

The Five Biggest Mistakes Parents Make With Their Children

Rich Nathan

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Living Sanely in an Insane World: Sane Parenting in an Insane World

I have been doing a series on living sanely in an insane world. This month I will be talking about sane parenting in an insane world. It is extremely hard these days to raise healthy, responsible, polite, caring, hard-working kids who don't just want to sit in front of a TV set all day or play video games. It is very difficult to raise kids who are thoughtful to others and not self-consumed, who don't have to be dragged and pushed into assisting in the family, or doing a little bit around the house.

Most parents that I know, whether they are in the church family or outside the church, want to do the right things with their kids. I don't know any parents who say: "My aim regarding my kids is to raise a disrespectful, lazy, vulgar child who does drugs and has no conscience." But it is so hard to raise good kids.

We could point to a number of factors regarding why this is so. We certainly live in an anti-family culture where it seems that everything and everyone from little league coaches to band directors to makers of video games conspire to attack the time we have together as a family. We certainly know that many of the values of the larger culture do not contribute to an others-centeredness for people, but rather to self-centeredness. We know that there is a breakdown of

community. Virtually no one other than parents will take responsibility for looking out for your child, guiding your child, supporting your values.

There is certainly a breakdown of shared values within the community. We know we live in the aftermath of the sexual revolution. Kids are bombarded from the age of 3 with the message: "Having sex before marriage is normal. There is no way that you can wait until marriage. Taking drugs is just part of growing up. Being rebellious is what is expected of every teenager. So is being cynical and angry and disrespectful."

And yet, we watch some parents who seem to do really well. My definition of a parent who seems to do really well is not that you've had no trouble with your children. God knows Marlene and I have had plenty of trouble, and I certainly used to judge parents when their kids were doing something wrong. It seems to me that the only people who judge parents really harshly are those who have never had kids, or those with only one child that happens to be really compliant. Any parents who have raised a strong-willed child, a child who is in your face from the time they are able to walk, tends to be more gracious and understanding towards other parents.

So, my definition of a good parent is not one who has had no troubles. My definition of a good parent is someone who is committed to the continual process of improving their parenting. I look for life-long learners. You know that when

you are a parent, you are a parent until you die. No matter how old your children are, you are still their parents. The nature of your relationship certainly changes. The way you parent certainly changes, but good parenting for me means that you are continually working on improving your parenting skills.

Let me share a word of hope for many of us. It is never too late to work on improving a relationship with your children even if your children are adults and you've messed things up. At the very least, you as a parent can sit down with your child and talk with them about the things you wish you'd done. You can ask your child for forgiveness. You can try to heal hurts and wounds because of mistakes, your selfishness, being caught up with your own problems as your child was growing up.

There are very few people who set out to be bad parents. And there is almost no child on earth that wouldn't like a better relationship with their parents. It is never too late to improve.

Let me tell you a story. A number of years ago I got a call from a very desperate man, who I will call Ben, who knew about our church but who was not an attender or member. Ben asked me if I would visit him. He said he was dying. I visited Ben and discovered his body was filled with cancer. The doctor gave him about a month to live. As I talked with him, I discovered that Ben was wracked

with guilt regarding the way he had lived and, in particular, the way he had treated his son, who was now an adult and wanted nothing to do with him.

I talked with Ben about how to find peace with God. I told him that were he to die in his present condition, he would experience the wrath of God. I also told him the good news of the gospel that God, in his love, sent Jesus to die for his sins on the cross. I explained that at the cross, Christ appeased the wrath of God and satisfied the demands of God's justice. Now, as a result of Christ's sacrificial death, God was offering Ben the forgiveness of all of his sins, escape from God's wrath, reconciliation with God, and eternal life.

We prayed together and this dying man was sincerely and certainly saved in that moment. A couple of days later, Ben was taken to hospice. While there, he had such a troubling dream one night that the nurses could not comfort him. One of the hospice nurses called me and said: "Ben is absolutely inconsolable. He had a dream and the dream has so shaken him that he cannot find peace."

