

What The Bible Actually Says About Sparing the Rod and Spoiling the Child

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The story about Adrian Peterson, an NFL player who used a switch to beat his 4 year-old son, has caused people to quote the verse from Proverbs 14:24 quite a bit lately. (I may be a bit more aware of it as the charges were brought here in the Houston area.) The problem is that the Bible doesn't say, "Go ahead and beat your children because it's good for them". Let's take a look at what it really says.

First, you have to read all of Proverbs chapter 13. It's a list of sort of pithy riddles and conundrums and contrasts. (It is much more poetic in the Hebrew.) It covers many different situations but the overriding motif is that righteousness and wisdom are the highest goods. Then we get to verse in question:

One who withholds his staff hates his child but he who loves him (the child) disciplines him (or teaches him) early.

(Proverbs 13:24)

So an interpretation of this verse is, "Raise your child with discipline and wisdom so that you won't need to use your staff to hit him later when you hate him." The verse is more interested in the second kind of discipline, i.e., teaching the child to do the right thing early in life, than in the second, which is derived from hatred of the child.

I would much rather people would quote a different teaching from Judaism about discipline and strength. Pirkei Avot asks, "*Who is strong? The one who masters his own impulses*" (Avot 4:1). Strength is not instilled through physical punishment. The only thing that instills is the notion that it's ok to hit people smaller than you. True strength is mastering your own impulses and anger. This is a value we should all want to practice and teach our children.

Discussion Questions

1. There are two kinds of discipline in this verse, one associated with hatred (the staff) and one associated with love (early discipline without the staff). What happens when we fail to teach our children with love early in life? Do we/would we come to hate them?
2. What happens to children who are physically punished as children? Why isn't this an effective form of punishment?

May you be inscribed for a sweet, prosperous, healthy year in the Book of Life!