

WHEN THEY PUSH BACK

A parent's guide to what may be happening beneath the conflict



LITTLE KIDS: BIG FEELINGS, LITTLE SCREENS

Understanding anger, unmet needs, and the early pull of
phones and reels

"A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

Proverbs 15:1 (NKJV)

About This Book

“Big feelings are not bad behavior. They are a small person telling the truth in the only language he has.”

This book is for parents of little kids — roughly ages three to eight, the beautiful, exhausting years of big feelings in small bodies. It looks honestly at where a child’s anger comes from, why little screens hook so deep, and the part we parents play in the weather of our own homes. Funny first, deep after, and practical to the end: every chapter closes with one small move, and the book closes with a Monday Morning Playbook of discipline that has actually been tested in real kitchens.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

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INTRO

The Kitchen-Floor Moment

Where every parent has sat at 9:47 p.m.

"Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, The fruit of the womb is a reward."

— Psalm 127:3 (NKJV)

It is 9:47 p.m. The dishes are still in the sink. Someone's sock is on the stairs for reasons no court could prove. And you are sitting on the kitchen floor — not from planning a moment of reflection, but because standing up felt like one decision too many.

The last hour had everything. A cup of water that became a flood event. A stuffed animal that was absolutely the wrong stuffed animal. A firm boundary about bedtime that turned into an Olympic-level protest, complete with tears, dramatic falling to the carpet, and a personal review of your parenting that included the phrase, "You are not my favourite anymore."

If you have lived some version of that night, welcome. You are in the right book, and you are not behind.

This small book is for parents of little kids, roughly three to eight years old — the apron-size years, when your children are still small enough to curl into your lap and big enough to argue like tiny barristers. They push back. They ask for one more show, one more snack, one more minute, with the stamina of professional negotiators.

And if we are honest, we push back too. With volume. With sarcasm we immediately regret. With a phone in our hand while we tell them

to get off a screen. With anger that rises so fast we scare ourselves afterward.

That is the real subject of this book. Not how to manufacture perfectly obedient children who never weep in grocery stores. Heaven has not promised us that model. The real subject is what happens between you and your child in the push-back moments — and how a parent can become a shepherd instead of a warden, a referee, or a fellow meltdown participant.

Why "Push Back"?

Little children push back for many reasons, and not all of them are rebellion. Sometimes they are tired. Sometimes they are hungry. Sometimes their feelings are simply bigger than their vocabulary, so their whole body has to do the talking.

But there is more. God made little people to grow, and growing includes testing where the edges are. "Can I climb this?" "Can I say no?" "Will you still love me if I am loud, messy, and completely unreasonable about the blue cup?" The blue cup matters to a four-year-old in a way it will never matter to you, and he needs to learn — slowly, safely, repeatedly — that love does not evaporate when feelings get big.

Your job is not to crush that testing. Your job is to make the edges firm and the middle warm.

That sounds simple until it is bedtime and you have already read the same book three times to a child who is now crying because the moon is "too far." Then theology meets laundry, and we discover what is actually in us.

STORY — The Wrong Banana

Mina, age four, asked for a banana. Her father peeled it. This was the mistake. She wanted to peel it herself, then she wanted a different banana, then she wanted the first banana but unpeeled, which is not a service the universe offers. Within ninety seconds she was weeping on the floor about a banana that was, technically, exactly the banana she had requested. Her father later said, "I stood there holding fruit and feeling like I had failed a test I never studied for." The banana was never really about the banana.

Every parent has a banana story. The question is not whether these moments will come. They will come five minutes after you told another parent, "Oh, we are doing pretty well lately," because children have a spiritual gift for timing.

A Word Before We Begin

You will not find a magic script in these pages that works on every child every time. Children are not machines, and parents are not technicians. You will find something better: a way of seeing.

You will learn to ask what a big feeling might be saying before you decide what to do about the behaviour. You will face the harder mirror — your own anger, tone, and screen habits — without shame, but without pretending.

Here is the heart of it: discipline at this age is less about winning a moment and more about shepherding a heart over thousands of ordinary moments. A warden guards the walls. A shepherd knows the sheep by name. Your child does not need a perfect warden. Your child needs a present shepherd.

And a heritage is not a report card. Gold is a reward too, but nobody expects it to come out of the ground already shaped into jewellery. It is precious before it is polished. So is your child on the hardest night of the week.

So take a breath. Get up off the floor when you are ready — or stay there a moment longer; God has met people in stranger places. Then turn the page. We will start where most push-back actually starts: not with bad behaviour, but with big feelings telling the truth in a very loud accent.

YOUR MOVE

Begin here, before chapter one.

Pick one ordinary moment from this week when your child pushed back. Do not analyse it yet and do not grade yourself. Simply name, in one sentence, what happened on the surface — "She cried when the tablet turned off" or "He refused his shoes." Then, underneath, write one gentle guess: "Maybe she was tired." Keep both sentences. You will need that habit — surface first, shepherd's guess second — all through this book.

CHAPTER ONE

Big Feelings Are Not Bad Behavior

Anger is a message before it is a problem

"A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

— Proverbs 15:1 (NKJV)

There is a moment every parent knows. Your child is not just upset; your child is weather. Tears, volume, limbs, a protest sign written in crayon somewhere in the soul. You feel the eyes of strangers. You feel your own blood pressure applying for a promotion. And the first sentence that rises in you is, "Stop that right now."