I went in to visit Ben and asked him: "What is it that you dreamed?" Ben dreamed that he was falling down this dark hole. As he reached up for help, he grabbed the hand of his son. But instead of helping, he was dragging his son down this hole and the two of them kept tumbling down.

In that moment, the Holy Spirit gave me the interpretation to the dream. I said to him: “Ben, God does not want you to die while you still fear that your past sins and your mistakes are going to drag your son down into hell, where you were headed until you found peace with God.”

By God’s grace, I was able to connect with Ben’s son. We met together in that hospice room, a dying man, his adult son, me as a pastor, but most importantly Jesus was there. This dying man, with great grief and great sincerity, begged his son’s forgiveness for all the mistakes he had made as a dad, for the horrible example he had been in life, and the unhappiness he had caused him. Ben’s son, in that hospice room, granted him forgiveness and they embraced. Then Ben explained to his son how he had found Jesus Christ just a couple of days before. He asked his son to join him in his newfound relationship with Christ. They held hands together and just as I had done two days before with Ben, Ben now prayed out loud and his son followed him – not down a hole into hell, but into salvation with Jesus Christ.

Ben made a ton of mistakes with his son. All of us make mistakes. We’re going to talk about some of these today. But as long as you have breath, it is not too late to improve your relationship with your children and learn new competencies.

Today, as we continue this series on Parenting in an Insane World, I want to talk about The Five Biggest Mistakes Parents Make With Their Children. Let’s pray.

One of the biggest mistakes that parents make in raising children is to attempt to avoid pain – pain for our children and also pain for ourselves. In 1 Cor. 13, Paul lays out the characteristics of love and he says in v. 4,

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^{1Co 13:4} Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

I love 1 Cor. 13.4 in the old King James Version. It reads:

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Charity [love] suffers long and is kind.

It implies bearing with, putting up with, continuing on with painful, inconvenient circumstances, or putting up with, bearing with people who oppose your agenda.

Parenting is often a lesson in long-suffering. Parenting is often God's primary way to teach us to bear with great pain. The same Mary who received the announcement from the angel that she was to be the mother of the Savior of the world, and joyfully proclaimed in Luke 1:46-49,

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Lk 1:46 And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

Lk 1:47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

Lk 1:48 for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

Lk 1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

also received this prophecy from an old man named Simeon when Jesus was just 8 days old:

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Lk 2:34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against,

Lk 2:35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

A sword did pierce Mary’s soul many, many times as she watched her boy being rejected, mocked, spit on, beaten, stripped, and nailed to a cross. Mary learned the lesson of long-suffering through her son, Jesus.

Love suffereth long.

For some of you the long suffering that you are learning in parenting is the pain of raising children with multiple disabilities. Parents, you cannot raise a child without being vulnerable to pain, the pain of having a child who is left behind because they are just not getting it, the pain of watching your child ride the bench, or strike out again, or not be invited to the prom. The pain of raising a

child who is disobedient and who rejects what you value and believe. Some of you know the heartaches of raising a child that has at least for now turned their backs on the Lord and on you.

But many of us, as parents, are tempted to try to eliminate all pain from our children's lives, even the God-given consequences of our children's bad behavior. So, for example, your child has been negligent in completing an assignment for school. They goofed off all weekend. It is now Sunday night and at 9:00 p.m. and they announce that a book report is due the next day, but they've done none of the research and none of the work to prepare for that book report. What do you do?

Do you stay up with your child finding them relevant websites and facts on the web, assisting them to write their report? Or do you say: "I'm sorry. You had all weekend to do this. You can stay up now if you want until 11:00 p.m., but you are on your own."

Or worse, your child was being corrected by a teacher at school. Rather than meekly submitting to the teacher's reprimand, your child becomes even more defiant. They ratchet up the level of confrontation until the school principal had to get involved and now your child is faced with a one-day, in-school suspension. What do you do?

Do you support the teacher by further disciplining your child at home, requiring them to write a full apology to the teacher and principal? Or do you go to the child's defense? Or do you, perhaps, laugh it off, sharing with your child how many suspensions you got when you were going through school?

