this item or that. Each boy was out-whining and out-howling the other, their voices no doubt heard throughout the store.

“You’re wasting time!” she told them in an exasperated tone. The boys’ demands grew only louder.

I ached with empathy for this harried mother. We’ve all had similar grocery store experiences of our own. And they’re painful. We long for our children to behave well, and for good reasons—we want them to understand and value the right things and to live in the freedom that comes with self-control.

So often, our hope for all that seems battered or even crushed.

My heart goes out to the downhearted and flustered mothers of young children who know things have gotten out of

hand. I've spoken and prayed with scores of them. I feel for the mother in South Dakota who asked me how to change the tone in their home. I admire the mother in Wisconsin who invited me to help her and her husband in promoting sweet and godly interactions in their family.

I've known what it's like to earnestly desire help with parenting, and wanting keenly not to squander the early years in our children's lives. I've prayed for readers of this book, that God would use these pages to help you, not shame you.

The aim of this book is to throw you a rope, not an anchor. Think of this book as an arm around your shoulder, a gentle pat on the back, and a nod that says, "You can do this. I'm pulling for you. God will help you. Your children will thank you later."

Parenting is sometimes painful, but it can also be joyful. I think of these words of John in Scripture: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 4). For parents, there's no greater joy than children walking in truth, yet many parents can identify with the opposite: there's no greater misery than knowing their children's behavior is outside the truth, a departure from what's best for them. How can we correct our children and get them back on the rails of truth and goodness?

Often, correction is done poorly. Our well-intended attempts can be too harsh or too lenient or too complicated. But correction *can* be done well. How can we correct our children without becoming harsh drill sergeants?

The apostles corrected the churches, shepherds correct straying sheep, good teachers correct student errors—and loving parents confront wrongdoing in their children. But how is this done *well*?

My aim in these pages is to help you better understand good correction.

Part 1

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Why the Struggle?

Parents can be confused or even clueless when it comes to correcting their children effectively. Often they have wrong assumptions about it. Wrong assumptions have tripped me up as a parent—and they might be tripping you up as well. These wrong assumptions can center on issues as basic as why our children disobey and why we ought to correct them.

What *is* correction, anyway? Here's a two-part definition that I think is helpful.

Corrective discipline means:

- (1) Identifying actions or attitudes of your child that are unacceptable when weighed against clear and explicit standards, then
- (2) acting promptly and decisively to move your child in the direction of compliance with those standards.

Later, we'll inspect each phrase of that definition more closely. I pray this definition will help you, and that it fits with your own good intentions as a parent. Why do

we struggle with making our good intentions happen? The reasons for our struggle grow clearer when we look deeper at why children disobey and why we as parents can be slow to correct them.

Why Do Children Disobey?

Our children can sometimes astonish us with how quickly and repeatedly they disobey. Shouldn't they just naturally know better? We look at them and think, *What's the matter with you?*

Well . . . sin, of course, is the matter with all of us. Including children. Even the most adorable little tyke is a natural-born sinner.

Sometimes we speak our frustration out loud: "What's *wrong* with you?" But parents shouldn't request that kind of explanation for misbehavior (especially since such indicting speech can instill irrational guilt in a son or daughter, like that experienced by children who are abused). What parents should be after is the child's compliance with clearly understood standards.

Besides your child's sin nature, maybe there's nothing "wrong" with him. The problem may be that he has been repeatedly rewarded for behaving the way he does. He's simply functioning according to the way God designed rewards and reinforcement to operate. (We'll talk more about this later.)

Children are not naturally obedient. The problem lies in the opposite direction. The little fellows are sinners—and sin hardens. The Bible talks about our daily potential of being "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13). We're told in that verse to therefore "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today.'" That's true for our children, too; they require corrective exhortations.

Obedience must be learned. The good news is that it can be! Weary and beleaguered parents can take hope in knowing this: children *can* be taught to respectfully obey. Children require some assembly—plus clear instruction and guidelines, and the kind of training that demonstrates your genuine love.

We're All After Happiness

Like you and me, children are naturally prone to pursue their own happiness without regard to what pleases God or anybody else. In their native sinfulness, they stubbornly disobey out of a desire to pursue pleasure in a way that isn't constrained by any outside authority.