Sometimes they do need to stop a behaviour — nobody gets to hit a sibling because feelings are sincere. But before we correct the outside, we shepherds learn to listen for the inside. Anger is a message before it is a problem. Big feelings are not automatically bad behaviour. They are often a small person's very honest weather report, delivered without a filter.

Adults have more tools for a bad day: words, a friend, ten quiet minutes. A five-year-old has fewer. The feeling arrives at full size in a small body, and the body does what bodies do: it cries, shouts, stomps, or goes limp like a protest made of noodles.

The feeling itself is not the sin. The feeling is information.

What the Anger Might Be Carrying

When little children flare up, wise parents become detectives before they become judges. Very often, anger is carrying one of four quieter passengers.

Tired. The great impersonator. A tired child can look defiant and dramatic right up until sleep arrives like a falling curtain. Many bedtime battles are not character issues; they are biology wearing a costume.

Hungry. Low fuel makes small problems enormous. The broken cracker becomes a tragedy. Feed the child, and sometimes the storm downgrades itself without a lecture.

Afraid. Fear hides inside anger at this age. The child who rages about a dark hallway or a parent leaving may be saying, "I do not feel safe, and I do not know how to ask you to come closer."

Unheard. This one stings because it is often true. They tried words twice while we were cooking, driving, answering messages. By the third attempt the volume goes up — not because they love shouting, but because shouting finally worked.

None of this means every boundary dissolves. A child can be tired and still not allowed to bite. A child can be afraid and still need to stay in bed. Shepherding holds two truths at once: the feeling is real, and the limit is still loving.

This is where Proverbs helps us more than a raised voice ever will. A soft answer is not a weak answer. It does not mean, "Do whatever you like, tiny emperor." It means your tone refuses to pour petrol on a fire you are trying to lead a child out of. In plain words: your calm voice can lower the temperature in the room without lowering the standard in the house.

STORY — The Sock Emergency

Karim, age five, lost his mind over socks. Not missing socks — present socks, clean socks, socks his mother had lovingly placed directly into his hands. He declared them "wrong," threw one across the room, and wept as if the sock had personally betrayed the family. His mother almost launched into a speech about gratitude. Then she noticed the clock, the skipped snack, and the short night before. She sat on the floor, said, "You are so tired, and these socks feel awful right now," and waited. He cried for one more minute, leaned against her leg, and put the socks on. The socks had not changed. The shepherd had read the weather first.

Feelings First, Then the Fence

Here is the order that will serve you for the whole book: name the feeling, keep the fence.

"You are mad. You wanted the red cup. The red cup is in the dishwasher. You may have the green cup or water in the small glass."

That is a soft answer with a spine. You did not mock the feeling. You did not surrender the kitchen to a four-year-old foreign minister. You translated the storm into words your child can borrow next time: mad, wanted, disappointed.

When you name the feeling calmly, you are lending them your grown-up brain until theirs can do the job. That lending is slow, and it is holy work: you are teaching a small image-bearer that feelings can be told the truth about without being obeyed like kings.

And outright defiance — the clear "no," the deliberate splash after you said stop? That needs correction, yes. But ask the shepherd's question first: what is underneath? A child testing a limit needs a limit. A child drowning in a feeling needs help surfacing. Often they need both, in that order.

Empathy is not agreement. You can understand why a child is furious that playtime ended and still carry that furious little protester to the bath. Warmth and firmness are not enemies. In little children, they are the two hands of the same shepherd.

So tonight, when the weather rolls in over the dinner table, listen for the message inside the anger before you answer the noise. You may still have to say no. Say it softly, say it clearly, and stay close. A soft answer is not a parent giving up. It is a shepherd who knows the sheep is more than the storm.

YOUR MOVE

Practise the detective pause.

1. **Stop and scan.** At the next meltdown, run a silent four-word check before you speak: Tired? Hungry? Afraid? Unheard? Pick the most likely one. 2. **Name it out loud.** Say one sentence only: "You are mad because the game ended," or "You are scared and want me close." Watch what the naming alone does. 3. **Keep one fence.** Hold a single clear limit in the same calm voice: "I will not let you hit. I am right here." 4. **Debrief later, briefly.** When calm returns, ask: "What was the hardest part?" Listen more than you lecture. You are collecting intelligence for the next storm.

CHAPTER TWO

When You Want to Break Walls

Your rage, named out loud, without shame

"So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath;"

— James 1:19 (NKJV)

Let us say the quiet part into the microphone.

There are moments in parenting small children when your anger is not cute, not mild, and not a tasteful little irritation you could solve with a scented candle. It is hot. It rises in your chest. Your jaw hurts. Your hands want a job to do. And if we are naming it plainly — as this chapter promised — there are parents who have stood in a kitchen, after the third spill and the second tantrum and the one sentence that hit the exact wrong nerve, and thought: *I could put a hole in that wall.*

If that thought has ever visited you, you are not a monster. You are a parent whose nervous system has been asked to absorb more noise, need, defiance, and exhaustion than it can gracefully hold. The thought is a signal. It is not your identity, and it must never become your child's experience — but hiding it in shame will not cool it down. Naming it honestly is where cooling begins.