I'm not going to give you the one correct answer for solving all the issues for how to deal with your child when your child's choices will produce pain for them. I think parenting is an art, not a science. But I do believe that one of the major problems with parenting today is that parents often fall into the trap of enabling their child's bad behavior by assisting them to avoid natural consequences and pain.

Alcoholics Anonymous many years ago discovered that if there was going to be real healing in the life of an alcoholic, they often needed to treat the other family members who were enabling the addictive behavior. They even came up with a term for this enabling behavior. They called it co-dependence. The alcoholic was dependent upon alcohol. The codependent excused and enabled the alcoholic to continue their bad behavior. They came up with criteria for codependency:

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1. Do you blame yourself for causing them to go out on a binge?
2. Do you deny or minimize the problem thinking it will get better?
3. Do you justify or rationalize their substance abuse?

4. Do you continually look for evidence that they are gaining control over their substance abuse?
5. Do you take on responsibilities that rightfully belong to the substance abuser?
6. Do you provide them with money, food, and clothing and shelter even though they could meet these basic needs for themselves if they weren't abusing substances?
7. Do you overlook frequent lateness, unreliability and broken promises?
8. Do you find yourself tolerating behaviors that used to be unacceptable to you?
9. Do you use alcohol or other drugs with them to keep peace in the relationship?

AA says that if you answered "yes" to three or more questions, you may be involved in unhealthy codependency and enabling patterns.

Do you suspect, moms and dads, that you are enabling your child in developing a pattern of negligence regarding their work, or defiance or substance abuse or selfishness?

It is unlikely, by the way, that you will develop the competency of allowing your child to experience the natural, God-given consequences of their choices unless you believe that short-term pain is a good thing because it will assist your child to

avoid longer-term more debilitating pain in the future. The scriptures say in Heb. 12.11,

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Heb 12:11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

In the wonderful book titled *Boundaries With Kids*, Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend say:

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“Just because your child is in pain does not mean that something bad is happening. Something good may be occurring such as his coming to grips with reality for the first time. And this encounter with reality is never a happy experience. But if you will allow them to experience pain and draw the line, your child will internalize the line and grow from this experience. This is the law of the universe. Frustration and painful moments of discipline help a child to learn to delay gratification, one of the most important character traits a person can have.”

If you are able to hold the line, then character will develop – what Hebrews calls a harvest of righteousness. If you don't, then things will just get worse.

But there is a second kind of pain that parents often avoid in raising our children and that is our own pain. Sometimes parents so over-identify with the pain that

their children are going through that they do not allow their kids to develop the emotional maturity or toughness to deal with life's normal bumps and challenges. It is normal to experience some degree of rejection. It is normal to not be picked for a team or a play, or for the band. It is normal in a fallen world to have people say mean things to us. It is normal to fail a test. It is normal to experience frustration.

Sometimes a child's pain begins to hook into a parent's own unhealed pain. A child's experience of rejection can call to mind a parent's memory of deep rejection. A child's failure can remind a parent of their own wounding experience of failure. If you find yourself frequently tied to your child's pain, not by way of comforting your child, but by way of being reminded of your own unhealed pain, parents, this is an area where you need to personally find healing.

Again, the book *Boundaries With Kids* is so helpful for parents who over-identify with their children. Cloud and Townsend say:

"Life is not about avoiding suffering. Life is about learning to suffer well. The child who is taught to avoid pain altogether will encounter much more pain in life than necessary. It is painful to have broken relationships because you do not know how to respect others. It is painful to not graduate because you are not disciplined enough to study. It is painful to have financial difficulties because you cannot control your spending. All of these problems come from the tendency to

avoid the pain of momentary struggle – the pain of self-discipline and delaying gratification. If we learn to lose what we want in the moment, to feel sad about not getting our way, and then to adapt to the reality demanded of difficult situations, joy and success will follow. Letting a child suffer in the moment teaches this lesson.”

The second great mistake that parents make is not disciplining their children. By discipline, I mean simply being clear about your expectations, laying out the rules without ambiguity and, of course, the consequences if the rules are violated. If you do x, then y will occur.

