

CHAPTER 6

You Are the Boss

Fathers, don't exasperate your children by coming down hard on them. Take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master.

— Ephesians 6:4 (*The Message*)

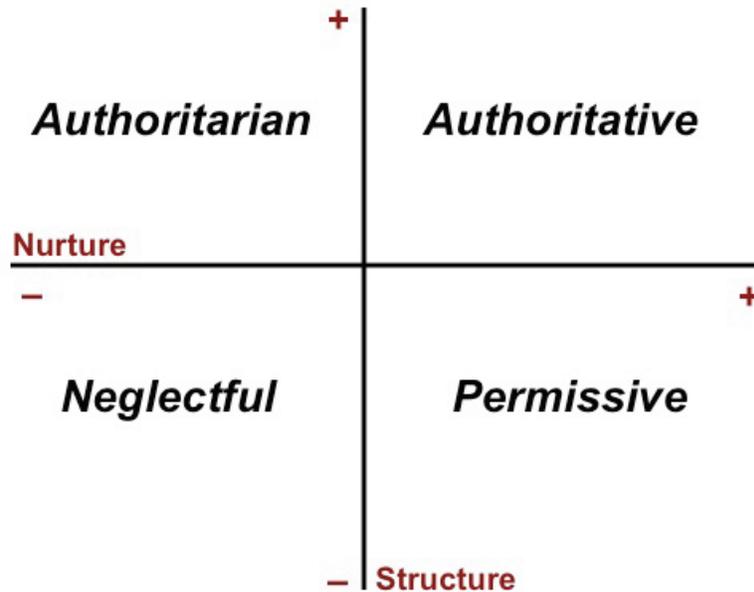
What if becoming the parent God has called you to be to your child from a hard place means that you need to un-learn as much or more than you need to learn? What if many of the popular approaches to parenting and discipline, many of which are regarded as “biblical,” actually aren’t best for your child given his background and history and what he needs to heal and grow? What if the parenting program you previously used, even with great success, when raising and training your other children needs to be significantly altered or even discarded for the child you adopted? What if the parenting techniques that most of your friends are using or that you grew up with are likely to be ineffective in achieving long-lasting change for the child you now love and desire to connect with?

I believe that parents need to seriously consider these and many similar questions as they set the course for how to best relate to and parent children from hard places. More importantly, parents need to honestly engage the question, “Am I willing to unlearn and let go of certain ways of parenting?” If you’re willing, what “new things” do you need to learn and, most importantly, how do you go about doing this?

Learning to Keep Your Balance

We have come to conclude that many traditional parenting approaches and programs, including many promoted in our churches, are simply not effective for children from hard places. Many of these approaches often tend toward the extremes, while also failing to reflect the heart of God for our children. They are either overly harsh, punitive and authoritarian in nature (referred to in the child development literature as “Authoritarian Parenting”) or overly permissive, excusing and lacking a healthy amount of structure (referred to as “Permissive Parenting”). Tragically, parenting styles falling within either of these extremes often serve to compound the problems they intend to address, while leaving parents and children more frustrated, disconnected and discontent.

The Balancing Act: *Parenting With Nurture & Structure*



As we mentioned, many parents are inclined toward Authoritarian Parenting (located in the upper left quadrant of the above illustration) or the “law and order” approach, focusing almost exclusively on structure—rules, requirements, control, consequences and punishment. Misbehavior is met with more and more structure, with a focus on changing the behavior above all else. With this high structure, low nurture approach, every offense is met with a consequence or punishment, and as the behaviors persist or escalate so too does the punishment.

Yet both research and experience show this approach is almost certain to fail with at-risk children. Because many of our children lack a solid foundation of trust, which ideally would’ve been established in the first year of life, attempts to establish authority (i.e., “who’s the boss”) without connection generally prove ineffective. Ironically, research indicates this reality persists even as children grow older, evidenced, for example, by the fact that children from homes with an emphasis on structure without a corresponding emphasis on nurture are more likely to engage in hard drug use and other acting out behaviors as teens.

