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Consistency Is Key

Guest: Sam Crabtree
From the series: Parenting With Loving Correction (Day 2 of 2)
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Bob: Having rules and boundaries in your home and, then, not enforcing those rules or boundaries—that can be a big problem. Sam Crabtree explains what happens when parents don't enforce the rules.

Sam: You teach the children to disregard what you're saying. If you say, "Now, get your pajamas on," and then they do everything except get their pajamas on, and there is no response from you, they just conclude—and rightly so—that when you mouth the words, "Get your pajamas on," you don't really mean that, apparently. The issues can escalate as they get older. So, it's not just—"Get your pajamas on"—but—"Keep your pants zipped on your date."

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I'm Bob Lepine. There is a positive, loving way for you to keep boundaries in place and to enforce rules even if your kids don't like it at first. We'll talk with Sam Crabtree about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. Did your kids—did they see you as a mean mom? Were you a mean mom?

Ann: I think they thought I was really fun. I'm an adventurous mom. I do crazy things.

Dave: She was fun—

Bob: Yes?

Dave: —really, really fun. She still is. I'm not saying she isn't anymore.

Ann: But I also made them toe the line, and it was exhausting. With three little boys, I was exhausted because you're—sometimes, it felt like that's all you do.

Bob: Yes.

Ann: But I think—I think I had a combination.

Dave: She was a good balance. She was—one of Ann’s real values in life is make a memory. So, I’m telling you. She made memories—unbelievable memories.

Bob: Well, was Dave a mean dad?

Ann: No.

Bob: No; he was fun dad.

Ann: Yes; he was fun dad. The kids in the neighborhood would want to come to our house to play with Dave.

Dave: They’d come to the front door, and I’d get it and go—“Can Mr. Wilson come out and play?” I’m not kidding. We’d play capture the flag and a little whiffle ball in the front yard. I wanted to be—we wanted our home to be the home—

Bob: Yes?

Dave: —in the neighborhood where your kids wanted to be because there was a lot of joy—the joy of Jesus radiated. We wanted that to happen.

Ann: And laughter was important to us. What about you, Bob? Were you the fun dad?

Bob: See, I was a camp counselor when I was in high school and then college. I thought that’s what parenting was—was just being an extended camp counselor. Honestly, that was my paradigm was just—if you can have fun with the kids and have them all / corral them all and get them to go along and—“Hey, let’s all go do this.” So, I was much more like that; and Mary Ann would come along and say, “No; they need to be—they need to be molded a little bit more. They need—it’s not just—‘Let’s all go have a party today’—but there’s—we’re actually raising real human beings.”

Dave: I actually—

Sam: So, as a dad, did you do table chants for table prayers?

Ann: Ooh, that’s a good question.

Bob: We have a song. We did our—

Ann: Oh, let’s hear it.

Bob: —we sang prayers. By the way, this is Sam Crabtree who is joining us again on *FamilyLife Today*. Sam, welcome back.

Sam: Glad to be here.

Bob: Sam is an author. He has written a book called *Parenting With Loving Correction* that we're talking about. Sam is on the pastoral team of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. So, still today, when our kids come home for a holiday or something and it comes time to pray, I'll go—"Okay. For health and strength and daily food, we praise thy name, O Lord. Amen." They'll join in and sing along.

Ann: The whole family.

Bob: The grandkids will look at their parents like—"What is this all about?" But yes; we would sing that little prayer.

Dave: I think I'm looking at you that way right now, Bob.

Bob: "For health...."

Dave: Really, you guys still do it?

Ann: That's fun.

Bob: We would sing that—yes.

Ann: That's really fun.

Sam: The Lord's been good to me.

Sam and Bob: "And so, I thank the Lord for giving me the things I need—the sun and the rain and the apple seed. The Lord is good to me. Amen."

Bob: We'd string out the "amen."

Ann: Sam, did you sing that?

Bob: Sometimes, we'd sing—

Ann: That was a camp song.

Sam: That was a camp song.

Bob: We'd sing "dig in" instead of "amen." So, at the end of the prayer—the reason we are talking about all of this is because—

Dave: Wow. What just happened here in this studio? [Laughter] I've never heard either one of those songs. Thank you.

Bob: Really?!

Dave: Have you, honey?

Ann: No.

Bob: You can download the file, and you can memorize them and share them with others; okay?

Dave: I can try it.

