# The Difference Between Punishment and Discipline

What is discipline?

Usually discipline is thought of in very negative concepts. In fact, one member of our congregation cannot hear the word "discipline" without hearing something negative, so when speaking with her I always try and use the words "training" or "correction." [If that helps you, just think of the word "correction" every time you see the word "discipline."] Discipline, in the true sense of the word is positive, encouraging, and even proof of love (*...because the Lord disciplines those He loves* – Hebrews 12:6).

The root word of discipline is *disciple* (= a student, a learner). When God disciplines us, He is making disciples of His children. When you discipline your children, you are making disciples. Discipline is defined as training that develops self-control. Discipline in the Biblical sense includes three levels:

Level 3 — Correction

Level 2 — Training

Level 1 — Instruction
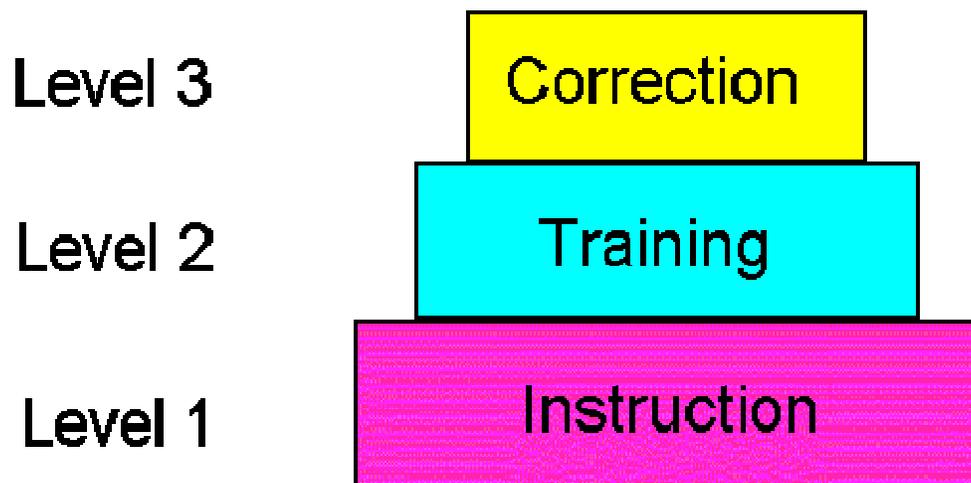
The foundational level of discipline, Level 1, is *instruction*. Discipline begins with clearly communicating, instructing, and teaching your children. Both the Old Testament and New Testament word for discipline support this definition containing all three levels. However, the word *discipline* in the English language has evolved (unfortunately) to eliminate the concept of "instruction" and instead focuses on the next two levels - mostly the third.

Level 2 is *training*. Training means to lead and direct the growth of the child. It includes helping the child form habits and develop proficiency in his instruction.

Level 3 is *correction*. Correction meant to alter or adjust a child's behavior by taking action to cause him to follow previous instruction. Therefore, correction follows instruction. A child needs

correction when he knows your instructions and doesn't follow them. It is crucial to take action at this level or your child's sense of security and growth in self-control will be damaged. Being direct and assertive at this level is important. There are several specific methods of correction you can use (See handout or web page entitled "Tools for Discipline").

Contrasting Discipline and Punishment

In most cases in the Bible there is a difference in the meaning of the words *discipline* and *punishment*. Parents are instructed to discipline their children, but they are not often instructed to punish their children (and when they are, such as in Hebrews 12:6, what is being described is actually discipline rather than punishment). Likewise, if you are a Christian, then God disciplines you for your own good. He does not punish you.

What's the difference? As stated earlier, the root word of discipline is *disciple* and means learner. The definition of discipline in both the Old Testament and New Testament included instruction and training, as well as correcting. Discipline is to be motivated by love and concern, according to Hebrews 12:4-11.

In contrast, punishment implies getting even, retaliation, vengeance, and exacting a penalty. Before we were Christians, we were under God's punishment (and rightly so). Government also has a legitimate and God-given role in punishing (see Romans 13:4-5). But parents are called to discipline, not punish their children. And if you are a Christian, then you are no longer punished by God. [For more on this see the web pages entitled "What Sin Does Not Do and Does Do in the Life of a Christian" and "The Gift We Have Difficulty Receiving."] Here is a chart which shows the difference between punishment and discipline.

	Punishment	Discipline
Purpose	To inflict penalty for an offense, to pay back for wrongs	To correct and promote positive growth
Focus	Past misdeeds	Future behavior
Attitude	Righteous anger	Love
Resulting Emotion in the Punished or Disciplined Person	Fear, guilt, hostility	Security

A parent's inner attitude while disciplining is CRUCIAL. It is possible for a parent to use the same method of correction and be either disciplining or punishing depending on the parent's inner attitude.

Anger is Part of Punishment, but *not* Discipline

Children have excellent radar to an adult's inner attitude towards them. In fact, a child can many times detect anger on the part of the parent when the parent does not even know that he is angry. Knowing how to handle anger is a necessary skill, so that parents can discipline their children and not punish (get even with) their children.

Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged (Colossians 3:21).

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires (James 1:19-20).

Try some of the following suggestions when you get angry:

1. Don't lash out to correct immediately. Don't hit your child anywhere on his body -- arm, leg, face, etc. (There is a difference between *hitting* and *spanking*.) It is also dangerous to use spanking as a method of discipline when your anger is out of control. That can lead to child abuse.
2. Separate yourself from the child for a few minutes.
3. Admit to yourself that you are angry and ask the Lord to help you deal with your anger and gain control.
4. Ask the Lord to help you discern why you are angry. Sometimes it's at yourself because you let the situation go on so long without correction.
5. When you are calm, go to your child and then take action to correct him.

If you have disciplined your child with uncontrolled anger, the best way to make it right is to ask your child to forgive you -- not for correcting him, but for being angry when you disciplined him.

For further information see the following web pages on www.new-life.net:

- "Freedom from Guilt" (http://www.new-life.net/guilt2.htm).
- "Favorite Stories: My Father's Shirt" (http://www.new-life.net/favrt043.htm)
- "What Father is Like" (http://www.new-life.net/fathrgod.htm)