Conversely, other parents practice Permissive Parenting (located in the lower right quadrant of the above illustration) by focusing almost exclusively on nurture, ignoring altogether their child’s need for structure to learn to regulate his behavior and develop healthy relationships. In their desire to be compassionate and extend grace to their child, these parents sacrifice the structure their child needs. This is seen in a parent who allows her child to behave in hurtful and even cruel ways because, as she said, “he has already been through so much I simply want to show him God’s love and grace.” One mother told us she allowed her daughter to repeatedly attack her, bruising her face and body, and accepted the beatings believing she was showing her God’s love. Instead of helping their child heal and grow, however, these parents are offering “cheap grace” by allowing their child to operate without boundaries, guidance and correction. As a result, this approach also fails to bring about the lasting change parents desire, just as it

does in our lives when we cheapen the grace God extends to us.

Instead, we are convinced that parents need to find a new balance in their approach to parenting, referred to as an Authoritative Parenting style (located in the upper right quadrant of the illustration on page 37). Particularly for children with difficult and painful histories, parents need to apply this balance in order to truly connect with their children and lead them toward healing and lasting connections. This balance isn't found so much in mastering the "right" parenting program (be it "Christian" or otherwise) as it is in understanding and applying the principles of Paul's instructions in Ephesians 6:4 to "take our children by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master" (*The Message*). Different translations and versions of Scripture use slightly different terms to communicate this point (including "nurture and admonition," "discipline and instruction," and "training and instruction") but the essential idea remains: as parents we are responsible for connecting with and correcting our children in a way that shows them the love of Jesus. It is in providing a consistent balance comprised of equal parts of high nurture (connecting) and high structure (correcting) that we can best lead our children in the direction they need to go and show them the love of God in tangible ways.

This conclusion is also supported by child development research that confirms that an optimal environment for children is one in which there is an equal balance between nurture and structure. This Authoritative Parenting style is rooted in the belief that the Law (structure) is our teacher and that Grace (nurture) is our guide. In fact, the research supports that those children who experience this ideal balance are at a lower risk for acting out behaviors in adolescence. The parent who understands the need for a balance of nurture and structure is most likely to be successful with the at-risk child.

I like to think of this as yet another example of science catching up with God. After all, isn't this how God relates to us as His children? Using a balance of both nurture (His tender mercies) and structure (His guiding hand that directs and corrects us), He kindly, yet firmly, leads us into a right relationship with Him. The apostle Paul puts it this way: "God is kind, but he's not soft. In kindness he takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into a radical life-change" (Romans 2:4, *The Message*). Both we and our children need love that is expressed in ways that lead to connection and transformation.

Questions to Consider and Discuss:

- 1. Growing up did your parents place more of an emphasis on structure or nurture, or was there a balance in your home? What influence does your experience growing up (in terms of how you were parented) have on the way you are currently parenting?**
- 2. Overall, do you tend more toward structure or nurture in parenting your child? If you have more than one child, is your approach the same for all of your children or does it differ from child to child?**
- 3. How do you view the way God loves and relates to you in terms of nurture and structure? Does this view of how God loves and relates to you influence the way you love and relate to your child? If so, how?**

4. What are some aspects of your parenting approach that may be a little out of balance? Be specific.

Learning New Ways to Relate

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in order to engage your children with a balance of structure and nurture you may need to un-learn some of the old ways of relating to them. At the same time, you will definitely want to learn some new ways of relating to them—especially ways that are proven to be effective with children from hard places. Two important ideas that exemplify this “new way” of relating to our children are learning and applying the IDEAL response and using Re-Do’s to correct misbehavior. Let’s look at each more closely in the light of some real world examples.

The IDEAL acrostic is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 of *The Connected Child*. If you are not familiar with this approach, take a few minutes to read pages 96-97 of *The Connected Child* and watch the video at <http://empoweredtoconnect.org/the-ideal-response-for-parents/>.