We do not help families by pretending godly parents float through bedtime like doves in linen. Parental anger is real, common among loving people, and it can be shepherded just as surely as a child's

anger can. James does not tell us to be feelingless. He tells us to be swift to hear and slow to wrath. In plain words: listen fast, burn slow.

Why It Gets So Hot So Fast

Little children are marvellous, and relentless in the way only small, beloved people can be. They need you when you are depleted. They repeat the question while you are answering it. They unravel, in eleven seconds, the room you spent an hour restoring. And sometimes they look directly at the boundary you just set and step over it like a line drawn in chalk.

That can feel personal. It rarely is. A five-year-old is not running a campaign against your authority; she is five, in a five-year-old storm. But your body hears disrespect, danger, failure — the old alarms ring at once, and wrath volunteers to solve it with volume.

Add the hidden ingredients — too little sleep, a hard day nobody thanked you for, money worry underneath everything, your own childhood saying, "Children in my house were never allowed to talk like that" — and no wonder the wall looks breakable.

Naming those ingredients is not excuses. It is a map. "I am not furious about the juice; I am exhausted and feeling invisible today" already slows the wrath down. Named things can be led.

Cooling Down Is a Shepherd Skill

Cooling down is not weakness and it is not letting your child "win." It is you refusing to discipline from inside a fire. A shepherd does not swing the staff while his own hands are shaking.

Try the unglamorous, effective things. Hands flat on the counter, feet on the cold floor, one slow breath: "Slow to wrath." Step to the doorway and announce, "I love you. I am getting too angry to talk well. I am taking one minute, and I will be back." Then actually come back. The return teaches safety.

Water helps more than pride admits — cold water on the face, a drink, washing your hands slowly. Lower your voice instead of raising it; children hear a low, slow voice as strength. And unclench the jaw. Half of the sentence you regret was loaded there before it reached your mouth.

STORY — The Man Who Apologised to a Doorframe

After a long day, Adel heard his son dump an entire box of crayons onto the floor he had just cleaned. Something snapped. He turned and punched the doorframe — once, hard — then froze at the sight of his son's face: not defiant now, just small and frightened, crayons everywhere. Adel knelt down that night and said, "I was very angry, and I hit the doorframe. That was wrong of me. I am sorry I scared you." His son studied him and said, "You were mad like me." Then, after a pause: "You need the calm corner, Baba." Out of the mouths of crayon criminals comes the wisest counsel in the house.

That story holds a hard line: we never aim our rage at a child, and we never make a child responsible for managing it. If your anger has crossed into shouting that terrifies, grabbing, or breaking things near your children, treat that as a shepherd's alarm bell, not a shame sentence. Repair honestly and get support — a spouse, a trusted friend, a counsellor, a priest. Asking for help with your temper is parenting.

A Better Kind of Strength

Here is the deep part. The world thinks strength is the loudest voice in the room. Scripture points to a different strength: the parent who can feel fury rise and still choose the slow road.

Your children will remember your strength. Let them remember it as the strength that knelt down, breathed, told the truth, and came back gentle. They are learning what to do with their big feelings by watching what you do with yours. Every time you slow down — even imperfectly, even late — you are teaching.

So the next time the wall starts looking breakable, hear it as information. Step back. Breathe. Name it: "I am furious, I am tired, and I love this child." Shepherds are made slowly, usually in kitchens, at 9:47 p.m., with crayons on the floor.

YOUR MOVE

Build your cool-down before you need it.

1. **Name your early signs.** Write down how your anger announces itself — jaw, shoulders, voice, speed of speech. Catching it at volume two is easier than at volume nine. 2. **Choose one reset.** Cold water, the doorway minute, flat hands and a slow breath — pick yours now, and tell your spouse or a friend what it is. 3. **Practise the sentence.** Out loud, once, while calm: "I love you. I am getting too angry to talk well. I am taking one minute, and I will be back." 4. **Plan the return.** Decide how you will re-enter: kneel to eye level, lower voice, restate the one boundary. Cool-down without return is just disappearing.

CHAPTER THREE

Little Screens, Big Hooks

The tablet is not a babysitter; it is a slot machine

"You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."

— Deuteronomy 6:7 (NKJV)

Let us begin with a confession the whole room already knows.

The tablet works. You hand it over, and the back seat goes quiet, the restaurant survives, the plane does not riot. For ten golden minutes you can finish a cup of coffee while it is still legally coffee. Tired parents do not reach for screens because they are careless. They reach because screens are very good at their job.

That is exactly the problem. The tablet is not a babysitter. A babysitter, however mediocre, eventually looks up, talks to your child, and gets bored enough to suggest a game. The tablet does none of that. A tablet is closer to a slot machine that learned your child's name: bright lights, quick rewards, one more spin, one more episode, one more tiny video that ends by offering three more. It was engineered by very clever adults to hold attention. Your four-year-old's self-control was engineered by God to need years of practice. That is not a fair fight, and at this age it cannot be your child's job to win it.

So when little kids melt down at screen-off time, parents often misread it. They think, "He is addicted to drama," or "She is

manipulating me." Sometimes they are simply hooked, mid-spin, when the machine is taken away. The crash is real. That does not mean you hand the machine back — it means you plan the ending the way you would lead a small gambler gently out of a casino: with warning, with warmth, and without negotiating with the slot machine.

