

A Theology of Children



Nove Vailaau

Barnardos New Zealand and the Royal New Zealand Plunket Society are jointly publishing this booklet to advocate that all children are treated with dignity and respect. These two major child agencies in New Zealand are supporting this publication to enable the public to have an informed understanding of the biblical precepts about raising children, which emphasise positive nurturing and non-violent discipline, which at heart means teaching and showing rather than punishment.

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A Theology of Children was written by Reverend Nove Vailaau. If you use material from this document please acknowledge Reverend Vailaau's authorship.

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Explanations of the illustrated symbols used throughout *A Theology of Children* can be found on the inside back cover of this book.

Foreword

It is a great pity that a subject as important as the upbringing of children in a loving and caring manner should be reduced to media slogans such as 'my right to smack' and 'nanny state'. The so-called anti-smacking bill arose from a desire to rectify a situation under which parents had been able to exercise extreme forms of violence against children and claim Section 59 of the Crimes Act as a legal defence. I, along with other church leaders, was a supporter of the law change, basing my views on the wealth of evidence showing physical punishment to be the least effective way to guide children as well as being potentially harmful to them. I was also moved by the evidence of groups such as Barnardos and Plunket who work on the front line with children of this country.

The debate continues, largely in an adversarial and superficial manner. In such a context this excellent work by Reverend Nove Vaialau and Dr Elizabeth Clements opens the way to a deeper understanding of the issues at stake. They take as a starting point the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1993) which states that 'the child should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.'

This *Theology of Children* considers the biblical evidence for attitudes to children, noting the emphasis on a positive and nurturing approach which reflects God's love for us. 'Can you imagine Jesus smacking a child?' it asks. The oft-quoted text about sparing the rod and spoiling the child turns out not to be a biblical quote at all. And 'discipline' at heart means teaching rather than punishment.

The incentive for *A Theology of Children* arose from a request by Pacific Island parents for a theological context for positive parenting. Reverend Vaialau and Dr Clements make their theology culturally specific by including a section on Samoan language, proverbs and spirituality. But there is wisdom here for every culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. The key role churches can play in this regard is lucidly spelled out.

The document concludes: 'Research shows that loving and non-violent ways of child rearing promote healthy children, adults and healthy relationships'. The Bible promotes this. Collaborative ecumenical actions can enhance the wellbeing of our children.

In this slim and accessible volume, there is wisdom that has universal application. I commend it wholeheartedly as a significant contribution to a significant debate. In the words of Isaiah (54:13), 'All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the prosperity of your children'.

Bishop Richard Randerson, Wellington, NZ

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The full version of this paper was written by Reverend Nove Vailaau in 2005.

This summary version was prepared by Dr Elizabeth Clements in 2008. The full version is available at www.barnardos.org.nz and www.plunket.org.nz

Introduction

SKIP (Strategies with Kids/Information for Parents) is a Ministry of Social Development (MSD) initiative managed through Family and Community Services (a service of MSD). Its vision is that all children are raised positively by parents who feel confident about managing their kids through the good and bad times.

More than 90% of Pacific peoples in New Zealand affiliate to Christian churches. Pacific peoples encouraged SKIP and its partners to develop a 'theological context for positive parenting'. This piece of work aims to meet this need to serve as a supportive, strengthening, and empowering tool for Pacific parents, grandparents and caregivers.

Theology helps us understand the authority of the Bible, the wisdom from other related disciplines and understandings, and the mission of the Christian church. These are guides for human beings to faith, truth and relationships.

This paper presents arguments for abandoning corporal punishment and developing a theology of children based on love, care and protection.

In Part One there is evidence of a global movement away from corporal punishment, a summary of New Zealand research on effective child discipline, and an argument against the use of biblical quotes to support corporal punishment.

Part Two analyses how the Bible presents children and the role of parents.

Part Three provides an analysis of Samoan language, proverbs and spirituality to demonstrate the way in which cultures define parent-child relationships. This Part provides an example of indigenous language and beliefs relating to pregnancy, childbirth and parenting.

Part Four describes a role for churches in caring for children and promoting positive parenting.

This booklet has been jointly published by Barnardos New Zealand and the Royal New Zealand Plunket Society.



PART ONE

Moving away from corporal punishment



A global movement

Over the last 20 years, a series of international movements resulted in changes to the status of children.

Children's rights

In 1993, New Zealand and 192 other countries signed a United Nations convention that says '...the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.'¹ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) is the most widely accepted human rights treaty ever.