To recap, IDEAL is an acrostic that stands for:

- I – Immediate
- D – Direct
- E – Efficient
- A – Action-based
- L – Leveled at the behavior (not at the child)

Embedded in this simple approach to responding to misbehavior is the principle of balancing structure and nurture. When it is applied consistently by attentive and insightful parents, this approach will yield more connection, greater contentment and the desired change in behavior, as compared to approaches that tend toward the extremes we mentioned earlier.

A Less Than IDEAL Response

By Michael & Amy Monroe

The thought of an outdoor family photo strikes fear in the hearts of most parents with young children. This experience can leave even the best parents feeling utterly powerless against both the weather and their children’s behavior. The stress starts even before the picture day arrives. Finding coordinated outfits and keeping everyone’s hair perfectly combed is a challenge all its own. This humbling and expensive rite of passage leaves many parents wishing for one thing above all else:

Please Lord, let them smile!

Let's face it, situations like this can bring out the worst not only in our children, but also in us as parents. This was the case during what will certainly be known for all time as the Monroe Family Picture Fiasco of 2009. But from the mess of our poor handling of the situation came a real opportunity for better understanding and a chance to learn from our mistakes.

Two Wrongs Won't Make It Right

Everything was set for the early morning photo session at a local park and everyone looked "picture perfect." The photographer started with the kids, positioning all four (ranging in age from five to nine) on a white rock in front of the beautiful waterfall. She backed away and lifted the camera to her eye ... and then it all began to fall apart.

Carter, our five-year-old boy, decided that he simply was not going to smile. There was no real reason that we could tell, he just wasn't going to. The photographer started with the old standby of silly faces. But it was to no avail. Then Mom and Dad got in on the act with a few tickles that quickly led to begging and pleading—still no smile. In fact, at that point Carter started to show more than a little attitude, as in, "I'm not smiling and you can't make me." And that's when we began to make a real mess of things.

Despite our sincere desire to be good parents we made some major mistakes in dealing with Carter's behavior. Looking back, we were primarily focused on wanting our kids to behave, not to mention wanting a good family photo. As a result, we failed to see his misbehavior as an opportunity for teaching and connection, even if it was coming at a most inopportune time. We started by using bribes, from promising candy to going swimming later that day, and when that approach didn't work we immediately moved to threats. The more he refused to cooperate, the more we threatened him. The more we threatened him, the more he refused to cooperate. We were in a battle and we weren't about to lose—not to a five-year-old. After all, we're the boss, right?

As the battle continued to escalate, Carter eventually began crying, which needless to say, doesn't portray the "happy family" we wanted everyone to see in our photos. Frustrated and embarrassed, it was time to pull out the "big guns." We took Carter aside and threatened to take away every privilege and ounce of possible fun he could imagine—for *the rest of his life*—if he did not stop crying and start cooperating by smiling NOW! These threats were accompanied by an onslaught of words, questions and accusations in increasingly louder and frustrated tones: "What is wrong with you?" "You are going to ruin this photo!" "We are wasting our money!" and "Why do you always do this?" Those are just a few of the not-so loving and kind things we said to him in our fit of frustration. But again, it was to no avail. The more we vented and raised our voices, the more Carter fell apart. By the end he was so upset that he couldn't have smiled even if he had wanted to.

Our missteps along the way were too numerous to count; our approach was anything but ideal. We tried all of the obvious and convenient tactics but they led us nowhere. To make things worse, we lost sight of what was most important. Our goal should not have been good behavior; our goal should have been (and must always be) to deepen the connection between our child and us, even—maybe especially—when we have to correct. That connection can then serve as the foundation that helps our kids make the right choices and, when they fail to, allows us to help them get back on track. Instead, we lost our focus and allowed our frustration to keep us from connecting with Carter and him with us.

