

HOW TO MAKE A FAMILY CODE

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"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

-- Deuteronomy 6:4-8

Family discipline requires planning, structure, and clear presentation if it is going to be effective. Without these aspects discipline either becomes a power struggle in which parent and child strive to out last one another, or a futile mission at “normalcy” that is prematurely aborted.

This document is intended to provide you with a step-by-step process as your family prepares to make a family code (that is a document which details the expectations, responsibilities, privileges, and consequences of the home). Read this article slowly. Take time to complete the brainstorming sections as you read. You will want to come back and revise your initial thoughts later, but it will be helpful for you to understand the next step if you have engaged the previous one.

The first step is to clearly articulate the foundational principles or core values of your home. These are the most important rules. Other rules that are added to the code should flow naturally out of these rules and clarify what the foundational rules mean for particular areas of life, relationships, or age appropriate activities. Start by listing no more than five core values:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

How many of your foundational rules were stated positively (that is they were “do” rules instead of “do not” rules)? When Jesus summarized the Law he did so in two positive commands: love God and love your neighbor. Loving God cannot be a rule of the house. Loving God requires personal commitment and regeneration of the Holy Spirit. Honor, however, should be in the foundational rules. Some sample core values would be:

- Honor your mother and father (Ephesians 6:2-3)
- Love your siblings as yourself (Matthew 22:39)
- Steward the blessings of our home (James 1:17)
- Submit and seek to bless those who are in authority over you (Romans 13:1-2)

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These rules can be unpacked with time, but by starting with these biblical concepts you are teaching your children to think in biblical categories. The Bible is not a rule book in the sense that it merely lists commands and penalties. The Bible is a guide book. It shows the way that God created us to live life to the fullest (John 10:10). The manner in which we set up the rules of our home should direct our children to think about God and His Word in this way (Deut. 6:4-6).

Next make a list of the responsibilities for each child in the home. These responsibilities are not punitive; they are what it means for each child to be a contributing member of the family at their present stage in life. A key emphasis of a family code is to teach that all of life is not privilege. Being a member of a family means contributing. When children are not expected to contribute to the well-being of the home their natural selfishness is exacerbated. When privileges are earned it means that the child exceeded these basic responsibilities. The chart below gives you a place to divide responsibilities.

Standard Chore Chart

Name	Daily	Weekly	Periodic
Child 1			
Child 2			
Child 3			
Child 4			

You will likely revise this chart later. Much of the benefit of making a family code is for the parent. It is good for the parent to think through what it means for each child, at his or her current age, to be a contributing member of the family. If this is not thought through and clearly stated, there is a strong likelihood that the standard will vary between parents, based on what type of day a parent has had, or the recent behavior of the child. When the baseline expectations vary, then it is impossible to be a consistent parent.

Much household disruption could be alleviated if only these first two components of the family code were consistently applied. Doubtless the specific rules, potential rewards, and consequences are needed. But imagine for a moment what a business or school would look like if it had no more established protocol than the average home.

After you have set the core values and standard chores, it is time to turn your attention to a discipline strategy. Our children’s hearts, like our own, are marred by sin. Punishment will be necessary. The absence of a punishment strategy either results in a power struggle or the laxity in discipline. It is good to have a variety of disciplinary options. With punishment, repetition breeds immunity. Also, if you have—or plan to have—multiple children, then they will probably need to be disciplined differently. Going to her room is not punishing for an artsy, reflective girl; but for a rambunctious, out-doorsy boy it is excruciating. Having a diversity of disciplines available allows you to be “fair” without having to be “the same.”


In following chart, list potential punishments. There are three columns. Level A is for the “big stuff,” particularly defiance. Level B is for important matters that have the potential to become habitual or destructive. Level C is for behaviors that are inappropriate. You have not yet defined what actions fit into each category. At this point you are merely brainstorming punishments and assigning degrees of severity to each. At this point you also have not asked for the kids input. That time will come, but this is still a stage of parental responsibility.

Possible Consequences

Level A	Level B	Level C

As you brainstorm, you may want to think in terms of categories of punishments. There are reflective punishments (i.e., time out or writing on a subject), active punishments (i.e., extra chores), restrictive punishments (i.e., grounding or remitting a privilege), punishments of loss (the permanent removal of an activity or object), and corporal punishment.

EXCURSIS: Many people question the usefulness or moral integrity of spanking. This is an important matter for parents to think through, and a subject on which parents must be unified. In order to address the biblical basis and proper application of corporal punishment, consider the following material taken from Crossroads' church bulletin insert series.



TO SPANK OR NOT TO SPANK?
Parenting 2 of 4

Few biblical imperatives are debated/neglected as often as the instruction to spank. This debate elicits confusion and much emotion. This flyer is intended to clear the air surrounding this subject.

Biblical Basis: Proverbs 23:13-14 says, "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol." Proverbs 29:15, "The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother." The Bible expects spanking.

Reason For: Proverbs 13:24, "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him." Spanking is an act of love. Like us, children are sinful. One of the most needed lessons for a child is, "Decisions have consequences." Pain is real. Bad decisions cause pain. When a parent refuses to spank, he/she short-circuits this learning process and contributes to the dangerous adolescent feeling of invincibility.

When To: Spanking is not for all disobedience, and it is *definitely not* for innocent childhood mistakes (i.e., spilled milk). Spanking is for rebellion against authority—defiance. Forgetting to clean one's room might call for loss of privileges. Refusing to clean one's room, however, calls for spanking and loss of privileges.