It states that children should be protected 'from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardians or any other person who has the care of the child'.²

Laws against hitting children

So far, 24 countries have abolished all corporal punishment of children. These countries made laws that stopped schools from hitting children. Then they made further laws preventing parents and caregivers from assaulting children.

The global initiative to end all corporal punishment of children

After nine regional consultations, this initiative resulted in regional reports that contain findings and recommendations for each region. The report on the 33 countries in this region (which includes New Zealand) states that:

- 15 of the 33 countries prohibit corporal punishment in schools
- 33 countries prohibit corporal punishment in the penal system
- 8 countries have taken some measures to prohibit corporal punishment in alternative care.

The report recommends that countries in this region:

1. Explicitly prohibit all violence against children including all corporal punishment, in the family and in other settings,
2. Ensure that all those working with children and families learn about children's rights and learn non-violent ways of raising children,
3. Encourage political, community and faith leaders and educators to support this awareness-raising and public education,
4. Review the extent of violent victimisation of children, including in the family, through interview studies with children themselves, parents and other carers, and
5. Review safeguards to protect children from all forms of violence in the full range of residential institutions and other forms of alternative care, state and private, and implement any necessary improvements.

New Zealand research

Recent New Zealand research shows ideas about parenting are changing.

A 1993 poll of 1000 people aged 15 and over found that 49% supported corporal punishment for girls, and 54% supported its use for boys.³ This was a significant decline from the 1980s. It appears to follow the 1990 abolition of corporal punishment in schools.

In 2001 a Ministry of Justice survey⁴ found that:

- 80% of parents believed smacks with an open hand should be permissible
- 95% were against the use of a wooden spoon or belt
- 98.7% believed hits to the head and neck area should be outlawed
- force that involves bruising was unacceptable to almost all respondents.

1. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC). Preamble, 1993, at: www.unicef.org/nz/page/114/UNCROC.html

2. Ibid. Article 19

3. The New Zealand Listener/ Heylen Poll, *Survey of Attitudes on Corporal Punishment*, 1993

4. Carswell, S. *Survey on public attitudes towards the physical discipline of children*, Wellington: Ministry of Justice, 2001



The Children's Commissioner commissioned a report that found, while many parents do hit children, they do not like doing it. Many parents are not particularly happy with the effectiveness of physical punishment or with the distress it causes, and say that they used it because they did not know what else to do.⁵

In this same report, researchers exposed fallacies about cultural beliefs:

'There is no evidence to support the often expressed view that Māori or Pacific people are more accepting of physical punishment. In fact one recent study⁶ showed that European New Zealanders were more likely than Māori or Pacific people to think that physical punishment of children should continue to be legally sanctioned.'

A 2005 Ministry of Justice report⁷ supports this finding. Its researchers found that while Pacific people are more likely to agree that objects such as wooden spoons should be allowed by law to physically punish children, they were less likely than European and Māori 'to condone the use of physical discipline of children aged 10 years or younger'.

There is a difference between what parents and caregivers believe and what they do. Of 1,151 parents and caregivers interviewed in 2004, 51% of parents and 21% of caregivers reported using physical discipline. Parents with the lowest levels of education and highest numbers of children were most likely to use physical discipline. The indicators for caregivers were low household income and age – the older caregivers were, the more likely they were to hit. The most common form of physical discipline used by parents and caregivers was smacking on the bottom⁸ (45% parents, 32% caregivers).

Factors most strongly associated with the use of corporal punishment by parents and caregivers⁹ are:

- approval of corporal punishment
- experience of physical punishment as a child
- angry reactions to conflict with the child
- attributions of the child's behaviour to willful defiance
- marital and parenting stress
- belief that the Bible says you should.

Further research shows that children who experience violence in families and other institutions are more likely than children who do not experience any form of violence, to develop severe cognitive and behavioural problems, to become violent as adolescents, and to continue the cycle of violence and abuse.

Corporal punishment of children has been found to be a threat to the healthy development and welfare of children and their societies, and while it may stop children's unwanted behaviour immediately, in the long term it is an ineffective form of discipline or control. Corporal punishment does not teach children how to behave well, and it does not help to build the warm, respectful relationships that children need.