Bob: We're talking, this week, about correction and about discipline. Part of the reason we're talking about this is because I think there's an observation that there are parents who are a little intimidated by the idea of correcting their kids. They don't want to be abusers in any way. They want to nurture their kids and want them to thrive, and they are concerned that correction is going to work against that nurturing and thriving—that kids are somehow going to grow up angry and frustrated and even violent if their parents try to correct them.

So, moms and dads just back off and let things go that some of us in the older generation look at and go—"You can't let that go." Do you know what I'm talking about?

Sam: Well said. We should be interviewing you, I think, here. [Laughter]

Bob: I didn't write the book.

Dave: Well, here is my question on that angle, Sam, because you're the expert. I—as a young dad with my first child, I had this idea that if you set a boundary or a rule and then you enforce it, the child feels unloved. Yet, I discovered the opposite is true. You talk about this in your book—is—no; when you set the boundary and enforce it, it actually makes him feel loved. A lot of parents are afraid to do that because they think, "I want my son or daughter to feel so loved. If I really enforce this rule / this boundary, they are not going to feel that." Talk about that because they do.

Sam: Yes; boundaries help. I taught sixth grade for seven years. We had a large playground adjacent to the school. Every once in a while, a stray kickball or something would go out into the street; and it was a significant hazard. So, the school district, then, wisely put up a chain link fence along the border of the property there between the playground and the street.

Whereas, the children used to play some distance from that street; but a stray ball would get away from them. Now, they would lean up against that fence and have their little gossip section or whatever they would do there because the boundary was there and wasn't going to move. They didn't have to fear the traffic. So, I think the boundaries do provide safety.

Ann: There were—a couple of years ago, I did a talk to some high school kids; and a 14-year-old girl came up to me, and she said, “I feel like my mom”—her mom was raising her—“I feel like she doesn’t love me.” I said, “What makes you think that?” She said, “All my friends have boundaries / rules / curfews.” I said, “And?” She said, “My mom has no rules / no curfew. I can be out whenever. I have never had a rule in my life. My mom is nice to me, but I feel like—‘Does she love me?’” I was so fascinated by that because she felt so insecure by the lack of rules in her home.

Sam: Yes. My point here isn’t to get parents to establish a bunch of rules, if they don’t have them, or to tell parents which rules they should have. Like, if you have a curfew, should it be at this o’clock or that o’clock or whatever it should be; but my main interest is once you’ve set a rule, then, enforce that rule for multiple reasons.

One is that if you set rules that you don’t enforce, the child can think, “You really don’t care about those rules. They must not matter to you.” Another is that you teach the children to disregard what you’re saying and to take it one step further. They even learn that your words don’t mean anything.

Bob: Yes.

Sam: If you say, “Now, get your pajamas on,” and then they do everything except get their pajamas on, and there is no response from you, they just conclude—and rightly so—that when you’ve mouthed the words, “Get your pajamas on,” you don’t really mean that apparently. The issues can escalate as they get older; but if they’ve learned when they are small that—“Well, your rules are just wishes. You hope I’ll comply, but you don’t really expect me to comply. There won’t be any consequence if I don’t”—then, they throw your words right out.

Dave: Enforcing that boundary or that fence is so important. I remember one time Ann and I were doing a parenting series at our church and I was trying to make the point that, Sam, you do such a good job of in your book of making the point that you’ve got to set the fence—I call it a fence—or a boundary. Then here is the other thing. You should expect your children to push on that fence. They’re going to do it. We are sinners raising sinner-lings. [Laughter] You know?

Sam: Well said.

Dave: Parents often are surprised; aren’t they? Like—“I set the fence, and now they are pushing against it like—‘I don’t want to go to bed at this time. I don’t want to obey your rule.’” What do you do in that situation?

Sam: Well, we—parents, it’s good for us to know that parenting will take us to the limits of our endurance—

Dave: Wow.

Sam: —of our energy. Children, in general—and specific children—given to us in sequence will continue to test the limits of our endurance. They are gifts from God really to test our endurance. From infancy on, our children will test what we really mean. If we don't meet the test, then they won't either. They'll be—they'll climb the walls because we haven't said, "Don't climb the walls."

Bob: Weren't there times, though, when your kids would—you'd lay down something and like you had a standard family rule like, "Lights out at 11 o'clock." There's one night and you're walking down. It's 11:15. You see a light on in a kid's room, and you go knock on the—"What's going on? You know lights out at 11." They go—"Yes; I was this and this and this." Did you immediately bring correction and a consequence, or were there some nights that you went—"Okay; just turn off the lights, and we'll be done with it"?