- If you are not in bed by 8:30, I will not read to you tonight.
- If you don't put your clothes in the hamper, I will not wash them this week.
- If you don't take out the trash, then I'm going to charge you for my services in taking out the trash, and it will be deducted from your allowance.
- If you track mud into the kitchen again, you will have to wash the floor.
- If you scream at mom again, you will sit in time-out.

By discipline, I mean being clear about your expectations and the consequences that will happen and then sticking to it.

Let me share with you a story about a man who refused to discipline his children. The man's name was Eli. He was perhaps the most respected man in the nation

in which he lived for 40 years. Eli was Israel's religious leader. He was a high priest. He was also a judge, meaning that he had great legal authority. Judges at that time would go on a circuit and so he was responsible for deciding all kinds of civil and criminal matters. He was a wealthy man. Yet, we are going to find in the story of Eli that he and his sons lost everything because Eli would not discipline his boys.

Is it important to discipline our children? God says absolutely yes.

You say, "Why? Why is it so important to discipline our kids?"

Here is the first thing. When parents don't discipline their children, their children don't respect God. Look at 1 Samuel 2:12"

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¹Sa 2:12 Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD.

Parents, I want you to hear this real clearly. You represent the authority of God to your children. If your children consistently show you disrespect, then they will show consistent disrespect to the authority of God.

I know some moms who suffer from low self-esteem and some dads who, likewise, may suffer from low self-esteem who are continually struggling with the

question. “Why should I require respect from my children?” Who am I? I’m not perfect.” You should require respect because you want them to respect God. It is not just for your own sake or for your own ego or so that you could feel like you are in control. It is because if you don’t have your children respect your limits, they won’t respect the limits of God. If they don’t take you seriously, they won’t take God seriously.

Why do you think the first commandment regarding our relationship with each other in the Ten Commandments, the first commandment before even “don’t murder”, “don’t steal”, “don’t lie” – before any of those commandments, the first commandment in our relationship with each other was: “Honor your father and your mother.” Because respect for parents is a foundation for respecting God’s limits in every other area of life.

Let’s continue to look at this situation with Eli’s sons. Verses 13-16.

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^{1Sa 2:13} Now it was the practice of the priests with the people that whenever anyone offered a sacrifice and while the meat was being boiled, the servant of the priest would come with a three-pronged fork in his hand.

^{1Sa 2:14} He would plunge it into the pan or kettle or caldron or pot, and the priest would take for himself whatever the fork brought up. This is how they treated all the Israelites who came to Shiloh.

^{1Sa 2:15} But even before the fat was burned, the servant of the priest would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, “Give the priest some meat to roast; he won’t accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.”

^{1Sa 2:16} If the man said to him, “Let the fat be burned up first, and then take whatever you want,” the servant would then answer, “No, hand it over now; if you don’t, I’ll take it by force.”

When parents don't discipline their children, their children won't respect other people. See, if there are no limits with mom or dad, if I can get away with murder at home, then I am taught that life is to be lived on my own terms. Since mom or dad never says "no" to me, I am completely unaccustomed to hearing the word "no" from anyone else: teacher, boss, principal, coach. Mom, Dad, if you want your children to respect not only the authority of God but the authority of a future boss or teacher and to respect the rights of other people, you must draw limits and discipline your kids. Nor will your kids be able to develop long-lasting friends, because friendship is based upon giving respect to another person.

When I was teaching at OSU some years ago, I gave an exam. After the exam, about three hours later, I was sitting in my office working and a student came to my office and literally kicked the door open and said to me: "Nathan, I missed the test this morning. I would like to take the test now."

I was so startled by the brazenness of this guy that I just looked at him and said, "I am sorry, what did you say?"

He said, "Yeah, I missed your test this morning. I had some car problems. I want to take the test now."

I said, "Well, I am sorry. I am not going to give you the test now."

Here was a young man whom I am certain was not used to being defied by his mother or father. He had such an exaggerated sense of self-importance that when I told him I wouldn't give him the exam then, he used profanity and said, "Let's stop #@%&* with each other. What are you going to do for me?"