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5. Anne Smith, Megan Gollop, Nicola Taylor and Kate Marshall (Eds), *The Discipline and Guidance of Children – Messages from the Research*, Children's Issues Centre, University of Otago, 2005, p.336
 6. Anne Smith, Megan Gollop, Nicola Taylor, & Kate Marshall. *The Discipline and Guidance of Children: A Summary of Research*, Children's Issues Centre, University of Otago, 2004, p.7
 7. Judy Paulin with Liz Tanielu, Pacific Edge, *Pacific Crime & Safety Profile for the Wellington Region*, Wellington: Crime Prevention Unit of the Ministry of Justice, 2005, p. 19
 8. Kanewa Stokes and Nancy Sheehan, *Research Report – Gravitas Research and Strategy*, SKIP/ Ministry of Social Development, 2004
 9. Laurie A. Couture, '10 Pro-Corporal Punishment Arguments & 10 Commonsense Answers' 2000–2003, at: www.childadvocate.org



The Bible and corporal punishment

The main biblically-based arguments for corporal punishment are 'God is a god of justice' and that the Bible says 'spare the rod and spoil the child'.

'God is a god of justice'

Many parents physically punish their children as a demonstration of God's justice. They assume God gives them the right to correct and direct children.

It is true that God is a god of justice. The Bible teaches that people should act justly (Micah 6:8). But God's justice is subject to His love. Scripture tells us that the greatest of the spiritual gifts – of which justice is one – is love. The Bible says:

'Love is patient; love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'
(1 Corinthians 13:4-7, 13)

God, who is love, judges through love. Jesus Christ's life models how to love – being meek, humble, ever patient, yet unwavering. He died to reconcile people to God and each other. God's desire is to restore harmony and love after mistakes have been made. It is not to punish. We call this restorative justice.

The parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) demonstrates restorative justice. The father forgives his son without recrimination or punishment. He accepts his son back even before his son confesses. The only 'good' thing the Prodigal Son did was to return home. This was symbolic of his repentance. The father did not demand an apology or punish the son for wrongdoing.

The Bible recommends that parents and caregivers exercise justice with wisdom and love. It calls on Christians to not be administrators of justice, but to embody love.

'Do not judge, or you too will be judged.'

'Love one another as I have loved you.'

This is the kind of love that produces healthy children and adults.

'Spare the rod and spoil the child'

'Spare the rod and spoil the child' is the most quoted biblical endorsement for physical punishment. Yet these words do not appear in any Bible. They are from an anti-Puritan poem¹⁰ by Samuel Butler. The poem is about sex, not child discipline.

There are biblical quotations that appear to advocate physical punishment of children. For example Proverbs 13:24 says 'he who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him'; Proverbs 22:15 says 'folly is bound up in the heart of a child; but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him'.

10. The poem, called *Hudibras*, was written between 1663 and 1678. According to theological researcher Robert Gillogly it 'was an anti-Puritan tract, portraying the Puritans as obnoxious nuisances whose hypocrisy and stupidity needed to be exposed'.

There are several reasons why these proverbs should not be taken literally.

First, they were written by King Solomon and presumably reflected his own beliefs about parenting. The Bible itself records the negative effect of Solomon's parenting style on his son, Rehoboam. He became a widely hated ruler after his father's death (2 Chronicles:10-12) and had to leave to avoid assassination by his own people.

Second, the word rod in Proverbs 13:24 is a translation of the Hebrew word *shebet*. This is more accurately translated as scepter or staff. *Muwcār* is the Hebrew word for a rod for beating. *Shebet* refers to the shepherd's staff. It is a sign of authority and a tool to shepherd the sheep. According to *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, 'the sceptre originated in the idea that the ruler was a shepherd of his people'.

What does being a shepherd entail? The earliest reference in the Bible is that a shepherd is one who cares for his/her sheep: 'But he brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep through the desert. He guided them safely, so they were unafraid; but the sea engulfed their enemies.' (Psalm 78:52-53)

In this sense, the rod is used metaphorically. Further biblical references to the rod shed more light on how to interpret this term. Psalm 23 refers to a rod that brings comfort in times of uncertainty:

'Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.'

The rod may also be understood figuratively as referring to the Torah, the Law, which guides the people within the boundaries of God's will, honouring the relationship between God and His people.

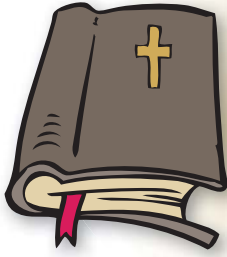
Parents are the shepherds of their children. By applying the rod of protection, guidance, care, comfort and nurturance, they guide them into adulthood. Children need parents to provide them with a set of values, including integrity and respect for others. Beating them does not achieve this. A shepherd who beats his/her sheep, will have no flock. The sheep will run from his/her voice and flee from his/her calling.