Sam: I think it's important to listen first, find out what—were there extenuating circumstances. You have more flexibility in doing that if it's a lights-out in the bedroom kind of thing rather than—"Don't go through red lights."

Bob: Right; yes.

Sam: But yes; I don't think you need to rush to judgment, but neither should we abandon consistency.

Bob: Yes. When we were working on the *Art of Parenting*[™] video series, I asked Pastor Kevin DeYoung—I said, "So, when do you correct, and when do you give grace?" He said, "Well, that's a false dichotomy. When you're correcting, you're giving grace." I'd not thought about that because we think giving grace means let them off the hook; but it is a grace response to actually correct. God is being gracious to us when He corrects our wrong behavior; isn't He?

Sam: Yes; I mean you posed it well at the outset when you talked about those who correct may feel like their children won't think it's loving. It is love—

Bob: Yes.

Sam: —to do the correcting. So, I just think in the Christian church we've not done well with the fallacy of the excluded middle / the false dichotomy. There are lots of issues where we think it's either this or that; and there are nuances where we can work out a creative solution.

Bob: Right.

Sam: So, same with disciplining children. It doesn't mean either 100 percent compliance or "We're going to drop the atomic bomb on your bedroom."

Ann: I think, too, all of our kids are so different, and we're going to correct in a different way with different children in their response.

Sam: Know your children.

Ann: Exactly. I think that's important. Also, I just want to say this culture with the comparison with social media. I think most listeners probably as moms or dads can feel overwhelmed and feel like—"I am a bad parent." I think they judge themselves, and they are hard on themselves. Part of it is they don't have answers; but also, because there is so much comparison going around, we don't think we are great at it.

I think, also, parenting is different in the young years. Dave and I always said, "Let's really set some boundaries with our kids from the time they are born to five. If we go hard then, it will get easier." I think that was really true in our case. Then parenting looked different as our kids got older. Have you seen that, Sam? How do we correct when our kids are little? What does that look like? Does it change as they get older?

Sam: Yes; it will change as the children get older. When they are very, very small—even newborns—I wouldn't discipline a newborn. I don't—I'd be highly leery of correcting a little one flicking your finger at their hand or something. I don't think they could respond in an appropriate way that children at six months or so—they can start to arch their back in defiance like—"I don't want you putting me on the table to change my diaper"—or whatever the issue is. Then I think we start to correct.

I will say that there are some physical forms of correcting that can be used with younger children that go away as the children get older partly because the maturity / partly because they've reached new cognitive levels where you can reason with children as they are older; and partly, they work with smaller children because you're bigger than they are.

I think that's a God-given thing for a season that—I'm not even talking about spanking, per se, here; but I'd love to talk about that at some point. You can just pick them up and sit them there. "I told you to get in your chair"; they don't get in the chair; you can pick them up and put them in the chair. I mean just simplify correction. It's "No, not this"; "Yes, this" and "Yes, now" and "Thank you" after they've done it to show that you are not just—

Ann: A dictator.

Sam: —Billy Goat Gruff, and you're just tough all the time; but when they cooperate, you appreciate it.

Bob: Break that down: “No” means this behavior is not acceptable—

Sam: Yes.

Bob: —“Not this”—what you are doing is you are explaining the specific behavior you are talking about. “Yes this” is saying, “This is what you should be doing.” So, you’re not just correcting; but you’re saying, “This is what’s right. This is the right way to act.” “Yes now” means this is not something you do next time. We’re expecting it right now. Then, the “Thank you” is gratitude for the right response?

Sam: Right. The gratitude is an important part. I don’t think it’s just a caboose that has become superfluous in our railroads—

Bob: Yes.

Sam: —in our trains these days. The illustration could be that one of our daughters— one time, she was perhaps—I don’t know—eight or ten years old; and she was talking to her mother in a particular tone that I found unacceptable. So, I just interrupted their conversation; and I said, “I don’t know if you’re intending to be sassy to your mother right now, but the tone of voice that you are using seems to me like it could be. I just want you to know that if you continue in that tone, I will count it as sassy, and you’ll be corrected. You’ll be punished”—

Bob: Yes.

Sam: —“for it. Now, can you talk to your mother in a different tone?” She did.

Bob: Yes.

Sam: “Thank you. Well done, dear daughter.”

