ADULTS SAVING KIDS
Founded by Alvin Erickson

Lesson 4

Correcting Behavior Without Condemning the Child

Teaching Responsibility While Protecting a Child's Sense of Worth

SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 4:15

"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ."

Ephesians 4:15 (NIV)

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Correction Is Part of Love

Children need guidance, boundaries, and correction because they are learning how to live in a world where their choices affect themselves and others. Our responsibility as parents is not simply to stop unwanted behavior; rather, it is to help our children develop the understanding, skills, and self-control they need to make better decisions.

The apostle Paul encourages Christians to speak the truth in love. Although he was addressing relationships within the church, this principle offers valuable guidance for parents as well. True love does not require us to overlook wrongdoing, but it deeply guides *how* we respond to it. We can be firm about what is right and wrong while remaining entirely respectful of the child we are teaching.

Learning Takes Time and Repetition

Imagine teaching a young child to count to ten. We know instinctively that a child doesn't automatically know how to count or read, so we understand that we must patiently teach them. You repeat the numbers, encourage their attempts, correct mistakes, and celebrate progress, knowing you cannot expect the child to master counting after hearing the numbers just once.

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Now consider teaching that same child to share a toy, tell the truth, manage disappointment, or control an angry response. These vital skills also require instruction, repetition, practice, and time. Yet parents sometimes become frustrated when children repeat a behavior they have already been told to stop, thinking, *"I've told you a hundred times!"* But knowing a rule is not the same as having developed the maturity and self-control to follow it consistently. If we understand that learning to count or read requires systematic teaching and practice, shouldn't we expect learning how to behave to require practice, too? This doesn't mean ignoring disobedience or eliminating consequences; it simply means remembering that correction is part of an ongoing teaching process.

Correct the Behavior, Not the Child's Identity

Consider a child who lies about completing a responsibility. A parent might angrily respond, *"You're such a liar! I can't trust anything you say!"* Alternatively, the parent might say, *"You told me something that wasn't true. Honesty is important, and we need to talk about what happened and how you can make it right."*

The second response still addresses the wrongdoing and does not excuse dishonesty, but it leaves room for the child to acknowledge the mistake, accept appropriate consequences, and learn to become more trustworthy. There is a profound distinction here: saying *"You did something wrong"* is not the same as saying *"There is something wrong with you."* Repeated negative labels can become part of how children see themselves, causing them to believe that their mistakes define who they are.

Our goal is to help children take responsibility for their behavior while preserving their sense of worth and identity in Christ. Their mistakes may reveal something they need to learn or change, but those mistakes do not define who they are, because their worth is grounded in God's love rather than their ability to behave perfectly. When correction reinforces this truth, children can learn to acknowledge wrongdoing without believing that they themselves are unworthy of love.

When Parents Make Mistakes

Parents are learning, too. We sometimes lose patience, raise our voices, make unfair assumptions, or respond more harshly than a situation requires. When this happens, we have a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate the very qualities we are trying to teach.

A parent might say, *"I was frustrated, and I spoke to you unkindly. That was wrong, and I'm sorry. We still need to talk about what happened, but I should have handled it differently."* An apology does not diminish parental authority; rather, it demonstrates humility, honesty, and accountability. It also teaches children that taking responsibility for wrongdoing is not something to fear or avoid, showing them that we can acknowledge our mistakes, make things right where possible, and continue growing.

Discipline Is Teaching, Not Condemnation

The word discipline is closely connected with the idea of instruction and training. Effective discipline helps children understand what went wrong, why it matters, and what they can do differently next time. Depending on the child's age and the situation, this may involve setting limits, making restitution, practicing a better response, or experiencing an appropriate consequence.

Sometimes the very first step is simply helping an overwhelmed child become calm enough to listen and learn. Because children have different temperaments and mature at different rates—what works well for one child may need to be adapted for another—our responsibility is to provide the guidance each child needs while consistently communicating:

> *"Your behavior matters. Your choices have consequences. And you are still loved."*

Questions for Reflection

1. When I correct my child, am I primarily trying to stop the behavior, or am I helping my child learn how to make a better choice?
2. Are there behaviors I expect my child to have mastered that may still require patient instruction, repetition, and practice?

THIS WEEK

Put It Into Practice

Choose one recurring behavior that frustrates you and approach it as a skill your child is still learning. When the behavior occurs:

- Pause before responding, especially if you are angry.
- Clearly identify the behavior that needs to change without labeling the child.
- Explain or demonstrate what the child can do differently.
- Follow through with appropriate boundaries or consequences when needed.
- Notice and encourage progress, even when it is small.

At the end of the week, ask yourself: *Did approaching correction as teaching change the way I responded to my child?*

LOOKING AHEAD

A Thought to Carry Forward

Our goal is not merely to raise children who know when they have done something wrong, but to raise children who know how to recognize a mistake, take responsibility, make things right, and grow from the experience. Children will make mistakes, and so will we. The important question is what we teach them through our responses. When correction is guided by truth and love, children can learn that accountability and personal worth are never opposites.

In our next lesson, we will explore how problems and difficulties can become opportunities for learning, growth, and developing wisdom.