What Screens Do at This Age

Children between three and eight are building the exact muscles screens exercise the least: waiting, boredom, imagination, finishing something slow. Play with blocks is gloriously inefficient. A reel, by contrast, delivers a new surprise every few seconds and never asks the child to generate anything.

That pace matters. When dinner, homework, or a conversation with Grandma has to compete with it, ordinary life can feel broken to a small brain — too slow, too quiet. Parents then hear, "This is boring," about activities that were delightful three months ago. Nothing is wrong with your child. Something is being trained.

Notice what Deuteronomy pictures instead. Teaching happens "when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" — in the ordinary traffic of family life. In plain words: little hearts are mostly formed in the margins — car rides, kitchen chats, bedtime questions — and those are precisely the margins a phone is best at filling. We are guarding the small conversations those minutes would have carried.

Shepherd Rules for Small Screens

You do not need a monastery rule. You need a few fences clear enough for a five-year-old and honest enough for the adults enforcing them.

Decide where screens live. A tablet that wanders the whole house will wander into every quiet moment. Many families find peace

when screens stay in shared spaces, charge in the kitchen overnight, and never sleep in a child's bedroom. Protect sleep first.

Decide when they end, before they start. "Two episodes" said at the beginning is a fence. "Five more minutes" said at the end, four times, is a negotiation your child will win on stamina. Use a timer the child can hear, and let the timer be the bad guy.

Choose together when you can. Offer bounded choices — this or that, both approved by you — and keep the catalogue small.

And expect the protest at switch-off, especially at the start. It is not proof the rule is wrong; it is often proof the hook was deep. Stay kind, stay boring, stay final. Offer the next good thing — snack, bath, story, your lap — like a shepherd leading toward grass.

STORY — The Video That Ate Saturday

Mariam, age six, was allowed "a few videos" while her parents finished chores. The app, being helpful in the way a waterfall is helpful, kept serving the next one. Two hours vanished. When her father finally said time was up, she wept like something precious had been stolen — and in a sense it had: the morning. He felt guilty, then angry, then guilty about being angry. The next Saturday they tried a playlist made in advance: six videos, chosen Friday night, then the tablet went to charge "because it was tired too." She still haggled. She is six; haggling is in the job description. But the ending came, the protest was shorter, and Saturday survived.

The Goal Is Not Panic. It Is Pasture.

Hear the tone of this chapter clearly, because screen culture makes parents swing between terror and surrender. Neither helps. You are not ruining your child with one rainy-day movie marathon. You are a shepherd arranging pasture: more green time than screen time, more faces than feeds, more boredom that blooms into play.

Protect the margins first — meals, car rides, the hour before sleep. Fill them badly if you must: silly questions, counting red cars, the same song sung too loudly. Those unimpressive minutes are where your voice becomes the one your child carries inside. A reel can entertain your child. Only you can accompany them.

YOUR MOVE

Make the fence before the fight.

1. **Set the charge spot.** Tonight, choose one kitchen spot where tablets and phones sleep. Screens that charge in bedrooms wander; screens that sleep in kitchens rest. 2. **Announce the ending first.** Before the next session say: "Two episodes, then the timer dings and we are done." Let the timer carry the argument. 3. **Guard one margin.** Pick one — the meal, the car ride, or the last hour before bed — and make it screen-free for the whole family this week. 4. **Prepare the next good thing.** When the screen ends, lead somewhere: snack, bath, blocks, story. Shepherds do not just remove; they lead toward pasture.

CHAPTER FOUR

They Copy the Weather

The mirror chapter: your tone is their climate

"And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord."

— Ephesians 6:4 (NKJV)

This is the mirror chapter. You may want to sit down.

Children do not primarily learn how to handle feelings from what we tell them about feelings. They learn from the weather in the house. Every home has a climate: the usual temperature of voices at 7 a.m., the way frustration sounds in the kitchen, what happens to apologies in this family — do they fall like rain, or do they have to be dragged in by force? Your little child, who cannot yet tie shoes reliably, is already a world-class meteorologist of your mood.

We say, "Use your words," in a voice that could peel paint. We say, "Calm down," at a volume that suggests we have never personally attempted it. We correct a child for rolling her eyes using a sigh so theatrical it deserves its own award category. Then we wonder where they learned it. They learned it the way they learned your accent, your laugh, and your opinion of traffic. They copied the weather.

the apostle's command to fathers — and we may rightly hear mothers in it too — is startlingly two-sided: do not provoke your children to wrath. Bring them up instead. In plain words: your tone can either heat a child toward anger or shepherd a child toward growth. The

same sentence, delivered in two climates, produces two different childhoods.

The Climate You Carry

Your tone is not a decoration on your parenting. To a small child, your tone is the parenting. A four-year-old hears the shout long after forgetting the instruction inside it, and remembers whether home sounded like a place where people repaired things, or where the biggest voice won.

Consider the ordinary climates. Sarcasm that calls itself humour and lands like a daily frost. The cold front of the silent treatment, teaching a child that love is withdrawn when people are displeased. The thunderstorm style — calm, calm, explosion — teaching children to watch the sky instead of trusting the shepherd. And careless words about other people, in a tone we would correct instantly if our child repeated it at school. Which, of course, happens next Tuesday.

This is not condemnation. It is bad news that becomes good news: if your children mostly copy what is around them, the most powerful tool in the house is not a chart or a cleverer script. It is you — your repenting, recovering, weather-changing you.