In his *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal famously gave the world this reminder: “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end.”¹ Children are no exception. They're seeking happiness, and again and again they figure that disobedience will gain them more happiness than obedience will.

After all, what do we suppose makes *us* happy? We think we know, don't we? Children believe the same about themselves. And they're pursuing it. They esteem their own plan above all others, no matter how foolish that plan might be. I can speak from my own personal experience as a child: we're born naturally foolish and in need of correction, just as the Bible tells us. “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him” (Prov. 22:15).

The fall—humanity's plunge into sin—threw all of nature into the need for correction. The culminating event of earthly history is when Jesus returns to make his grand correction, making all things new. But that hasn't happened yet. Meanwhile,

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Harvard Classics ed., trans. William Finlayson Trotter (New York: F. F. Collier & Son, 1910), 7.425.

our children need correction. As we all do. We need correction because we affirm wrong things, or we affirm good things over against better things, or we affirm good things from wrong motives. That's our bent.

When we honestly face up to this sinfulness in our children, do we then give up any expectation that they'll obey us? No. But we shouldn't be surprised when they don't obey us the first time, every time.

And when they don't, we correct—or we should.

Does this require that I watch my kids like a hawk, looking over their shoulder all day long? No. Good parents enjoy empowering their children to try new adventures, expanding each child's understanding of the pleasures to be found in God's world. But parental permissiveness should never make allowance for defiant disobedience.

Why Do Parents Hold Back?

If correction simply means we identify unacceptable actions or attitudes in our child, and then act promptly and decisively to move that child in the right direction of compliance, why do we so often hesitate?

Sometimes, it's because firm correction makes us feel guilty. No good parent wants to come across as a dictator.

At other times, it's because we don't see the value in corrective discipline. It seems to make little difference, so why bother?

At other times, we don't want to upset the child.

And sometimes, we're just plain weary.

I'm no stranger to any of those feelings. But a number of wrong assumptions may be lurking behind them. When our children are unruly and disobedient—when the moment's ripe

for correction—all kinds of fears and worries and doubts can cause parents to hold back.

Like these:

My child will think I've lost my affection for him or her.

My child will stop loving and respecting me.

I run the risk of damaging my child's self-esteem.

I'll stifle my child's personality, creativity, and drive to explore.

I'll cause my child to be afraid of me.

If you've had those thoughts, it's helpful to remember certain truths. For example, when a child is rebelling, the child in that moment is far less interested in your affection than in getting his or her own way. You might mistakenly assume that your affection and patience alone will miraculously remedy your child's misbehavior. Yes, when pigs fly, oceans run dry, and December's in July. Your child may not take kindly to you in the moment you apply corrective discipline, but a child's love is swiftly rekindled—and deepened and solidified in the process of receiving wise correction.

Or let's think about the danger of damaging a child's self-esteem. I'm a strong proponent of building up a child's self-*acceptance*. But that's not the same as self-*esteem*. Self-acceptance is necessary and good, but self-*esteem* plagues the world. Prisons are full of people who esteem no one but self.

Children (like adults) are naturally self-centered. No baby in the nursery is crying because some *other* baby is wet or hungry. Infants come out of the womb entirely self-preoccupied and quite content to let the entire universe cater to them. Their self-will is fully formed. They are us.

When we worry that our child will perceive our corrective discipline as unloving, we forget God's higher wisdom about genuine love. He tells us, "Whoever spares the rod hates his

son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him” (Prov. 13:24). When we refrain from correction, do we subconsciously think we’re wiser than God?

True love means that parents will give their children objective “outside” feedback on the true condition of their sinful little hearts: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). Correction exists because errors and omissions exist, and because sin exists. Corrections are undertaken because of love. Love implements correction in order to protect the loved one from heaping up negative consequences, to his or her regret.

God knows that discipline and obedience are required before a child’s God-given abilities can truly flourish. It’s a misunderstanding to think that practicing firm, decisive, consistent discipline will interfere in any way with your children’s proper development. Christlikeness does not develop accidentally.