A third reason for not reading these or other biblical quotes selectively is that they were written in a very different context to today's world. For example, the Bible refers to:

- the buying and selling of human beings (Genesis 17:13)
- slavery (Ephesians 6:5)
- the beating of fools (Proverbs 10:13, 26:3)
- the suppression of women (1 Corinthians 14:34, Ephesians 5:22)
- sanctions against marriage (1 Corinthians 7:25-38)
- incest (Genesis 19:30-36)
- infanticide (Psalm 137:9).

None of these activities are acceptable in today's world.

Fourthly, it is hard to conceive of Jesus ever hitting a child for any reason. The very suggestion is contradictory both to what He taught and the way He lived. When anxious adults wanted to shoo the children away, Jesus rebuked the adults and welcomed the children. 'Of such,' He said, 'is the kingdom of heaven.' A popular question these days is 'What would Jesus do?' This becomes the most reliable biblical authority for Christians when it comes to hitting children. Jesus just wouldn't do it. Why, then, should we?



PART TWO

The Bible on children and parents



We have found that the Bible does not support corporal punishment. Two questions remain. What does the Bible tell us about children? And what guidance does the Bible give parents on raising children?

What the Bible tells us about children

Children are created in the image of God

Like everyone else, children are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27, James 3:9). According to Psalm 127:3 they are a reward from God.

Valuing children begins at conception. Psalm 139:13 says, 'For you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother's womb'. And Job 31:15 says, 'Did not He who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?'

God is honoured when persons created in His image are treated with honour, respect and love. Jesus pointed this out when He rebuked His disciples because they tried to prevent children from touching Him (Mark 10:13-16).



All children are God's children

In Mark 9:33–37, Jesus states that in order to welcome Him, one must welcome God's children. Then He took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in His arms, He said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the One who sent me.'

This suggests that caring for children is a privilege which God entrusted to all adults, not just parents.

Children are an important part of all our lives

Numerous stories in the Bible provide evidence of the importance of children. It is through the child Isaac, and the subsequent generations, that the making and blessing of a nation occurs. The deliverance of enslaved people is foreshadowed in the rescue of a baby found in the bulrushes. The guidance of Eli and the faithful response of young Samuel witness to a pattern of call and response that servants of God still aspire to.

The contributions that the young can make to the Kingdom of God are modelled in the youthful David and his senior Goliath; the girl, Esther, who became a Queen to protect her people; and the prophetic voice of the boy Jeremiah.

Children are developing

'When I was a child, I talked like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways away.' (1 Corinthians 13:11)

This and many other Biblical texts demonstrate the immaturity of children. Children develop not just physically, but intellectually, emotionally and morally as they grow older.

The intellectual differences between adults and children are pointed out in Ephesians 4:14. This says that when we are adults, 'we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming'.

And 1 Corinthians 14:20 says 'stop thinking like children. In regards to evil, be infants, but in your thinking be adults'. These quotes also point to the emotional and moral immaturity of children. This is more explicit in Hebrews 5:12–13:

'In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.'

These texts show us that children are in the formative stages of thinking, reasoning and making moral judgment. They lack experience in knowing what is right and are easily swayed by different morals.

Children are dependent

Jesus said, 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven' (Matthew 18:3–4). This means that children are utterly dependent on their parents to meet their needs. They are happy to trust their parents to protect them and provide for them.

Jesus is not naive about the self-centredness of children. When He says, 'for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these' (Mark 10:14), the likeness He is commending is the free and natural dependence and trust of children.

Children become accountable for their actions over time

To know what is right, children need a mind that is physically developed enough to perceive the world and process moral thoughts. They also need information from which truth and right can be inferred.

A very young child does not have a sufficiently developed brain to learn not to touch an electric socket. They will not understand a parent's order to not touch the socket. They are therefore not accountable for their actions at this stage of development.

As the brain develops children become more able to be accountable for their actions. This is when they need information that helps them learn right from wrong.

Jesus used word and deed to teach us about children. By taking them in His arms, He pronounced them full members of the family of God. When placing them in the midst of the disciples, He declared them exemplars of what it meant to be the 'greatest'. In welcoming them, He said 'we welcome not just Jesus but the God who sent him'. Children, Jesus taught, are among the most cherished of God's cherished.

Parental Responsibilities

God as a parental model

The Bible describes God as father and mother to all human beings. This role is one of love and guidance. The prophet Hosea (11:1) describes this love in relation to the nation of Israel:

'When Israel was a child I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son... It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.'