I stood up from my desk and I said, "I'll tell you what I am going to do for you. I am going to fail you on this test that you just missed and then I am going down in just a few minutes to the Dean's office and throw you out of my class."

This guy couldn't believe what he heard. He stormed out of my office. He kicked a bunch of doors on the way down the hall and I am sure in future years he was a nightmare for every teacher and every boss who crossed his path.

When parents don't discipline their children, their kids don't respect other people. When parents don't discipline their children, their children don't know that they are loved.

Proverbs 13:24 says,

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Pr 13:24 He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.

Likewise, Hebrews 12:5-6 says:

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Heb 12:5 And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ^{Heb 12:6} because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”

One of the ways that the Lord communicates that he loves us is that he disciplines us. The writer of Hebrews goes on and says:

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Heb 12:8 If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.

In other words, not only do we love our children by disciplining them, but in fact one of the ways that our children know that they are loved is that mom and dad care enough to set boundaries. I know some of you really struggle with drawing lines and exercising discipline because you feel like it is unkind, unloving or ungenerous, but the Bible says the exact opposite. Not only do you love someone by exercising discipline, but also they feel loved. That doesn’t mean they enjoy the discipline. It just means that they know you care.

A young woman told me that when she was in High School, her mother discovered drugs in her purse. Mom came to her and held up a bag and said, “What’s in here?” The daughter said, “What do you think it is?” Mom said, “Well, it looks like pills.” She put them on the table and walked out of the room and

never said another word to the girl about what she discovered in her purse. The girl said that from that moment, I determined that my mother couldn't care less about me.

If you don't draw lines regarding whom your kids are hanging out with or what they are doing in their free time, what their curfew is, then you don't care about your kids. That is the message they get.

A third mistake that parents make is favoritism towards one child over against another. James Dobson, who most of you know from his famous radio show, and who is a child psychologist, made this statement some years ago:

"If American women were asked to indicate the most irritating feature of child raising, I am convinced that sibling rivalry would get their unanimous vote. Siblings argue with each other, hit, kick, scream, grab toys, taunt, tattle, and sabotage each other. I knew one child who deeply resented being sick with a cold while his older sibling was healthy. He secretly blew his nose on the mouthpiece of his brother's musical instrument!"

Now sibling rivalry is not new. We read about it in the very opening pages of the Bible. Cain so resented his brother, Abel, that he killed him. But you know, parents can contribute to the natural antagonism that exists between children by playing favorites.

I want you to watch this video clip from a recent movie called *Swimming Upstream*. In it you see a dad creating life-long antagonism between brothers by favoring his older son above his younger son.

VIDEO CLIP – Swimming Upstream

How do we play favorites? By comparing one of your children to another child, so that the other child is made to feel inferior as a result.

- Why can't you be more like your sister, Amanda, who always cleans up her room?
- Why can't you be more like your brother, Josh, who does so well in school?

Parents, do you use comparative statements when bringing correction to your kids? How many of you parents were raised with comparative statements?

Children are particularly sensitive to statements concerning their looks. Watch your children some times when their brother or sister is complimented about their looks.

- Emma is certainly beautiful. She's really going to turn heads.

What do you think Emma's sister, Madison, feels like when she continually hears complements about Emma's looks? Will she grow up with the confirmed sense: "Well, I am the ugly one?"

Parents unwisely compare their children's intelligence with each other.

- Actually, it is amazing, but I think Billy, who is younger, is actually smarter than his older brother.

We do need to comprehend the power of our words. We do, parents, need to grow in our capacity to know the impact of what we say upon our children.

James Dobson has this example in his book, *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions About Raising Children*. This was written by a nine-year old son to his eight-year old brother the evening after the younger son had beaten him in a race.

Dear Jim,

I am the greatest and you are the badest. And I can beat everybody in a race and you can't beat anybody in a race. I am the smartest and you are the dumbest. I am the best sport player and you are the badest sport player. And you're also a hog. I can beat anybody up. And that's the truth. And that's the end of this story.