The Fear Factor

I admit there’s a fine line—and perhaps a tricky distinction—between destructively fearing a parent and having a healthy regard for that parent’s authority to reward and punish. This dynamic mirrors our relationship with God, where genuine fear is warranted. God is not to be trifled with: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccles. 12:13). Moses once asked the Lord, “Who understands the power of Your anger? Your wrath matches the fear that is due you” (Ps. 90:11 HCSB).

Where can we flee to escape God’s just wrath? We flee to God himself, to his mercy. We pray with the psalmist, “Be to me a rock of refuge, to which I may continually come; you have given the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress” (Ps. 71:3).

We fear God because he loves us so much that he threatens to do terrible things if we run from him. As C. S. Lewis famously taught us through Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, God certainly isn't safe—but he's *good*. In a healthy parent-child relationship, the child will possess a general apprehension regarding the consequences of defying his parent. Growing up, I knew that if I sassed my mother, I'd be in a heap of trouble with my father. But I also knew that if I spoke respectfully to Mom, there was nothing to fear from Dad in that regard. The child who discovers that his parents punish only when he does wrong will be more apt to avoid wrongdoing. There's punishment to dread—but only if you deserve it.

I take it for granted that good parents desire to show kindness and compassion toward their children. God himself has established the template: "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion *to those who fear him*" (Ps. 103:13). With tender care, wise parents teach children to have the *right* fear—to fear what warrants fear—but not to be anxious, jittery, skittish, or timid. We're not aiming to make cowards of our children, but bold and heroic champions. Correction aims to shape them, not harm them.

If our children fear us without delighting in us, they'll find no rest in our company. If our children delight in us without the right fear, we'll become their vending machine, and when the machine doesn't dispense what they want, they just may utter curses and inflict hostility toward us.

Note also that an authoritative approach that may *invoke* fear is not the same as an approach that is *fear-based*. There are things one might naturally fear (crossing the street at the wrong moment), but that fear is not injurious—in fact, it prevents injury. Such fear is healthy, not paralyzing or psychopathic.

Love and fear are not necessarily at odds or mutually exclusive. God loves his own, and he commands them to fear him. In his relationship with us, God doesn't restrict himself to doing only what provokes our positive feelings. Sometimes he causes our momentary pain—which is meant to be transforming and corrective, driving us away from destructive attitudes and behaviors. He doesn't cease to be good when he disciplines us. All along he's aiming at “the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” Pain isn't his purpose, but his means: “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. . . . For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:6, 11).

I join the myriad of individuals who, upon receiving parental correction, did not find it enjoyable at the time. But now, years later, I'm extremely grateful for it. It's a mistake to think you should never do anything that your child finds painful. No discipline is pleasant at the time. Wise, corrective discipline always has an element of pain and discomfort. But God promises a fruitful result. It will eventually usher in peace—even if, for the time being, conflict escalates.

Behavior Change versus Heart Change

If our correction promotes a child's *external* conformity to our instructions (and to God's) but leaves the heart unchanged—won't that merely suck our child into outward conformity, moralism, and legalism, and away from heart transformation and sincere cooperation? While children are still spiritually unregenerate, maybe it's useless or counterproductive for parents to correct them when they fail to obey the commands they're given (tell the truth, obey your parents, don't steal your brother's

things, put on your pajamas, don't throw your applesauce). How could such a child's obedience be genuine?

It is unwise to pit behavioral change against heart change as though it's either/or—because it's *both/and*. Wise discipline looks beyond simply altering the child's behavior; it aims toward impressing the heart. But on the way to the heart, good discipline *does* shape behavior. Wise discipline doesn't skip over behavioral change, even while praying for the child's heart change.

Wisdom doesn't settle for changed behaviors, but presses on toward the goal of attitudinal change that only God fully creates and sustains. But the path to such heart change is often *through* the measured pain of discipline—the awakening rod of correction, the consequential misery of reaping what one's mischief has sown.

Discipline aims at fostering a specified pattern of character, in the strength God supplies.

We want to address the heart, not just outward behaviors. Meanwhile, we also want to address those problematic outward behaviors before they introduce undesirable consequences. Proverbs 20:11 tells us, “Even a child makes himself known by his acts, by whether his conduct is pure and upright.” The child's true character becomes *known* by his actions—which means behavior! But corrective discipline that addresses behavior is not mere *behaviorism*.