Provoking Without Meaning To

Nobody wakes up planning to provoke a child to wrath. It sneaks in through small doors. Correcting in front of an audience until shame does the work our words should have done. Teasing that continues after the smile has left the child's face. Repeating a past failure like a theme song.

Or this quieter one: a hundred small corrections and not one moment of delight. If your child mostly hears your strong voice for errors and your distracted voice for everything else, the climate tilts cold no matter how correct the rules are.

Bringing them up, he says — training and admonition. Admonition without warmth is weather damage. Warmth without training is sunshine with no fence around the cliff. The mirror asks you to become the kind of person in whose climate both grow.

STORY — The Lion Voice

At dinner, little Youstina, age four, roared across the table at her brother. Her mother corrected her firmly: "We do not use that lion voice in this house." Youstina considered this with great seriousness, pointed one small finger, and announced, "But Baba uses the lion voice when the car in front is slow." The table went very quiet. Her father later admitted he felt "prosecuted by a witness in a booster seat." He did not defend himself. He apologised — for the car voice, right there at dinner — and the children watched something more important than table manners happen: the biggest person in the room telling the truth and changing the weather on purpose.

Changing the Forecast

Since they copy the weather, let them copy the repair. A parent who says, "My voice was too sharp. I am sorry. Let me say that again gently," is not losing authority. That parent is demonstrating the exact skill we beg our children to learn — feeling something big and handling it honestly. Authority that can apologise is the only authority a child will trust with their own apologies later.

Also, let them copy your delight. Catch your child being kind, patient, or brave and say it out loud, warmly, specifically: "You waited while your sister finished. That was strong and kind." A house where good things are noticed loudly needs corrections less often.

And guard your tone about each other. Your child is learning marriage, friendship, and church from how the adults speak when

they are tired and think the small ears are busy with cereal. They are not busy. They are taking notes with crayons.

So hold up the mirror kindly, but hold it up. Ask: if my child grows up to sound like this house on an ordinary tired Tuesday, will I be glad? Whatever needs to change, begin with one degree — one softer answer, one apology offered quickly, one lion voice retired from traffic duty. Children copy the weather. By God's grace, parents get to help set it.

YOUR MOVE

Take the mirror test this week.

1. **Listen for your echo.** Notice one phrase or tone your child uses that sounds exactly like you. Do not correct it in them yet. Write it down. 2. **Change your forecast first.** For three days, deliberately soften that one phrase or tone in yourself, even when tired. Watch what shifts in them. 3. **Let them copy repair.** The next time your voice is too sharp, apologise within the hour, out loud, at eye level: "My voice was too sharp. I am sorry." 4. **Say delight out loud.** Once a day, name one specific good thing you saw — "You were gentle with your brother" — and say it warmly, like weather.

CHAPTER FIVE

Apron-Size Shepherding

Guide, not warden: warm limits for small people

"He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young."

— Isaiah 40:11 (NKJV)

Notice whose arms are busy in that verse. The shepherd is carrying lambs — not chasing them with a clipboard. Parents of three-to-eight-year-olds live with a constant temptation to become wardens: guard the rules, patrol the perimeter, issue citations for sock-related offences.

Wardens and shepherds both use fences, but for different reasons and in different tones. A warden's fence says, "Do not cross, or else." A shepherd's fence says, "Stay close; it is safe here, and I know the way to grass." Little children can feel the difference by breakfast. One produces sneaky children who get better at not being caught. The other produces children who, slowly and with many relapses, learn the way.

Apron-size shepherding is my name for this scale of care. Your children are still small enough to need you near — in the kitchen, in the bedtime routine, in the meltdown itself. You are not managing from a tower. You are down at sock level, tying, wiping, carrying, and guiding. It is gloriously unglamorous work, and it is exactly where formation happens.

Discipline Means "Teach," Not "Win"

The word discipline comes to us smelling of punishment, but at its root it means teaching — forming a disciple, a learner. That does not make correction soft. A shepherd's staff is real. It pulls a lamb back from the ditch without asking the lamb to vote on the ditch. But the aim is always formation, not domination: I am teaching you how we live, because you belong here and this way is good.

Hold the famous promise next to it:

"Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it."

— Proverbs 22:6 (NKJV)

In plain words: the daily training — small, repeated, ordinary — is the long road, and God honours the long road. Training up is not one enormous talk at age seven. It is ten thousand two-sentence shepherdings at apron height.

The Shepherd's Toolkit

Warm limits. State the boundary once, kindly, like a fact of geography: "Blocks are not for throwing. Throwing blocks ends blocks." Then enforce it without a career in debating. Warmth is in your tone; firmness is in your follow-through.

Choices with fences. "Blue shirt or green shirt?" "Walk to the car or be carried like a sack of happy potatoes?" Both options are acceptable to you, inside a safe fence. Never offer a choice you cannot honour — "Do you want to leave the park?" when leaving is not optional is a trap wearing a smile.

Routines that carry the weight. Children this age are steadied by rhythm: same waking order, same bedtime steps, same song. The chart on the wall becomes the bad guy — "Teeth, pyjamas, story. That is our order" — and you remain the beloved shepherd instead of a nightly auctioneer of hygiene.

Close before correct. Connect first: hand on the back, face at their level, name said gently. Then correct briefly. Correction from connection lands as teaching. Correction from a distance lands as attack.