Later that day we discovered, much to our shame, that Carter wasn't feeling well. He was diagnosed the next day with a major sinus infection, which is a chronic condition for him and one of several legacies of the "hard place" from which he comes. While this certainly does not excuse his misbehavior and refusal to cooperate, it does highlight the need to better understand and appreciate the complex array of factors and influences that are always present with our children. Had we chosen to handle the situation differently by spending time trying to talk (and listen) to Carter about why he wasn't cooperating and less time bribing, threatening and venting our frustrations, he likely would have told us he wasn't feeling well and we could have given him a big hug and talked with him about how we could help him feel better. If we had taken the time to respond to Carter in an IDEAL way as suggested in *The Connected Child*, seeking to connect even as we corrected, we likely could have avoided a very frustrating situation for all of us.

Back home, after all of the apologies were made (including many from us to all of the kids) and accepted and after everyone had calmed down (including Dad, who spent more than a few minutes in the "think it over" chair himself), we were able to talk about the Monroe Family Picture Fiasco of 2009 with a few laughs. As things turned out, the photos weren't all that bad. The photographer even managed to sneak a couple of great shots of Carter smiling somewhere along the way! And in the end, despite our less than ideal handling of the situation, Mom and Dad learned some valuable lessons, and we all grew a little closer together as a family.

Key Scripture Verses

When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

—John 21:9, 15-17 (NIV)

Another Chance to Get it Right

Scripture records only two accounts of a charcoal fire, yet these accounts tell two very different aspects of a single story that is particularly instructive for us as both followers of Christ and as parents. Both accounts are found in John's Gospel (Chapters 18 and 21), and they bookend one of the most well known

interactions between Jesus and the apostle Peter. The first account involves Peter's denial of Jesus just before his death; the second records Jesus' restoration of Peter following his resurrection.

Peter surely represents one of the most memorable figures among all of Jesus' disciples. Impulsive, self-assured and outspoken, Peter was never one to hold back. We see this as Peter jumps to Jesus' defense in the garden the night before his crucifixion. Likewise, in response to Jesus' prediction that Peter would deny him, we find Peter unwavering in his insistence that he would never do such a thing. But only a short time later, Peter is standing in the temple courtyard warming himself around a charcoal fire (John 18:18) and, when asked whether he is associated with this Jesus who is about to be crucified, Peter denies Jesus not once, but three times, confirming his denial with an oath.

Few accounts in all of the Gospels so vividly evidence our human condition of sin and weakness. And yet, shortly after the resurrection, Jesus encounters Peter—again around a charcoal fire—and fully restores him (John 21). We see this complete restoration on display in Peter's response to Jesus asking him for a third time, "Do you love me?" (John 21:17), when Peter answers by relying on Jesus' knowledge of Peter's own heart. Surely this is the ultimate of connections—to understand that we are fully known and fully loved by Jesus.

This passage in John 21 is a beautiful example of Jesus giving Peter an opportunity to "return to the scene of his crime" and "try it again." There, beside the charcoal fire, Jesus offered Peter a chance to get it right—a "re-do" of sorts—by professing his love for the Master. It serves as a great model for us as followers of Christ and as parents. The location and manner in which Jesus offered Peter a "re-do" were not accidents. Likewise, we as parents should be just as intentional in offering our children opportunities like this as often as we can. Giving our children the chance to "try it again" and get it right is an effective way to correct behavior, particularly for less serious behaviors. In addition, this approach provides them with "motor memory" for doing the right thing and offers an opportunity for us to give praise and encouragement once they re-do the task or follow the instruction. These outcomes help our children experience doing the right thing and help to deepen our connections with them as well.

Questions to Consider and Discuss:

- 1. Think back to a recent example of when your child misbehaved and you handled the situation less than ideally. Applying the IDEAL approach, what could you have done differently in that situation?**
- 2. In what ways has God offered you a "re-do" when you've sinned and missed the mark?**
- 3. Why is it sometimes difficult to offer your child a "re-do"?**

4. What behaviors does your child exhibit that might be best responded to with a “re-do”? Pick one or two and discuss in detail how you would go about using this strategy.