Moreover, even outward yet unredeemed conformity to godly ways is ultimately better *for the child* than nonconformity and defiance. It's also better for all those who have to share the room and the community (and the grocery store aisles) with that child. When parents restrain the egocentric bent of defiant children, we help shape their little consciences (even before

they're born again) while also making it easier for these children to later get along in society.

More importantly, requiring obedience from children can awaken awareness of their own sin nature and their need for Christ to be their substitute. It can show them their further need for inner transformation. A child will have difficulty grasping the meaning of the cross if parents haven't required him to confront his own sinful impulses as wrongful.

Paul tells us (in Gal. 3:24) that the law with its rules and regulations is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, but that result is less likely in a child's life if biblical standards of behavior are not taken seriously by the adults around the child. It's right and necessary for parents to require children to do some things their little sinful natures dislike. Requiring a child to do something when he would rather do something else is an excellent and necessary way not only to shape behavior, but also to awaken the child to his attitudes.

It's foolish and irresponsible for parents to think they can do little or nothing while waiting for their children to "see the light," experience regeneration, and turn over a new leaf. To not correct disobedience is to entrench it.

Further, a child's simple good behavior and civility (not biting your neighbor, saying please and thank you, speaking in a respectful tone of voice) can come from the heart later, even if for now it comes "only" from parental enforcement.

So we aim for outward conformity, but not outward conformity *only*. We also aim for inward transformation, knowing that when inner heart transformation happens, it will be followed by outward cooperation. Heart change in our child is our desire in corrective discipline, and we know that what's necessary for heart change is God. Meanwhile, behavioral methods—especially rewards and punishments—can be a means to

capturing the child's attention for introduction of the gospel. Wise correction can get the attention of the head so that instruction can make its way to the heart.

We can't force our children (or anyone else) to supremely value the supremely valuable, for we cannot make them actually see it as valuable. But we can display it as being superior, and we can discipline our children to look, even if they don't look seemingly just yet.

Genuine obedience to God's standards must spring from the heart, and we can't coerce a child to worship and obey God with genuine heartfelt earnestness. Rebellion also flows from the heart. While we can't change the rebellion, we can attach firm and clear associations to rebellious actions so that in the child's understanding, pain becomes associated with naughtiness. Our son or daughter begins to discover that refusal to live in accord with God's ways results eventually in disaster and regret. For a sinner, the thrill of misbehavior can seem to be its own "reward"; we as parents are being neither kind nor wise if we let that impression continue, giving a child the false impression that life brings no painful consequences for misbehavior.

When correction is done well, it does *not* derail heart change, which is absolutely essential, but honors God, who is the foundation and pinnacle of what is right. We want our children to honor God, and requiring children to honor parents honors the God who commands children to do exactly that.

We cannot change our children's hearts, but if they go through life never having to complete an unpleasant assignment or yield to the leadership of an authority, we're foolish to think we've prepared them to yield to God.

"A gospel-infused framework for the kind of loving correction that will help all of us train up a child in the way he or she should go."

Bob Lepine, Cohost, *FamilyLife Today*

Parenting can be a challenge. Sometimes it seems like all we do is give directions and all children do is disobey. How can we promote good behavior and a peaceful home without becoming harsh drill sergeants on the one hand or passive pushovers on the other?

This book aims to help you better understand loving correction through clear steps and practical tips aimed at transforming not only your children's behavior but also their hearts. Rooted in three principles—keep it God-centered, always mean what you say, and reward obedience rather than disobedience—this is a guide to consistent, faithful discipline that mirrors the grace-giving, truth-speaking God of the Bible and sets the tone for a loving, joy-filled home.

"In a permissive culture that leaves parents unsure of their authority and confused about discipline, this book speaks with clarity."

Paul David Tripp, President, Paul Tripp Ministries; author, *Parenting:*

14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family

"I have no doubt that many (if not all) parents will find Sam's wisdom in *Parenting with Loving Correction* as helpful as my wife and I did."

Paul K. Lim, MD, Trustee, Bethlehem College & Seminary; surgeon

SAM CRABTREE is a pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he has served for over twenty years. He is a former public-school teacher and is chairman of the board of Bethlehem College & Seminary. He is the author of *Practicing Affirmation*.

CROSSWAY

crossway.org

PARENTING