

Getting to the Heart of Your Child's Behavior

Too many parents focus on changing a child's behavior. More important is what's going on in the child's heart.

by [Tedd Tripp](#)

The Scripture teaches that the heart is the control center for life. A person's life is a reflection of his heart. Proverbs 4:23 states it like this: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."

The word picture here is graphic. The heart is a well from which all the issues of life gush forth. This theme is restated elsewhere in the Bible. The behavior a person exhibits is an expression of the overflow of the heart.

You could picture it like this. The heart determines behavior. What you say and do expresses the orientation of your heart. Mark 7:21-22 states: ". . . from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly." These evils in action and speech come from within—from the heart.

What your children say and do is a reflection of what is in their hearts. Luke 6:45 corroborates this point:

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.

These passages are instructive for the task of childrearing. They teach that behavior is not the basic issue. The basic issue is always what is going on in the heart. Remember, the heart is the control center of life.

Behavior is determined by the heart

Parents often get sidetracked with behavior. If your goal in discipline is changed behavior, it is easy to understand why this happens. The thing that alerts you to your child's need for correction is his behavior. Behavior irritates and thus calls attention to itself. Behavior becomes your focus. You think you have corrected when you have changed unacceptable behavior to behavior you sanction and appreciate.

"What is the problem?" you ask. The problem is this: Your child's needs are far more profound than his aberrant behavior. Remember, his behavior does not just spring forth uncaused. His behavior—the things he says and does—reflects his heart. If you are to really help him, you must be concerned with the attitudes of heart that drive his behavior.

A change in behavior that does not stem from a change in heart is not commendable; it is condemnable. Is it not the hypocrisy that Jesus condemned in the Pharisees? In Matthew 15 Jesus denounces the Pharisees who have honored Him with their lips while their hearts were far from Him. Jesus censures them as people who wash the outside of the cup while the inside is still unclean. Yet this is what we often do in child-rearing. We demand changed behavior and never address the heart that drives the behavior.

What must you do in correction and discipline? You must require proper behavior. God's law demands that. You cannot, however, be satisfied to leave the matter there. You must understand, and help your child to understand, how his straying heart has resulted in wrong behavior. How did his heart stray to produce this behavior? In what characteristic ways has his inability or refusal to know, trust, and obey God resulted in actions and speech that are wrong?

A real-life example

Let's take a familiar example from any home where there are two or more children. The children are playing and a fight breaks out over a particular toy. The classic response is "Who had it first?" This response misses heart issues. "Who had

it first?" is an issue of justice. Justice operates in the favor of the child who was the quicker draw in getting the toy to begin with. If we look at this situation in terms of the heart, the issues change.

Now you have two offenders. Both children are displaying a hardness of heart toward the other. Both are being selfish. Both children are saying, "I don't care about you or your happiness. I am only concerned about myself. I want this toy. My happiness depends on possessing it. I will have it and be happy regardless of what that means to you."

In terms of issues of the heart, you have two sinning children. Two children are preferring themselves before the other. Two children are breaking God's law. Sure, the circumstances are different. One is taking the toy that the other has. The other is keeping the advantage. The circumstances are different, but the heart issue is the same—"I want my happiness, even at your expense."

You see, then, how heart attitudes direct behavior. It is always true. All behavior is linked to some attitude of the heart. Therefore, discipline must address attitudes of the heart.

This understanding does marvelous things for discipline. It makes the heart the issue, not just the behavior. It focuses correction on deeper things than changed behavior. The point of confrontation is what is occurring in the heart. Your concern is to unmask your child's sin, helping him to understand how it reflects a heart that has strayed. That leads to the cross of Christ. It underscores the need for a Savior. It provides opportunities to show the glories of God, who sent His Son to change hearts and free people enslaved to sin.

Shepherding the heart

The heart is the wellspring of life. Therefore, parenting is concerned with shepherding the heart. You must learn to work from the behavior you see back to the heart, exposing heart issues for your children. In short, you must learn to engage them, not just reprove them. Help them to see the ways that they are trying to slake their souls' thirst with that which cannot satisfy. You must help your kids gain a clear focus on the cross of Christ.

This proposition will inform everything you do as parents. It will dictate your goals. It will inform your methods. It will shape your model of how children develop.

I am not offering simple, clever methodology here. I am not promoting a new three-step plan for trouble-free children. I am not presenting a simple way to meet their needs so you can get on with your life. I am, however, willing to explore with you fresh ways of pursuing the training task God has given you. I offer these things as one who is not new to the task, but who has neither grown cynical. I am more excited about this job than ever. I am full of hope and certain that God can enable us to raise from our homes a holy seed for the church.

I have seen parents shepherding happy, productive children who are alert to themselves and life. I visited such a home recently. The family was alive and vibrant. Teenage children were at home, because home was an exciting place to be. Father and Mother were held in high esteem and sought out for advice. The Bible and biblical truth blew through every conversation—not with stifling heat, but like a refreshing life-giving breeze. In this home, five generations have kept the faith and a sixth is learning that God is the foundation of life in whose light we see light.

These are things worth striving for. This is a vision worthy of sacrifice.

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