

Teaching Toddlers—and Older Children—to Sit Still

by Susan Bradrick

“Impossible!” That’s what many are thinking. Or, “Cruel! How dare we take out the wiggles that God put in!” Yes, I’ve heard that, too. But I think God has another perspective on the matter. And it is *His Word* that matters.

“Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.” (Prov. 22:6) This is just one of many commands from our Creator God to parents. Because He made us and our children, doesn’t it make sense that we study His instruction manual for “Toddlerhood?”

That is just what I did when I became a believer as I was completing my master’s degree in psychology. God had shown me clearly through my studies that man’s wisdom is foolish and futile (psychologists have the highest suicide rate of any profession) and that I needed to go to His Word for my questions about child training. His Word told me that if I wanted my child—then 18 months, now 34 with six precious punkins of his own—to become a mature, responsible, diligent, self-controlled, loving adult (and I did), I needed to diligently seek *and* equally as diligently apply God’s wisdom (Prov. 2:1-13), not man’s. That was huge for a young woman who had thought she was going to help people as a psychologist.

So, back to toddlers. I learned that all men were controlled by their own sin natures from birth—even toddlers. I learned that training up a child didn’t start when he was ten or five, but that God designed infancy and toddlerhood as *the* prime time to begin to train little hearts “in the way they should go.” And I began to understand that if I took the time and energy now to teach my child to obey, to deny self and practice self-control, in the little things during infancy and toddlerhood that I would be building the critical foundation for that mature, responsible, diligent, self-controlled, loving adult I hoped to have in the future. Makes sense, doesn’t it? And you know what? God’s Word is faithful and true. It worked—nine times over!

“But how!” you exclaim. The basic sin of man is this, “I want to do when I want to do it. I will be like God.” (Gen. 3:5) So God gives us the blessed opportunity when our children are tiny to help them learn that they may not do what they want to do when they want to do it. They must learn to obey God (through His earthly representatives—their parents) rather than *being* God as *all* children want to do.

So let’s look at sitting still. Does a tiny child need exercise, opportunities to crawl or toddle or wiggle and play? Of course! But now comes the crucial question: Does a tiny child (even as young as 6-12 months old) need to crawl or toddle or wiggle and play where and whenever he wants to do so? Or does he need to learn from his very earliest days that there are sometimes when he may crawl or toddle or wiggle and play *and* there are times he may not. He may not always do what he wants to do when he wants to do it and it is critical for him—for his own good and future blessing—to learn this crucial spiritual lesson when he is tiny.

So let's get realistic. How can you possibly teach an infant or toddler to be quiet and still while you are sitting in church, at a concert, on an airplane? That's easy. You can't! You must do it at home before you get to the church, concert, or airplane. Purpose before God to use the everyday opportunities He graciously gives in your home to teach your child to deny himself, to practice self control, and to obey someone other than himself—namely, you!

Some people use family Bible reading time for this training. And this is prime training time. But to keep Bible time from being continually interrupted by teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17), be a wise mommy and teach the rudiments of these principles at a less disruptive time. Teach your infant to lie still without rolling around on the changing table by showing him what you want him to do, reproving him firmly but gently for several time when he doesn't (and he won't!), and then soundly swatting his conveniently bare little bottom several times to show him that he must obey your words. If you are consistent, he will soon get the picture and learn that *during diapering* I may not do what I want when I want to do it. I must lie still and quiet.

Then apply this very same process to other situations, including daily story reading time before naps. (This is an invaluable time for both sharing wonderful early childhood literature—including Bible stories—with your children *and* teaching them to be quite and sit still. Then, with this groundwork laid, apply this process during family Bible study. If you have been diligent, it will be much easier now because your child has learned the basics already. And guess what? You *have* been teaching your child to be quiet and still while you are sitting in church, at a concert, on an airplane! Oh, he will test you occasionally—some children are more persistent at this than others—to see if you really mean “sit quite and be still” in church like you do at home. But you will be blessed to see the “peaceful fruits of righteousness” (Heb. 12: 11) that God will be working in your child and home if you will faithfully, from infancy, train up your child in the way *he should go*, rather than allowing him to do what he wants to do when he wants to do it.