Bob: So, let’s do this. Let’s help a mom and a dad who have been listening to us this week; and they’re thinking, “Okay, if I do a little self-evaluation, we probably let our kids get away with too much. We’re probably not correcting as consistently or, maybe, as regularly as we ought. Maybe, we’re fearful or we’re tired or whatever it is; but this is an area where we need to do better.”

So, if you are sitting down with somebody who says, “I am ready to make some course corrections / some adjustments,” what would be your best tips to that person on how to get started especially if it’s not been the way you’ve been parenting over the last couple of years with your child?

Sam: Well, bless their hearts. I have had parents of teenagers say, “We think we’ve squandered a decade plus with our children. Is it too late?” First off, I just want to commend them. Second, “Is it too late?” There could be tracks that have been laid

down that will be pretty stubborn to relay those tracks in those lives or straighten those arrows that have bent a certain way; but it's never too late. I think it's always the right time to start meaning what you say and saying what you mean in terms of household regulations / rules / policies / guidelines / practices—whatever.

You're stewardship, as parents, is to God. Under God, you're raising these children. You are accountable to God for how you're raising your children. So, under God, with respect and in communion with Him and relating to God, you want to run the household the way you think you should run the household.

So, if you're going to have to change some rules or household standards or something, it's okay to say to the children: "We're coming to a place where we think we have not been doing right, and we're sorry. We apologize. We're discovering we should have probably been doing some things differently. We're asking for your forgiveness and for your patience and for your prayer because we're going to make some changes. Here they are. Here are the changes we are going to make."

You lay it out: "This is in all fairness, full disclosure, family meeting"—or whatever.

Bob: Right.

Sam: "We're going to change these things." And you'll have to go to work maintaining those changes to demonstrate that you mean what you are saying; but it is always the right time to act on what you've come to discover / what you've come to know and believe is the right thing to do and then start implementing it.

Bob: At that point, you've explained what the new normal is going to be; and then it's important that you start living that out with some level of consistency; right?

Sam: Major emphasis on consistency.

Bob: Consistency.

Ann: Yes.

Sam: Yes.

Dave: I've even thought—tell me what you think, Sam—of Ephesians 6:4 where Paul writes, "Fathers don't exasperate your children but raise them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." I've often thought ways that we exasperate our children is we don't lovingly correct. We state things. We don't follow through.

Bob: Whom the Lord loves—

Dave: Right.

Bob: —He disciplines; right? Yes.

Dave: Yes. So, we're that parent that's making grand statements or laying down boundaries and, yet, not enforcing them. It's exasperating to a child. Is that true?

Sam: I think that and many other things. I think our children are born with hypocrisy antenna. [Laughter] I think—I mean one of the things that used to exasperate me about my dad—there were seven of us children and so nine at the dinner table—and he would say, “The ketchup's not—somebody get the ketchup and so forth.” I don't remember seeing my dad get the ketchup. So, it seemed like that's what you tell the kids to do rule, and that's not something that all human beings do.

From that, I took away from being raised that way—I think I want to be different in terms of raising my children so that if there are times that I will volunteer to say, “I see that there is no butter on the table. Let me get that for everyone.”

Bob: Yes.

Ann: So, you're just playing a servant's attitude kind of—you're expecting them what you're doing yourself.

Sam: To not exasperate. I think that's your question. Inconsistency exasperates. Double standards exasperate. Failed promises exasperate. I mean if you make promises, do everything in your power to keep them; or repent: “That was a bad promise to make. I shouldn't have made that promise. Please forgive me of making that promise. I can't fulfill that promise.”

Bob: You mentioned that you'd like to talk about corporal punishment a little bit. The challenge is we don't have time today to do that. So, here is what we're going to do. We are going to have an extended conversation about that subject. It'll be available online. So, if a listener wants to hear our conversation about corporal punishment, you can go to FamilyLifeToday.com and listen to that. We've also got a section from the *Art of Parenting* video series on corporal punishment that I think would be helpful. You can watch that as well.

I would just say wherever you are on that subject—whether you are including spanking as a part of what you are doing as a parent or you're not—this would be worth listening to and worth watching the video just so you can kind of rethink the subject and decide what you think is right for you. All of that is at FamilyLifeToday.com.

In addition, we've got information about your book there as well. Sam, thank you for being here and for helping us and for getting practical with us on these issues. Let's hope there are moms and dads who have been listening who would say, “I think we can

make some adjustments here; and it'll be better for our kids if we do." Appreciate you being here.

Sam: It's a privilege.

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