

# Ways Parents Provoke

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*(By John MacArthur)*

In Ephesians 6:4, Paul writes, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” In our series these last two weeks, we’ve looked at both discipline (specifically, spanking) and instruction (specifically, evangelism). Today, we will look at the command to not provoke.

To “provoke . . . to anger” suggests a repeated, ongoing pattern of treatment that gradually builds up a deep-seated anger and resentment that boils over in outward hostility.

Such treatment is usually not intended to provoke anger. Here are eight ways in which parents can provoke their children to anger:

**1)** Well-meaning overprotection is a common cause of resentment in children. Parents who smother their children, overly restrict where they can go and what they can do, never trust them to do things on their own, and continually question their judgment build a barrier between themselves and their children—usually under the delusion that they are building a closer relationship. Children need careful guidance and certain restrictions, but they are individual human beings in their own right and must learn to make decisions on their own, commensurate with their age and maturity. Their wills can be guided but they cannot be controlled.

**2)** Another common cause of provoking children to anger is favoritism. Isaac favored Esau over Jacob and Rebekah preferred Jacob over Esau. That dual and conflicting favoritism not only caused great trouble for the immediate family but has continued to have repercussions in the conflicts between the descendants of Jacob and Esau until our present day! For parents to compare their children with each other, especially in the children’s presence, can be devastating to the child who is less talented or favored. He will tend to become discouraged, resentful, withdrawn, and bitter.

Favoritism by parents generally leads to favoritism among the children themselves, who pick up the practice from their parents. They will favor one brother or sister over the others and will often favor one parent over the other.

**3)** A third way parents provoke their children is by pushing achievement beyond reasonable bounds. A child can be so pressured to achieve that he is virtually destroyed. He quickly learns that nothing he does is sufficient to please his parents. No sooner does he accomplish one goal than he is challenged to accomplish something better. Fathers who fantasize their own achievements through the athletic skills of their sons, or mothers who fantasize a glamorous career through the lives of their daughters prostitute their responsibility as parents.

I once visited a young woman who was confined to a padded cell and was in a state of catatonic shock. She was a Christian and had been raised in a Christian family, but her mother had ceaselessly pushed her to be the most popular, beautiful, and successful girl in school. She became head cheerleader, homecoming queen, and later a model. But the pressure to excel became too great and she had a complete mental collapse. After she was eventually released from the hospital, she went back into the same artificial and demanding environment. When again she found she could not cope, she committed suicide. She had summed up her frustration when she told me one day, “I don’t care what it is I do, it never satisfies my mother.”



4) A fourth way children are provoked is by discouragement. A child who is never complimented or encouraged by his parents is destined for trouble. If he is always told what is wrong with him and never what is right, he will soon lose hope and become convinced that he is incapable of doing anything right. At that point he has no reason even to try. Parents can always find something that a child genuinely does well, and they should show appreciation for it. A child needs approval and encouragement in things that are good every bit as much as he needs correction in things that are not.

5) A fifth way provocation occurs is by parents' failing to sacrifice for their children and making them feel unwanted. Children who are made to feel that they are an intrusion, that they are always in the way and interfere with the plans and happiness of the parents, cannot help becoming resentful. To such children the parents themselves will eventually become unwanted and an intrusion on the children's plans and happiness.

6) A sixth form of provocation comes from failing to let children grow up at a normal pace. Chiding them for always acting childish, even when what they do is perfectly normal and harmless, does not contribute to their maturity but rather helps confirm them in their childishness.

7) A seventh way of angering children is that of using love as a tool of reward or punishment—granting it when a child is good and withdrawing it when he is bad. Often the practice is unconscious, but a child can sense if a parent cares for him less when he is disobedient than when he behaves. That is not how God loves and is not the way he intends human parents to love. God disciplines His children just as much out of love as He blesses them. “Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines” (Heb. 12:6). Because it is so easy to punish out of anger and resentment, parents should take special care to let their children know they love them when discipline is given.

8) An eighth way to provoke children is by physical and verbal abuse. Battered children are a growing tragedy today. Even Christian parents—fathers especially—sometimes overreact and spank their children much harder than necessary. Proper physical discipline is not a matter of exerting superior authority and strength, but of correcting in love and reasonableness. Children are also abused verbally. A parent can as easily overpower a child with words as with physical force. Putting him down with superior arguments or sarcasm can inflict serious harm, and provokes him to anger and resentment. It is amazing that we sometimes say things to our children that we would not think of saying to anyone else—for fear of ruining our reputation!

In closing, consider the confession of one Christian father,

My family's all grown and the kids are all gone. But if I had to do it all over again, this is what I would do. I would love my wife more in front of my children. I would laugh with my children more—at our mistakes and our joys. I would listen more, even to the littlest child. I would be more honest about my own weaknesses, never pretending perfection. I would pray differently for my family; instead of focusing on them, I'd focus on me. I would do more things together with my children. I would encourage them more and bestow more praise. I would pay more attention to little things, like deeds and words of thoughtfulness. And then, finally, if I had to do it all over again, I would share God more intimately with my family; every ordinary thing that happened in every ordinary day I would use to direct them to God.

*(Today's article adapted from John's [commentary on Ephesians](#), published by Moody.)*

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