Yours truly,

Richard

Here is a child who had been stunned by being beaten by his brother and he needed to retaliate. That is what we find very often, a life-long pattern of sibling rivalry that can extend well into adulthood whenever parents play favorites.

A fourth great mistake that parents make is forgetting that the most important relationship in offering a child security is not the relationship between parent and child, but rather the relationship between their mother and father. There is no better way to secure your child's happiness, or sense of worth, or give your child a sense of security than to allow your child to feel the love and commitment you have for your spouse.

I've talked with our counseling staff here at Vineyard. One of my dear friends, Mark Sullivan, is a family counselor here. He spent years meeting with the families of emotionally disturbed young people many of whom were ordered into his office because they got into trouble with the law. Mark told me invariably one issue that must be talked about with a troubled teen is not the relationship of the parents with their children, but rather the parents with each other. Often, if you scratch the surface of a troubled kid, you will see unresolved tensions between a husband and wife.

Husband and wife may disagree about their priorities. They may disagree about their child raising philosophies. They disagree how to discipline. Mom may undercut Dad's authority. Dad may talk behind mom's back.

Listen to me now, the most important thing parents can do for their children is to love and support each other. The greatest fear of most children is that their parents will stop loving each other and will get a divorce. Let me prove my case to you. If you are still married and have children, have you experienced a fight between you and your spouse when your children were present? Have you ever noticed how your children responded when you and your spouse were fighting? I don't know about your kids, but my children's moods totally changed when Marlene and I were having an argument. They got real quiet. They looked afraid.

I am not saying that you bury things, or that you don't ever allow your children to see you having a conflict. But if you want your children to be really insecure, tear up your mate in their presence.

On the other hand, if you want to improve your competency with your kids, make your first priority your relationship with your spouse. One of the best things you can do for your child is to begin to schedule a date night with your spouse. Show your mate open affection in front of your kids. If your kids are anything like my children were when they were little, or like my grandchildren are now, they will

squeal and complain when you give your wife or husband a big kiss or hug in front of them.

- Oh, daddy, stop it!
- Yuck...they are kissing again. That's disgusting.

But there is nothing that will secure a child's soul more than knowing that his or her parents love each other intensely.

On the other hand, if your children fear that you may get divorced, or if they see their friends' parents getting divorced it creates great fear in them. It is so securing for your children to know that their parents are committed to this marriage forever. They are so committed that they will openly show affection for each other. They are so committed to their relationship that they still want to date.

I will tell you one thing that I said to my son when he was an adolescent. He was really sassy with his mother on one occasion. I grabbed him by the shoulders and looked him straight in the eye and said, "You may think you can talk to your mother that way; but you better not talk to my wife that way anymore."

Let me sum this up by saying, parents, all the research says that to have healthy children, what you need is a marriage-centered home instead of a child-centered home. Your children need to hear you say that you believe you are the luckiest

person in the world to be married to their mother or father. I frequently tell my son and daughter that I love their mother intensely; that I thought their mother was the most beautiful woman in the world; that I am incredibly blessed to be married to their mom; that I married way over my head.

The last great mistake that parents make is that we forget to catch our kids doing what's right. 1 Cor. 13.6-7 says this:

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1Co 13:6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

1Co 13:7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

It is easy to pounce on children when they make mistakes. We're often very quick as parents to bring correction, but we're slow to praise our children for what they do right.

In Ken Blanchard's and Spencer Johnson's book, *The One Minute Manager*, talk about how a manager in any company can help people set goals and guide them to reach those goals. According to Blanchard and Johnson, the one minute manager moves among his people trying to catch them doing something right. When he does, he quickly shows appreciation and encouragement for their efforts.

I want to close by sharing with you a clip from a video put out by National Geographic titled *Celebrate What's Right With The World*.

Video – Celebrate What's Right With The World

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- II. Failing To Discipline Our Kids (1 Sam. 2.12-17)
- III. Playing Favorites (Gen. 27:1-4)
- IV. A Division Between Husband And Wife (Gen. 27:5-13)
- V. Failing To Celebrate What Is Right (1 Cor. 13.7,8)