

Spanking away sin: Christian child abuse

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [May 1, 2007](#) issue

Last year a four-year-old boy named Sean Paddock died in North Carolina after he was struck with a plumbing supply line, then tightly wrapped in blankets. His mother was punishing him for getting out of bed. She was a follower of Michael and Debi Pearl, whose book *To Train Up a Child* is familiar to many parents in conservative Christian movements. While the Pearls' book may seem far outside the mainstream, parents in mainline churches are also picking it up.

Recently I heard a mom at a soccer game proudly describe how she responded to her infant crying in his bed by “punishing and punishing” him. When I asked how one punishes a five-month-old child, she said that he was spanked in his crib. Spanking is nothing less than a mark of orthodoxy for followers of the Pearls, who deem it a necessary means of dealing with sin. They insist that parents who are faithful to Jesus need to hit their children.

In folksy, friendly style, *To Train Up a Child* offers techniques that promise to yield happy and obedient children. This promise is a holy grail to tired, frustrated and often isolated parents, who are told that their anger will be eliminated when they follow techniques that produce “immediately obedient” children. The book also appeals to parents' concern for their reputation—happy, obedient children will save Mom and Dad the public embarrassment of having intractable children. It's a tempting promise: perfect domestic peace, a kind of Martha Stewart flawlessness reworked for Christian families.

The Pearls compare children to stubborn animals: both have the same predictable responses to unpleasant stimuli. The book advocates a consistent behaviorism that involves switching a child's bare skin until the child's will is broken. The result? A model child who is completely compliant; a model parent who is a conqueror.

Children are prepared for “future, instant, unquestioning obedience.” The authors advocate tempting an infant by putting an appealing object within reach and

compare the object to the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. (Putting a forbidden object outside a child's reach is considered a parental "display of weakness.") When the child reaches for the object, the parents lash the child. The suggested switch for a four-month-old child is a branch 12 inches long and an eighth of an inch wide. Rulers, belts and tree branches are recommended for older children. In the Pearls' world, crystal bowls, other breakable treasures and even loaded guns can be left around the house because curious toddlers can be trained to "complete and joyous subjection."

The Pearls portray parent and child as embroiled in a "competition of interest." Children are understood to be devious and self-centered. Normal childhood frustrations are understood as manipulative and self-indulgent assertions of a child's sinful nature. *To Train Up a Child* and similar (though less severe) books by Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, James Dobson and Ted Tripp are a publicity nightmare for those who would rather not have Christians associated with the beating of kids. They also point to a theological mess.

The understanding of Christian discipline advocated in punitive Christian parenting guides suggests that Christian parents can make their children holy through relentless training. This is built on a desperate Pelagianism and undermines the priority of God's grace by turning salvation and sanctification into a high-stakes game that can never be won.

The pursuit of flawless children is a cruel sort of domestic idolatry. Children are a gift from God, not a battlefield. Yet the Pearls tell parents, "You hold an eternal soul in your hand." In an especially disturbing turn, they claim that corporal punishment will absolve the guilt of sin for children who are not old enough to understand substitutionary atonement. The Pearls cite Proverbs 20:30—"Blows that wound cleanse away evil"—as justification for hurting a child. Ironically this text has traditionally been read as a reference to the wounds of Christ—not to any human effort—as the only means of cleansing.

The Pearls insist that the problem with the way most parents discipline is that they do not "hope to conquer their [children's] wills." But by suggesting that the human response to God is one of unquestioning obedience, the Pearls misunderstand the relationship between God and humanity. In saving us, God does not conquer our wills. God is not an authoritarian father figure, a muscle man in the sky seeking to beat us children into submission. God draws us in by grace, even though we are

broken, even though we are disobedient.

To Train Up a Child claims to be not about discipline, but about “training.” But discipline is not a bad thing. The word *discipline* connotes education, being formed by practices in an ordered way of life. Discipline, like drills for basketball or the repetition of piano scales, prepares us for a worthy goal, whether growing to adulthood or maturing as a disciple of Christ. Christian spiritual disciplines form God’s people.

Christian discipline involves the active guidance of both parents and the church body. It involves training our children in God’s ways through the practices of charity, prayer, confession, service and participation in the sacraments. We discipline best when we model God’s grace and practice for our children through activities that point toward holiness.

For the Pearls, Proverbs 13:24 is a proof text for spanking. But “Those who spare the rod hate their children” does not stop at verse 24. It continues, “those who love them are diligent to discipline them.” The Christian faith directs us to discipline our children, but I don’t want unquestioning obedience from my children. Instead, I hope to teach them to know the discipline of Christ, whose rod, as promised in Psalm 23, is a comfort.