Stay near, stay warm, stay boringly consistent. That is apron-size shepherding. It does not photograph well, and it will not trend, but it is how lambs learn the shepherd's voice.

STORY — Two Ways Through the Supermarket

Two fathers, same aisle, same request for a forbidden cereal. The first, acting as warden, delivered a verdict: "No. Stop asking. I said no. If you ask again we are leaving." His daughter heard a contest and entered it professionally — tears, volume, a small sit-in beside the pasta. The second father, no less firm, knelt down: "You love that one. It is not our cereal today. You may pick the oats or the flakes — you are the picker." His son chose the flakes like a statesman signing a treaty, and the expedition survived. Same fence. Different climate inside it. One father won an argument; the other led a lamb.

Gentle, and in Charge

Isaiah says the shepherd gently leads even those who are with young — which is a mercy for parents reading this with a baby on one hip and a negotiator at the gate. Gentleness is not the absence of leadership. Our Lord carries lambs in His bosom and still leads the flock somewhere. You are allowed to be the calm, immovable, kind adult in the room. Indeed, that is the job description.

So tie the apron. Set the small fences with warmth. Offer the two good choices. Let the routine do the shouting so you never have to. You are not the warden of a tiny prison. You are the shepherd of very small, very loved sheep — and shepherds lead from inside the flock, at sock level, one ordinary day at a time.

YOUR MOVE

Shepherd one routine this week.

1. **Pick one daily battleground.** Bedtime, mornings, or leaving the park — choose the one that costs you most. 2. **Write the fence as a fact.** One sentence, warm and final: "After the story, lights out and I sit with you five minutes." Say it before the battle, not during. 3. **Build two good choices.** Inside that fence, offer exactly two options you are happy to honour, and let your child be the picker. 4. **Close before you correct.** This week, every correction starts with connection: eye level, gentle voice, their name. Then the limit. Notice how the same fence lands differently.

CHAPTER SIX

The Fairness Rule at the Table

You cannot scroll and scroll-ban

*"And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye,
but do not consider the plank in your own eye?"*

— Matthew 7:3 (NKJV)

Children have an internal fairness department, and it never closes. It notices everything: who got the bigger half, whose turn lasted longer, which sibling was corrected for a crime another sibling committed at dawn, unpunished.

It also notices us. This is important, because the most common way we lose credibility with our own children is not through the rules we set. It is through the exceptions we grant ourselves while enforcing them.

Here is the fairness rule at the table: you cannot scroll and scroll-ban. You cannot feast on your phone at dinner while delivering a solemn lecture on screen limits. You cannot use the words at home that you wash out of your child's mouth with consequences. You cannot demand calm, apology, and self-control in a voice and lifestyle that exhibit none of the three. Children may not have the vocabulary for hypocrisy, but they have flawless instruments for detecting it, and they will present their findings at the least convenient moment, in public, in a clear voice.

Our Lord's picture is deliberately ridiculous — a man with a plank in his eye offering eye surgery to his brother. It makes us smile until we

recognise the operating theatre. It is our kitchen. The point is not that parents must be sinless before they may guide a child; if that were the rule, nobody could parent past Tuesday. The point is order: consider the plank first. In plain words: deal honestly with your own version of the thing before you correct their smaller version of it. Children can follow a repenting parent much further than they can follow a pretending one.

The Table Where It Shows

Meals are where the fairness rule gets audited nightly. The rule you announce will be measured against the parent answering messages "just quickly," refereeing siblings' tone while using a sharper one, or requiring please and thank you while barking for the salt like a general.

Your children are not trying to catch you out of cruelty. They are checking whether the rules are real. A rule that only applies downwards feels like power, not goodness. A rule the whole table lives under — especially the tall people — feels like the way of the house.

So state table rules as family rules: "In this house, we look at each other when we eat." Then be seen looking. "In this house, we do not use that word." Then let it die in your own mouth first. Your child will still test the rule; testing is childhood. But the rule will stand on your example, not your mood.

Phones, Words, and the Plank

The phone is the clearest modern plank. If your child must surrender a tablet at dinner while you keep a phone face-up like a fourth family member, you are teaching two lessons, and the louder one is not the lecture. Put yours in another room first, and you will be amazed how much of the screen battle was actually a fairness battle.

The same audit applies to words. We correct "stupid" and "shut up" while our own speech about neighbours and other drivers supplies a

masterclass. Children learn language at tables, in cars, and through walls we believed were thicker than they are.

And it applies to anger. A child cannot be sent to a calm corner by a parent who has never been seen going to one. When they watch you pause, breathe, and apologise, the calm corner stops being exile and becomes a family practice.

STORY — The Treaty of the Kitchen Table

The Hanna family made a rule: no phones at dinner. On night three, seven-year-old Bishoy watched his father check a message under the table with the stealth of a man defusing a bomb, and announced to the room: "Papa is doing phone contraband." There was a silence in which an empire could have fallen. His father did not explain that his phone was important and different. He stood up, carried it to the kitchen counter, and said, "You are right. The rule is for the whole table. I am sorry." Bishoy, satisfied by justice itself, returned to his soup like a judge leaving court. That dinner cost the father one message. It bought him a rule his children now defend for him.