Responsibility to pass on a positive legacy

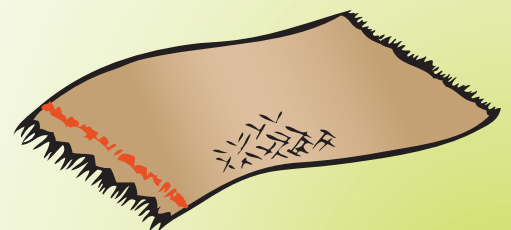
'Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation.' (Joel 1:3)

Parents always leave their children a legacy. Children take in both the good and bad. The quote from Joel suggests that parents do this consciously in order to pass on the best possible legacy.

A spiritual, emotional and social legacy is like a three-stranded cord. Individually, each strand cannot hold much weight. But woven together, they are strong. Passing on a positive and affirming legacy to our children can be our greatest contribution. A negative legacy can be destructive to the entire life of a child – and their children.

Passing on a spiritual legacy involves presenting our faith to our children.

'And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them...' (Exodus 12:26, 27)



'Only be careful, and watch yourself closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live, but make them known to your sons and grandsons...' (Deuteronomy 4:9,10).

Responsibility to teach God's children

God's plan is for families to lead the development of their children. Churches and communities have a role in that process, but it is parents who will be held accountable by God for the proper growth of their offspring.

'These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Teach them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.' Deuteronomy 6:6,7

The word for teaching in this verse is *shahnan*. It literally means 'sharpen, point, or penetrate'. This does not mean 'hammer'. It is the type of teaching that occurs in the everyday affairs of life.

'Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.'
Deuteronomy 11:18,19

Instructions to teach our children are summed up in Psalm 78:3-4, 6-7:

'What we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us; we will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power, and the wonders He has done; so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God, and would not forget His deeds but would keep His commands...'

Responsibility to model a godly lifestyle

The example set by the lifestyle of parents has a profound and lasting impact on children. The Bible tells us to avoid anger and give lots of love:

'The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in love, and forgiving sin and rebellion.' (Numbers 14:18)

It tells us to obey the commandments:

'Keep His degrees and commandments, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the Lord your God gives you for all time.' (Deuteronomy 4:40)

'Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!' (Deuteronomy 5:29)

Setting a good example is summarised in Proverbs 20:7:

'A righteous man leads a blameless life; blessed are his children after him.'

Responsibility to show compassion and gentleness

Loving children is the main job of parents. This is stated over and over again in the Bible. Two ways to do this are to show compassion and gentleness:

'As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.' (Psalm 103:13)

'Can a woman forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?' (Isaiah 49:15)

'Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.' (Colossians 3:21)

Responsibility to guide, reproof, and discipline

Effective parents refuse to leave their children at the mercy of their own folly. Exerting every effort to prepare their children for successful living, they teach them the skills of self-control, respect for authority, consideration for others, and submission to God.

The word discipline derives from the Greek word which means 'to teach'. When disciplining, the parent/child relationship is a teacher/student relationship.

Punishment's main goal is to stop the occurrence of inappropriate behaviour now. It is less concerned with the future than with, 'Stop that right now!' Literally, punishment means 'to cause to undergo pain'. This is a police/suspect relationship.

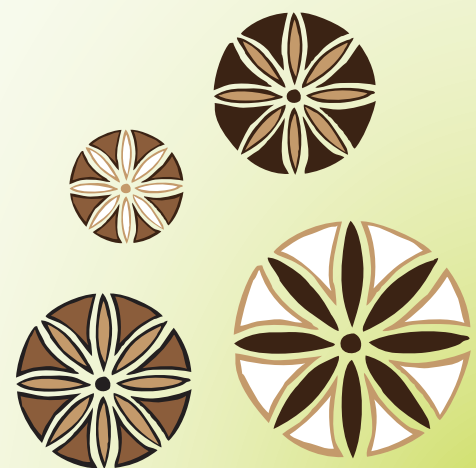
Punishment tends to assume that children are bent toward evil (or at least no good) and are out to manipulate their parents (the police). Discipline's main objective is to teach the offender what to do rather than merely stopping the offence. Tools for achieving this include stories, following through with logical consequences, real life examples, personal sharing, redirecting, practice, and giving information in respectful, repeated and varied ways.

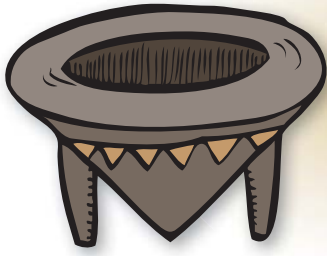
Discipline is concerned with teaching how to have deeper, more respectful and loving relationships rather than compliance with the law. It recognises that 'love does no wrong to a neighbour' (Romans 13:10).

