

Behavior In Special Needs Children: What are our standards? What does the Bible say?

(Behavior in Special Needs Children is an excerpt from the book, *Christian Homes and Special Kids* www.nathhan.com)

By Cathy Steere, author of *Too Wise to be Mistaken, Too Good to be Unkind: Christian Parents Contend With Autism*

I think the worst day in our lives was the day we realized our son had autism. That first year following the diagnosis was a dreadful year of confusion, swirling in a sea of intense urgency and overwhelming grief. I'm positive that without the goodness and wisdom of our God, my husband and I would have surely drowned in that wild, black, torrent.

Figuring out what this illusive word called autism meant, and wading through the immense pile of information available at the time regarding treatments and therapies - it all paled in the light of our complete lostness with how to proceed in the way of parenting. Can we require any standards of behavior in our son? Do we now exempt him from obedience because he "can't help it?" Do we discipline him? If so, how? Do we intervene at all, or do we just let him be because he has "special needs?"

Our pastor's mantra has always been, "Ultimately, all things are disciplined by theology." My husband and I knew that, despite the crazy confusion the diagnosis threw at us, it was God's objective and unchanging Word where we would drop the anchor and find the answers to our questions. And though the scriptures do not address parenting special needs children, specifically, they do, however, have much to say about the nature of God and the nature of man. They provide us with principles to govern us, which pertain to all of life.

When our firstborn was just a baby, we read all we could by way of parenting materials. One of our very favorites, however, was a little book by J.C. Ryle called, "The Duties of Parents." To quote him regarding the training of our children, he says, "...God says expressly, 'Train up a child in the way he should go,' ...He never laid a command on man which He would not give man grace to perform. And I know, too, that our duty is not to stand still and dispute, but to go forward and obey. It is just in the going forward that God will meet us. The path of obedience is the way in which He gives the blessing. We have only to do as the servants were commanded at the marriage feast in Cana, to fill the water pots with water, and we may safely leave it to the Lord to turn that water into wine."

And while we never did find any books that taught us how to 'train up our special needs child in the way he should go,' we knew that our son's heart before God, was no different from any other child. And because of this theological truth, we sought to "obey, and then safely leave it to the Lord."

How do the scriptures teach us how to parent our special needs children? While there are many verses, especially in the book of Proverbs, the best guide is the example of God, Himself, and how He trains His own children.

First, we learn that He intimately knows each of us - our individual strengths, our unique weaknesses, and our particular struggles - and deals with each of us accordingly. We need to seek to really know our children, not only the details of their particular disability and how it affects them, but we need to know them and their unique temperaments, to parent successfully.

We also learn by our heavenly Father's example, that we should seek our children's good, not their momentary happiness. Many times, hard as it is, I must think objectively for my son's sake, for what is good for him, no matter how much he balks or hates my guidance. When he was four years old he was absolutely driven to rock on his rocking horse. It was one of his many self-stimming behaviors in which he engaged, due to his sensory processing problems. If left up to him, he would have never come down off of that horse. Did stimming on the rocking horse make him happy? Of course it did - he hated when we made him stop. Was the constant rocking good for him and his development? No! It would have been much easier for my husband and I to have just let him have at it. There would be no fit by him to endure. There would be no tears and no screaming in response to us telling him he must get off the horse. He was so happy on the horse - but doing what was good for him was more important.

Another thing we can see is that God leads His children. He leads us even when we understand not His ways. Ryle says, "We cannot see the meaning of all His dealings with us; we cannot see the reasonableness of the path in which our feet are treading. Sometimes so many trials have assailed us, - so many difficulties encompassed us, - that we have not been able to discover the needs-be of it all. It has been just as if our Father was taking us by the hand into a dark place and saying, "Ask no questions, but follow Me." When our son was very young he especially needed to be led. He had great difficulty processing information and understanding the crazy world around him. He needed us to lead him even though he couldn't understand the reason why, at the time. If we had waited until he could understand and be reasoned with, it would have been too late. He would, by that time, view himself, alone, as leader.

We also see that God chastens his people. This is a hard one for us parents of special needs children to reckon with. The prominent message from the world is that to chasten our children, and especially our special needs children, is akin to child abuse. Let us not think we know more than God and adopt this philosophy of thinking.

Before our son was diagnosed, we had always treated him as if he were just a regular kid. We expected a standard of behavior, taught him that it was right to obey, and used chastisement as needed. At the time, we knew nothing about autism and nothing about what, exactly, was going on in the brain of our child. I remember thinking that I was indeed failing miserably as a parent because it was just so hard! After we found out he had autism I fell into a horrible, dark, depression. My grief was for several reasons, but one of them was for how unjust I felt I had been to my disabled son - for chastising him. That season of depression was the darkest I had ever known in my life. But through it I was forced to wrestle with the future and how we were going to now choose to parent our special son. We determined to continue to look to our God and his moral law as our guide to setting standards of behavior. We looked to our son's Creator as our prime example of how to be a parent - from studying to truly know our son, doing what was good for him, leading him, and lovingly chastising him when his soul's health required it.

“Soul love is the soul of all love. To pet and pamper and indulge your child, as if this world was all he had to look to, and this life the only season for happiness - to do this is not true love, but cruelty. It is treating him like some beast of the earth, which has but one world to look to, and nothing after death. It is hiding from him that grand truth, which he ought to be made to learn from his very infancy, - that the chief end of his life is the salvation of his soul.” John Charles Ryle

For More Information Contact:

Maggie Dail, MA
Special Helps @
Center for Neuro Development
P.O. Box 99369
Lakewood, Washington 98496-0369
(253) 581-1588
www.centerforneurodevelopment.com
maggie@centerforneurodevelopment.com