Appropriate Means: Part of the reaction against spanking is that it is sometimes done poorly. Here are a few guidelines. Never spank when angry—compose yourself first. Never spank in public. Use an appropriate rod (i.e., wooden spoon). Limit the spanking to three to five strikes on the fatty tissue of the buttocks. Make sure the child knows what the discipline is for—rebellion not a mistake. Reaffirm your love for the child after giving them a time to reflect on their actions. Around age 12 spanking should stop or be very rare. Spankings do not replace other consequences of the child's actions.

Kids both appreciate and need limits and authority. Spanking is not fun for anyone, but it is a way to demonstrate your family's commitment to living in loving obedience to the Bible.

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Now that you have a punishment chart, think through the same three level categories for rewards. Remember rewards are not for every good thing that a child does (in a case such as potty training there are exceptions). There are certain things that children need to learn are expected because they are members of the family who should contribute to the well-being of the family unit. Rewards are for things that are done with excellence or above and beyond the call of duty.

As you think through the best use of rewards in parenting, reflect on Matthew 6:1-24. Jesus does not want his disciples to become reward-dependant. However, he does say that “your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (vv. 4, 6, 18).” When your children “fish for a reward” let them know that this violates the principle of the family code and do not reward them. The goal of rewards is to teach the children to love doing good, not candy (or whatever else the reward may be).

Possible Rewards

Level A	Level B	Level C

Incentives are a part of God’s economy of motivation, but God is not a behaviorist. That is to say that God does not seek to change the condition of the human heart by creating an elaborate system of rewards and punishments to coerce/manipulate people into being good. In creating a family code this mindset must be guarded against. The purpose of the family code is to make expectations clear so that parents can focus their time and energy upon shaping the child’s priorities and values. The time that you are spending reading this article and writing a family code is intended to make it possible for you to focus on your child’s heart while discipline is occurring.

Discipline is generally a time of stress. Nobody likes to take away from being a happy family or out of their busy schedule to deal with discipline. This inconvenience, unless we have prepared for it, either leads to annoyance (a nice word for anger) or neglect. Preparing allows us focus our attention on motives more than behavior. The family code alleviates the concern over “what we should do” so that our disciplinary conversation can focus upon “what motivated our child to do this.”

At the end of this article you will find a “PARENTAL DISCIPLINE ASSESSMENT” which is designed further assist you in developing consistency and focusing upon your child’s heart during discipline. Additional copies of this form can be found on the Crossroads Counseling website (www.crossroadsaugusta.org) under “Resources” and then “Homework.”

You are almost finished. The final step is to put the materials you have developed into a document that you can review with your spouse and then present to the family as a whole. Here are some suggestions for how to move from the notes that you have created as you read this article (or will go back and create) to a fully enacted family code.

1. Take these notes and make a master draft of a family code. Making this draft on a computer will allow you format the material in an easy-to-read manner, and allow for easy revision.
2. Let at least a week pass (no more than two) and review the master draft with your spouse (if applicable). Fine tune how the rules are defined, make the chore chart more complete, and add to the reward or consequence charts.
3. Set a time to review the revised code with the children. Explain how the system will work and get their input (particularly on the expansion of the reward and consequence charts). Once their suggestions are incorporated, this is the initial completed code.
4. Have a “grace week.” This is a week when both parents and children get used to what it will be like to live with a family code. During this week rewards and punishments are discussed rather than given.
5. Begin enacting the family code.
6. Post the family code in a place where it can be seen regularly (i.e., the refrigerator).
7. Revise and expand the family code as needed. “As needed” is should be neither daily nor arbitrary. The positively stated rules will require some “thou shall not’s.” Revisions should be done at official family meetings. Additional rules should be tied to the foundational rules from which they emerge or the biblical principles that under gird them.
8. Keep the family code workable. You should not create a document that rivals the IRS tax code in complexity. When rules have not been violated for a significant period of time or are no longer age-appropriate remove them (again, this means it will be helpful to keep the family code saved on the computer for easier revision).
9. Do not quit if you are tested. No disciplinary system works unless it is consistently applied for a period of time in the face of opposition. If this were not the case, then you would not have needed to read this article in the first place.

PARENTAL DISCIPLINE ASSESSEMENT

Date: ___ / ___ / ___ Time: _____ Place: _____

What was the offense? _____

Evaluation of Parental Response Prior to Formal Discipline: (Circle One)

- | | | |
|---|-----|-------|
| 1. Did you remain calm? | Yes | No |
| 2. Did you restrain from making hollow threats of punishment? | Yes | No |
| 3. Did you restrain from shaming or embarrassing the child? | Yes | No |
| 4. Did you restrain from physical aggression? | Yes | No |
| 5. Did you resist viewing the episode as a power struggle? | Yes | No |
| 6. How many times did the action occur before you addressed it? | | _____ |

Evaluation of Disciplinary Conversation and Follow Through: (Circle one)

- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. Before acting the child knew the action was wrong. | Yes | No |
| 2. The child was asked to express that what they did wrong. | Yes | No |
| 3. The child was asked to answer a heart question. | Yes | No |
| 4. Opportunity for the child to repent was provided | Yes | No |
| 5. Discipline was administered within predefined parameters. | Yes | No |
| Discipline Administered: _____ | | |
| 6. Parents forgave and re-affirmed love for child. | Yes | No |
| 7. Parents followed through on discipline (if applicable). | Yes | No |

Heart Questions: What was it that was so important that you were willing to disobey? What did you think this action was going to achieve? What desire were you obeying when you did this? How would this action have provided security, identity, or pleasure? Who were you trying to please or win their approval? Do you think this was your "right"? (Use back of page if necessary)

Key Theme of Heart Question: _____

What elements of this disobedience (activity, patterns, threats, peer presence etc...) have been frequently repeated in past episodes of disobedience? (Use back of page if necessary)