Discipline which is concerned only with removing evil can make a child good, but good for nothing! More useful discipline is that which teaches a child not only what not to do but also what to do.

'Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.'
(Proverbs 22:6)

Children are human beings. They are God's gift to parents and to the community at large. As human beings created in the image of God they have rights to be treated with dignity.





PART THREE

Cultural Ideas about Children and Parents - A Samoan Perspective



All cultures have values and perceptions about human relationships. Each generation learns from its past and brings fresh understanding and new insights to the way we care for and raise our children. Each culture has its own ideas and its own way of making changes. These are reflected in the words we use, our spirituality and our proverbs. This is demonstrated in this section with the use of Samoan words, spirituality and proverbs.

Words

The Samoan word *atalii* (son) is a combination of two words – *ata*, meaning picture, reflection, likeness, image, and the word *alii*, meaning man, father, male, chief, lord. The word for daughter is *afafine*. This also combines two words – *a* meaning of the, and *fafine* meaning woman. So *afafine* defines a daughter as the reflection and likeness of her mother.

Atalii and *afafine* convey the Samoan perception of the intimate relationship between children and parents. The Samoan proverb *O Au o Matua Fanau* means 'children are the precious offspring of the parents'.

The eldest son born to a family is called the *alii-o-aiga*, meaning the man of the family, or the heir to the family. A daughter born to a family is called the *feagaiga* (covenant), signifying the mutual relationship and responsibility between brothers and sisters. Hence the Samoan proverb, *O le tuafafine o le mea uliuli i le mata o le tuagane*. This translates as 'the sister is the pupil in the eye of a brother'.

These terms define the importance of maintaining healthy and humane relationships in the cultural ethos of the Samoan people. It is the hope for harmonious relationships, and the trust expected within the family network, that enhances love and care between people. Samoans recognise that the emotions and values of love and compassion begin in the microcosm of the home, in the relationship between parent and child.

Atalii is also used to describe the son-father (*Atalii o le Atua*) relationship between God and Jesus Christ in the Samoan translation of the Bible. *Alii* is the accepted translation of the word Jehovah in the latest translation of the Samoan Bible, as a name for God. *Fafine* is also the Samoan translation of women, which in Hebrew is Eve.

Indigenous Spirituality

Pregnancy and childbearing figure strongly in the indigenous religions of the Samoan people. There are *tapu* (taboos) that govern both the security of the mother and the safety of the baby during the pregnancy¹¹. Obedience to the rules of *tapu* brings an easy process of giving birth. Disobedience results in extreme pain, excessive blood flow during labour and difficulty in giving birth. It could result in the death of either the baby and/or the mother.

The word *fanau* means giving birth. It also means children. The word *fanua*, means the placenta. It also means land. Samoan indigenous spirituality holds strong beliefs about where a baby's placenta and umbilical cord should be buried,¹² not only as a close connection between a human being (symbolized by the *fanua*, placenta and umbilical cord), and the land (*fanua*), but also in relation to one's identity, belonging and ownership.

The word *alo* is the term of respect for child, son or daughter. It is also the word for stomach, womb, or front part of a person. It is the root word of *alofa* (love) and *faa-alo-alo*, respect, which literally means 'face to face', or 'front to front'. The word *alo* is commonly used in the Samoan translation of the biblical term *Alo o le Atua*, Son of God.

11 Childbearing Beliefs & Traditions of the Samoan Culture, at: www.hawcc.hawaii.edu/nursing/RNSamoa03.html

12 *ibid*



The word *tagata* (human) is a combination of two words. The word *taga* is derived from the spiritual understanding of the deity *Tagaloa*, the all embracing god.¹³ The word *ta* is a verb meaning to carve, or to create. So the *tagata*, human being, is the creation, or image, of the all embracing god, *Tagaloa*. The birth of a healthy human being, *tagata*, is a blessing from *Tagaloa*.

The sacredness of pregnancy and childbearing in Samoan indigenous knowledge portrays the need for the baby to be well protected and cared for from conception to birth. The rituals employed and the literal terms formulated in this process reflect the spiritual and covenantal relationship between the child and the cosmos, the child and the land, the child and the older generation (*tua'a, matua*) or parents (*matua*), and the child and herself/himself.¹⁴

The sustenance of these relationships depends on the degree to which one party respects (*faaaloalo*) and honours (*ava*) the human dignity and the integrity of the other party. Samoan wisdom calls this type of mutual respect and reciprocity between people the *ava fatafata* (*fatafata* means one's chest) or the *va fealoaloa'i*, meaning 'the space for face to face'. Without this mutual acceptance of reciprocal honour and respect, human relationships will sever.

