

## **Self-Control from the Inside**

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Children must learn self-control in order to function effectively in society, and their first teachers are usually their parents. Before attempting to teach their children, however, parents should reflect upon their own ways of dealing with conflict, asking themselves, “How do I typically react when things don’t go my way?” Children tend to model their parents’ behaviors, so they will exhibit the same level of self-control out in the world that they witness at home. Once parents have a firm grasp of their own impulses and emotions, they will serve as better role models. A technique known as the “Three Question Method” enables parents to teach self-discipline in a loving, yet instructive way.

### **The Barking Policeman**

If you are like me, my first impulse when I see misbehavior is to order it to stop—loudly. I immediately feel like barking out an order, since, after all, I’m one of the big guys and I set the rules. Let’s face it: when kids are misbehaving, it’s irritating. Barking feels especially good after a bad day at work where one feels ignored. Unfortunately, kids become a captive audience for parental frustration with no means of escape.

This “barking” approach eventually led to a question: *Will giving orders necessarily help my children develop self-control over the long run?* It’s a no-brainer that commands make children behave on the spot. Kids are not stupid; they know if you are standing right there ready to blast them, they’ll stop immediately. However, a child acting properly only while under a parent’s watchful eye should not be the ultimate goal. True self-control occurs without the policeman standing there; it comes from within.

### **Becoming a “Chooser”**

If our kids are going to show restraint in a world that encourages the lack of self-control, they must develop a strong function of choice within themselves. Inner control exists beyond external threats of unpleasantness (“If you touch that, I’ll spank you”). Rather, it is an internal reference (“I want to steal this money, but it’s wrong to do so”). To stand in the face of external and internal pressures, children need to be shown how to choose the right behavior. This “chooser” will eventually become strong enough to withstand the demands and temptations of the world.

If a child is weak and simply looking around for the policeman for guidance, he or she will never make it in a world full of freedoms. How many times have we seen extremely well-behaved kids in controlled, highly religious families go on to college and simply lose themselves to drugs, sex, and other forms of indulgence? This is typically a sign that

external controls were probably used in the home, but the “chooser” was never fully developed. Parents in general (and Christian parents in particular) must be dedicated to strengthening the chooser within our children. This can be achieved through the Three Question Method.

### **The First Question**

The Three Question Method can help a parent develop internal control in a child without simply relying on external control (threats) and it prevents the parent from saying unhelpful things. After a child misbehaves, the Three Question Method provides guidance that addresses the problem at hand and hopefully prevents it from happening in the future. This approach takes more time than simply barking out an order, but it will have positive, long-term results.

When bad behavior occurs, ask the child, "*Honey, what are you doing right now?*" This question needs to be asked in a straightforward, businesslike tone, without yelling. The first week you implement this strategy with your children, you will get responses like "I don't know" or statements that tell you what they are trying to do; there probably will not be much reflection on their actual behavior. For example, when they are nagging and whining they may respond to this question with "I'm just trying to tell you something." The proper parental response should then be "No, honey, you are nagging and whining and arguing with me." This first question forces children to face their behavior and look at themselves, which is also a Biblical principle. Scripture is always calling us to honestly examine our behavior and face anything that is ungodly. It is a wise man who can face himself; the fool minimizes and rationalizes.

### **The Next Question**

The second question involves having the child reflect on the standard (or template) for behavior. This question goes, "*What are you supposed to be doing?*" Again, as you first implement this, kids will give you a range of responses including, "I don't know." You must then tell them (gently yet firmly), "What you are *supposed* to be doing is quitting the arguing and getting ready for bed," etc.

### **The Final Question**

Having looked at the behavior and the standard for behavior, the third question then calls the child to a choice. The parent should ask, "*Now, what are you going to choose? It's up to you.*" Again, during the first week, the child will usually balk at making a decision and will often respond with, "I don't know" when asked what they are going to choose. At this point, the loving parent should simply say, "Well, honey, if you keep doing that behavior in the next few seconds, I will take that as your choice to misbehave and I will discipline you. It's up to you." At that point, the parent must understand that if the child makes a bad choice, a choice has been made all the same, and a reasonable punishment for that misbehavior will be meted out. It does put the parent out a bit, but that's the reality of

parenting.

After the Three Question Method is established, something wonderful starts happening. You will find yourself asking a child in the middle of misbehavior, "Honey, what are you doing right now?" and they will cast their eyes down and say, "Okay . . ." stopping the misbehavior. It is an important sign that Questions Two and Three were asked and answered internally, which is exactly what we want. The extra time it took to teach this the first week or so pays off many times over. Eventually, you'll notice that you won't have to carry out the entire questioning phase every time.

### **What About Strong-Willed Children?**

Strong-willed children are more of a challenge, especially when they reach the teen years. The good news is that the Three Question Method will work for them as well. We as parents can only show them where the choices are in life, then allow them to exercise their will. There will be days when a child is mad at us and wants to watch us bounce off the walls; he'll simply pull out of his repertoire some behavior he knows will drive us absolutely crazy. Parents should be prepared for this. Give your children room to understand what's going on when you implement the Three Question Method. It usually takes a week or so for kids to finally catch on. For teenagers, I often explain to them that their parents are asking these questions because they are trying to learn how best to help. One of the hopes of parents with strong-willed children is that the strong will can be lovingly confronted and directed early on.

### **Stand Back, and Let Them Learn**

Parents must remember never to get upset because of a bad choice on the child's part. They should instead ask themselves, "*What would I do in this situation?*" The more reactive we are, the more it shows that we are taking on the child's responsibility, thus weakening the child's ability to cope with larger issues later on. Parents have to accept that their children will face consequences and equip them with the right tools (such as the Three Question Method) to minimize negative outcomes. In the end, your children will be stronger and wiser for it.

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