Honour Is Cheaper Than Control

Parents sometimes fear that admitting the plank costs authority. Experience teaches the opposite. Control is expensive — it must be re-imposed at full volume every day. Honour is cheap and compounds daily: a parent who lives the table rule, apologises for breaking it, and holds it with humour keeps authority without raising a voice. Children obey many kinds of parents for a season. They trust the fair ones for a lifetime.

So audit the table this week before you audit your child. One rule, applied first to yourself, out loud. Let them see the plank come out. It will preach a better sermon than the speck ever could.

YOUR MOVE

Run the fairness audit.

1. **Pick one table rule.** No screens, kind words, or staying seated — one rule only, stated as a house rule: "In this house, we..." 2. **Apply it to yourself first.** Put your own phone in the kitchen before anyone sits down. Let your children watch the rule cost you something. 3. **Confess the plank once.** The next time you break the house rule, say so plainly at the table: "I broke our rule. I am sorry." No explanations, no "but work." 4. **Hand them the whistle.** Invite your children to remind you — kindly — when they see the plank. Accept the first reminder with thanks, even if it is announced like a court ruling.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Confession at Bedtime

Repair is the real discipline

"And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."

— Ephesians 4:32 (NKJV)

Every family disciplines. Very few families repair. That difference explains more about a child's heart than any chart on the refrigerator.

Discipline, as we have been learning, is teaching. But here is what nobody tells young parents while they are stocking up on strategies: the teaching your child will remember most is not your best correction on your best day. It is what you did after your worst moment on your worst day. Did anyone come back? Did anyone say the true words? Did the big person kneel down and make it right with the small person? Children can survive imperfect parents. Every child has them; it is the only model in stock. What wounds children is not the rupture. It is the rupture nobody ever repairs.

Bedtime is God's gift to families who need to repair, because bedtime slows everything down. The lights are low. The day's defences are tired. Small people who argued like barristers at dinner suddenly speak from somewhere softer, and questions come out that would never survive the daylight: "Are you still mad at me?" "Why did I do that?" "Do you love me when I am bad?" A shepherd learns to guard that hour like treasure, because confession at bedtime — theirs and ours — is the real discipline of the home.

Notice the recipe: kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another. One another. The kitchen runs both directions. In plain words:

forgiveness in a family is not a lecture the big people deliver downward; it is a road the whole household walks, with parents going first and going often.

The Apology They Are Waiting For

Let us be specific, because vague guilt helps nobody. If you shouted and scared them, that needs words. If you disciplined in anger, corrected them for something a sibling did, broke a promise, or spent the evening behind a screen while correcting theirs — those need words. Not grovelling; a child is not your counsellor. A child's apology needs three clean parts: what I did, that it was wrong, and that you are loved and it is finished.

"I shouted at you when the milk spilled. That was wrong of me. I am sorry. I love you, and we are okay."

Watch what happens when those words land. Shoulders come down from around ears. The child who was "fine" suddenly leans in, or pats your face and grants absolution: "It is okay, Mama." You are teaching the entire grammar of repentance in four sentences.

And children confess too, when confession is safe. A six-year-old will volunteer, out of the silence, "I hit him because I was mad about the tower." Do not ruin it with a second trial. Receive it, name the forgiveness, and bury the matter. Repentance met with a lecture learns to hide; repentance met with mercy learns to come home early.

Forgiveness Is a Bedtime Liturgy

Make it small, repeatable, and the same most nights — little children are steadied by liturgy more than novelty. One thing to thank God for, one thing to say sorry for — parent included — forgiveness spoken out loud, and a blessing to close. Two minutes. Some nights it will be holy. Some nights your child will confess to a crime involving a sibling, a biscuit, and perjury. Both nights count.

What you are building is bigger than behaviour management. You are building a child who knows what to do with guilt: run toward, not

away. So many adults hide from God because in their childhood home mistakes meant explosion or ice. Your house can write a different reflex: we tell the truth, we say sorry, we forgive, we sleep in peace.

STORY — The Buried Biscuit Case

One night, during the sorry part of bedtime prayers, four-year-old Lydia went quiet, then whispered, "I took the biscuit. And I said the dog did it." There was no dog. The family cat, asleep in another postcode of the house, had been falsely convicted for two days. Her mother did three wise things: she did not laugh until later, she did not reopen the biscuit investigation, and she said, "Thank you for telling me the truth. I forgive you. Let us ask God to help us be brave and honest." Lydia slept like a theologian. The cat remains, officially, innocent — and telling the truth became, that night, a survivable and even honoured act in that house.

Go First, Go Briefly, Go Often

The pattern is yours to set: parents confess first, briefly, and often, so children learn that apology is not humiliation but home. You are not lowering yourself. You are showing them where the door of mercy is by walking through it in front of them, night after night.

Do not end hard days unrepaired if you can possibly help it. Go back down the hallway. Sit on the edge of the small bed. Say the four sentences. A soft answer turned away wrath at breakfast; a humble apology at bedtime buries it. Sleep, for both of you, will be the proof.

YOUR MOVE

Start the two-minute bedtime repair.

1. **Thank.** Each person names one thing to thank God for tonight. Keep it small and real. 2. **Sorry.** Each person names one thing to be sorry for. Parent goes first — one sentence, no excuses: "I shouted about the shoes. I am sorry." 3. **Forgive out loud.** Answer every sorry with real words: "I forgive you. We are okay." Bury the matter; do not reopen cases at breakfast. 4. **Bless to close.** End with a short prayer of blessing over your child — hand on the head if they like it — and lights out in peace.