Proverbs

The following proverbs are mainly used in relation to parenting.

'*O au o matua fanau.*'

'Children are the parents' liver (precious).'

This proverb likens children to an internal organ, the liver, a vital part of a human being's system. The word *au* means the liver of an animal or human being. Just as a person needs to protect and care for his/her liver, so the parents are to care for and protect their children.

'*O fanau a manu e fafaga i fuga o laau, a o tama a tagata e fafaga i upu.*'

'The young ones of birds are fed with nectar; the children of people are fed with words.'

This proverb recommends that parents teach their children with words (*upu*), which implies face to face conversation; not through smacking. The comparison to the feeding of young birds with nectar suggests teaching children with warm words, encouraging the development of wisdom and strength.

Beliefs about parenting expressed in Samoan language are consistent with biblical teachings. Similar analysis of other cultural traditions will reveal similarities and differences from Samoan beliefs. It is appropriate for each culture to examine their own roots.

13 The Origin of Samoa including Manua, at: <http://www.samoa.co.uk/>

14 Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Tupuola Tufuga Efi, *In Search of Harmony: Peace in the Samoan Indigenous Religion*, 2005, at: <http://www.samoaoobserver.ws>



PART FOUR

The Churches' Role with Children



The role of churches in relation to children is to promote a society in which every child is valued and all children have the opportunity 'to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to the society'.¹⁵

This is a theological imperative. As the Body of Christ, and the Family of God in the world, the church's responsibility for children is sealed in such concepts as baptism, the promise of blessing, and the gift of creation. As God has nurtured the church, so too the church communities are called to provide for children, and to nurture them in the love of God.

The church is in a unique position to proclaim and execute God's blessing and justice for children. Charged with a theological imperative and grounded with a biblical mandate, the church is the voice of the voiceless as it calls a people and a nation to care for children within the church and beyond.

¹⁵ Ministry of Education. *Te Whāriki: Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media (1996). P.9



Churches can achieve this by:

1. Including children as full members and participants in the common life of worship, prayer, witness and service

In detail, this means to:

- receive, nurture and treasure each child as a gift from God
- nurture the spiritual life of children and teach them of the love, grace and fellowship of God
- ensure, through leader development and assignment of resources, that faith communities are places of joy, nurture and safety for children
- give high priority to the quality of planning for children and the preparation and support of those who minister them
- foster community beyond the family unit, in which children, youth and adults know each other by name, minister to each other, and are partners together in serving Christ in the world
- appreciate children's abilities and readiness to represent Christ and his church, to bear witness to God's grace wherever that may be, and according to gifts given them, to carry on the faithful work of reconciliation in the world, and to take their place in the life, worship, and ministry of the community of faith.

2. Creating loving and safe families

All segments of society share responsibility for supporting families in raising their children and future generations. To contribute to this aim, churches can:

- respect and preserve the child's bond and covenant with parents, family and community
- support families to recognise and appreciate their children's abilities and their gifts for ministry
- support families to attend to the spiritual development of their children
- ensure that families have the skills, knowledge and resources to develop, support and sustain loving homes
- protect the dignity and value the diversity of every family
- provide families with resources and systems that enable them to balance the demands of parenting, work and education and make time for recreation
- encourage parents to be active in their communities, in the democratic process, and in the promotion of the interests of children and families
- be intentional in providing church and community support in those kinship care situations when children are being cared for by relatives other than their parents
- encourage congregations to become caring partners with institutions and systems that provide care for children, and engage in advocacy for children in those settings.

3. Promoting quality public education

All children have a right to quality public education that fosters their intellectual, social, emotional, physical, cultural and creative development. To contribute to achieving this, churches can:

- respect and support parents as first teachers, recognising that learning begins at birth
- support an education system that is a partnership between families, communities and schools
- respect and provide for each child's differences and capacities to learn, recognising the needs of those children with special needs and with special gifts

- ensure the availability of remedial education for children and their adult caregivers who need special help to be ready for further education and eventually to become employable
- ensure that communities are provided with safe, excellent, well-funded public schools for all children
- encourage the use of schools and community resources during and beyond school hours for study support activities
- teach children to understand, respect and celebrate diversity, multiple cultures and languages, and a global perspective.

4. Promoting physically and emotionally safe environments

Every child has a right to live in a physically and emotionally safe environment that cultivates acceptance and peace. To promote this, churches can:

- provide child protection policies, church-based positive parenting training and offer resources that promote and ensure safe, non-violent family and community environments
- teach and practice healthy conflict resolution
- promote social justice through the elimination of prejudice and discrimination
- promote non-violent, positive images and language that respect the dignity of every human being
- advocate for reducing violence on TV, in movies, video games and on the Internet
- ensure equal protection and due process of law for all children and youth in a system, which recognises their differing capacities.

5. Celebrating arts, recreation, and culture

All children have a right to express and celebrate their souls and spirits through arts, literature and recreation. Children need to have open time to dream, play and create. To contribute to this aim, churches can:

- advocate for the integration of arts, culture and recreation into the core curriculum of education
- provide access to a wide variety of affordable, quality arts, cultural and recreational programs for children of all ages
- promote an increase in safe indoor and outdoor neighbourhood recreational activities
- create ongoing opportunities in congregations, schools, and before-and-after-school programs to discover, recover, preserve and celebrate traditions across cultures
- ensure that museums, libraries, parks and diverse cultural resources are supported as vital parts of our communities.

6. Seek economic security and justice

All children have a right to adequate food, clothing, transportation and safe, affordable housing. To achieve this, churches can:

- continue to strengthen the commitment to overcome poverty
- promote family-friendly policies in the workplace
- actively pursue just tax policies
- cultivate marketable job skills through providing congregational and community models of training and education



- provide accessible, affordable, high-quality child care
- promote corporate partnerships that strengthen communities
- provide economic security through government initiatives for children whose parents cannot support them.

7. Promote quality accommodation and healthcare

All children deserve to live in a healthy environment that allows them to thrive. Churches can:

- ensure quality accommodation is available to families and children
- ensure quality pre-natal care is available for all
- focus on prevention as a key to preserving the health and well-being of children
- ensure that no children go hungry
- implement effective health and nutrition education programmes for children
- support publicly funded, integrated, accessible and high quality health care.

Conclusion

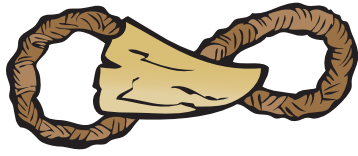
Fundamentally, all parents seek to do the best they can as parents, and ultimately seek the best possible outcomes for their children.

Corporal punishment of children breaches children's fundamental human rights. It has been found to be a threat to the healthy development and welfare of children and their societies, and an ineffective form of discipline or control. Constructive, non-violent child discipline is needed. When discipline is formulated and applied in a manner that respects the human dignity and rights of the child and is based on an understanding of child development, children thrive.

Research shows that loving and non-violent ways of child rearing promote healthy children, adults and healthy relationships. The Bible promotes this. Collaborative ecumenical actions can enhance the well being of our children.

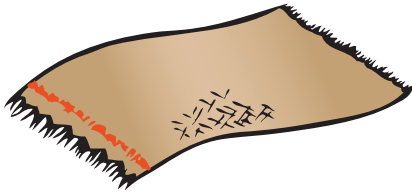
'Good children do not just happen. They are the result of careful cultivation.' (Isaiah 54:13)

Caregivers, the bearers and nurturers of the sons and daughters, and we the parents are honoured with the opportunity and privilege to prepare them for 'life's longing for itself'.



Tabua

The *tabua* is a polished sperm whale tooth and is an important cultural item in Fijian society. A *tabua* is traditionally given as a gift for atonement and is important in negotiations between rival parties.



'ie Toga (Fine Mat)

The *'ie toga* is the highest-ranking item in the Samoan exchange system and greatly valued. For example, in Samoan marriage ceremonies, *'ie toga* are presented to the husband's family by the bride's family, and are viewed in much the same way as dowry property. In funerals, the use and display of *'ie toga* shows social status, genealogical connections, and human relationships between people, families, villages and districts. *'ie toga* are also sometimes presented by the offending party in a ceremonial apology known as an *ifoga*. The presence or use of a particularly old and fine *'ie toga* brings great dignity to a ceremony or an event.



Tanoa Fai'ava (Kava Bowl)

Symbolically, the *tanoa fai'ava* portrays the importance of welcome, hospitality, care and protection towards a visiting party. The sharing of drinks between a visiting party and a hosting party out of one cup drawn out of the kava bowl shows unity and oneness for the two parties.



Fale (House)

Like many cultural characterisations for a house, Pacific cultures also associate it with home, family, and community. It is where nurturing and human development is practised. It is also the foundation and platform for cultural education and knowledge, human relationships and spiritual enrichment. Many Pacific houses are open and circular, representing openness and inclusiveness, without boundaries.