THE PLAYBOOK

The Monday Morning Playbook

What to do on Monday morning

"And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart."

— Galatians 6:9 (NKJV)

Everything so far has been about seeing: the feeling inside the behaviour, the fire inside your own chest, the hook inside the screen, the weather inside your house, the fairness at your table, the mercy at your bedside. This chapter is about doing — because Monday morning is coming, and Monday morning does not care how inspired you felt on Sunday. It cares about shoes.

What follows is a small playbook of practices that real families have tested at kitchen tables and car doors. Let me be honest before we start, because honesty is this book's house rule: none of these works every time. Children are not appliances and there is no button sequence that produces a calm household on demand. Any parent who promises you a technique that never fails has either forgotten parenthood or is selling something. What these practices do is stack the mornings in your favour — more connection, fewer ambushes, quicker repair — and give you something better than improvising at volume nine while holding a lunchbox.

Take what fits your house. Leave the rest without guilt. Test one thing for two weeks before judging it, because little children need repetition the way gardens need more than one watering.

The Practices

1. The five-minute morning launch. Connection before correction. Before the first instruction about shoes, spend a few unhurried minutes: a hug, breakfast together, one silly question. A child whose tank was filled at 7:00 needs less refuelling by conflict at 7:20.

2. The visual chart that argues so you don't have to. Pictures on the wall in order: wake, bathroom, clothes, breakfast, bag. When the stall begins, point instead of preach: "Where is the chart up to?" Children obey paper with far less wounded dignity than a parent commanding from a doorway.

3. The calm-down corner, built together. Not a punishment chair — a small, soft, agreed place with a cushion and a stuffed animal. Practise going there on a happy afternoon, and offer it early: "Your body looks stormy. Corner or my lap?" Parents use it too, visibly. A corner only children are exiled to is a threat with upholstery.

4. Choices with limits, offered early. "Blue shirt or green shirt?" Two options, both fine with you, offered before the standoff. When a child refuses both, stay warm and final: "Those are the two today. I will choose in ten seconds, or you can."

5. The warning that respects their world. Give time a body: "Five more minutes — when the timer dings, the blocks sleep and we eat." One warning, then follow-through without a fresh auction. The tenth day, the timer will carry arguments that used to be yours.

6. The bedtime repair, two minutes, most nights. Thank, sorry, forgive, bless. Bedtime is your second chance to repair the day. It is almost never too late the same day.

When Nothing Is Working

There will be a Tuesday when the chart is ignored, the corner is rejected, and you end up carrying a protesting child to the car like a bag of shouting laundry. Breathe. That morning is data, not a verdict.

Ask the shepherd's questions later: Was she tired, hungry, afraid, unheard? Was the routine too rushed, my voice already at storm level before the first shoe? Adjust one thing, not ten. Families rarely need a new philosophy on Tuesdays. They need lunch, sleep, and one fence moved two feet.

And sometimes the practice that failed was yours. Go back, apologise briefly, and restart the day at 10 a.m. if you must. The reaping Scripture promises comes "in due season," not by Friday. You are not behind. You are in season.

STORY — Monday, Starring the Chart

The Shenouda family adopted the picture chart on a hopeful Sunday and met Monday, when Mina, age five, reviewed the chart and announced, "I am not doing teeth today." Her mother pointed. Mina negotiated. The chart, having no feelings and no promotion prospects, simply continued to say: teeth. By Wednesday, Mina was pointing at it herself to announce her progress like a train conductor. By Friday she had added a final square of her own drawing: a biscuit, earned, apparently, by the entire railway. Her mother framed this accurately: "The chart works about eighty percent. The other twenty percent, we are apparently a biscuit economy now."

Your Monday, Specifically

Do not overhaul the household tonight; exhausted revolutions fail by Thursday. Choose one practice. Tell your child about it in advance, on a calm afternoon, the way a shepherd walks a fence line before moving the flock. Expect a louder few days while the new fence settles — protest at a boundary is often the sound of it being tested, not failing.

Then keep going, parents. Slow to wrath, quick to repair, firm at the fence and warm in the middle. Your children will not remember every rule. They will remember the shepherd: who came close, who

told the truth, who apologised, and who got up off the kitchen floor and shepherded again the next morning. That is the whole book. Now go and have Monday.

YOUR MOVE

Choose your Monday.

1. **Pick one practice only.** Morning launch, chart, calm corner, choices, timer warnings, or bedtime repair — circle one for the next two weeks. 2. **Walk the fence line first.** Explain it to your child on a calm afternoon, and practise once while everyone is happy. 3. **Set the timer to argue for you.** This week, every screen and play ending gets one announced warning — then warm, final follow-through. 4. **Restart without shame.** After the first morning it all collapses — and it will — apologise briefly, fix one small thing, and restart the day. Do not lose heart.

THE MISSION

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THIS BOOKLET

Little Kids: Big Feelings, Little Screens — When They Push Back, Book One

Book One of WHEN THEY PUSH BACK — a parent's guide to what may be happening beneath the conflict. Where big feelings come from, why phones and reels hook little hearts so early, the rage every parent feels and nobody admits, and warm, proven ways to guide a small child instead of merely reacting. Includes the Monday Morning Playbook, what to actually do, starting Monday.



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