

# Goldilocks Discipline

A Just-Right Approach to  
Christian Parenting

Melanie Wilson, Ph.D.



# Table of Contents

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| Table of Contents .....                                  | 1          |
| Lost in the Woods of Parenting .....                     | 7          |
| <b>Part I: When Discipline Goes Wrong .....</b>          | <b>9</b>   |
| Discipline Can Be a Bear .....                           | 10         |
| When You're a Too-Hard Bear .....                        | 13         |
| When You're a Too-Soft Bear .....                        | 23         |
| <b>Part II: The Just-Right Way .....</b>                 | <b>31</b>  |
| Becoming a Just-Right Bear .....                         | 32         |
| Raising Cubs with Self-Control .....                     | 40         |
| <b>Part III: Taming the Bear Within .....</b>            | <b>50</b>  |
| When You're an Angry Bear .....                          | 51         |
| From Roaring to Teaching .....                           | 65         |
| From Avoiding to Leading .....                           | 74         |
| <b>Part IV: Just-Right Discipline in Real Life .....</b> | <b>88</b>  |
| Motivating Your Cubs the Just-Right Way .....            | 89         |
| Strong-Willed Cubs .....                                 | 103        |
| Cubs with Big Feelings .....                             | 114        |
| When Cubs Clash .....                                    | 127        |
| When Mama Bear & Papa Bear Disagree .....                | 138        |
| <b>Part V: Your Family's Story .....</b>                 | <b>153</b> |
| Writing Your Just-Right Story .....                      | 154        |
| Your Happy Ending .....                                  | 162        |
| About the Author .....                                   | 164        |
| Recommended Reading .....                                | 165        |

## INTRODUCTION

# Lost in the Woods of Parenting

Parents start their parenting journey with very little guidance. Many cannot believe they're being allowed to take tiny babies home when they have no experience.

As children grow, parents get more guidance, but it's conflicting—especially when it comes to discipline. As Christian parents, we want to use biblical principles in disciplining our children. But the interpretations of these principles are at odds too.

One school of thought is that strict discipline prevents our children from failing and developing bad character. The other school of thought is that giving children loads of grace motivates them to live godly lives without risking the relationship.

We've all observed plenty of examples of each approach, but these experiences are confusing because the results are mixed. We and our friends may have "turned out okay" with our parents' approach, whatever it was. And we can find examples of everything from juvenile delinquents to pastors coming out of both types of homes.

We tend not to worry about discipline when everything is going swell with our adorable, agreeable baby. Then that baby becomes a toddler who fights us when we go to put him in the car seat. He tries to hit us when we end his playtime. And he throws his food when he doesn't like it. What should we do? Do we use physical discipline? Time out? Ignore it?

As our child begins talking back, the pressure intensifies—especially if he gives us an emphatic "no!" in front of grandparents or friends. If he insists on having his way, no matter how many times we say no, we feel we've gotten a little deeper into the woods of parenting.

When our child reaches school age and there are expectations of getting dressed, completing schoolwork, and keeping a clean room, parents who are still uncertain about discipline can get very frustrated. We may find ourselves yelling to motivate our child but end up feeling guilty. We may take away screen time but find that our resolve fails quickly. We wonder if the punishment is too harsh and we're just too tired to deal with the whining.

When our middle schooler begins openly disrespecting and disobeying us, we wonder if something else is going on with him. We consider getting an evaluation. One parent thinks that he just needs stricter discipline. The other thinks maybe the strict discipline is responsible for our son's more frequent outbursts.

Having one child to discipline is tough enough, but when we have more than one child who is not only sparring with us but fighting one another, we can feel even more lost. Should we punish them for fighting? Make them work it out on their own? Ignore it as a normal phase that will pass?

By the time our oldest child is a teen, it's getting dark in the woods. There is less time for our teen to mature before she will be on her own. After having a more grace-based approach to discipline, we may become stricter, grounding our child from outings and privileges—hoping that serious consequences will get through to her. If that doesn't work, we may decide it's too late. We've ruined our child. Or our partner has. The frustration of dealing with a rebellious child has us arguing more. We wonder if the marriage can survive the crisis.

I've seen many parents get lost in the woods with discipline. They often ask me for advice. I understand that.

I'm a trained clinical psychologist who worked in a Christian practice. I did not intend to work with children and parents, but many of my clients presented with parenting issues.

I quickly learned that most parents did not really want my advice. Instead, they wanted me to fix their child while they were in the waiting room. Any suggestion that parents might try something new in their discipline approach was met with resistance, anger, or both.

When I quit counseling to raise my own children, I discovered that parenting was much harder than it seemed! Having six unique children to discipline gave me the same lost-in-the-woods feeling that many of my clients had. My personal struggles and clients' negative response to advice had me retiring from the role of parent advisor for good—or so I thought.

When Felice Gerwitz asked me to create a Christian parenting podcast as part of the Ultimate Homeschool Radio Network, I didn't hesitate. I gave her an emphatic "no." She was surprised given my background. But she agreed to let me create a podcast called *The Homeschool Sanity Show*, where I would discuss just about any topic other than parenting.

Several years of podcasting later, I was asked to speak for Great Homeschool Conventions. I chose my topics strategically to help market my books, *The Organized Homeschool Life* and *Grammar Galaxy* language arts curriculum. But I also gave a session on overcoming parental anger called The Anger Antidote. The room for that session was packed. The room for the language arts session? Not so much.

Every year thereafter I did a session on a parenting topic that had the same result. Hundreds of homeschooling parents came to hear what I had to say about parenting and thanked me for it. It was clear that advice on parenting is what these parents wanted to hear from me.

I decided to develop a talk on discipline that formed the basis for this book—helping parents find a Just-Right discipline approach for their family. But after my first presentation of it, I felt uneasy. I didn't know why until it was the night before my

second presentation of the talk and I couldn't sleep. I believe I was the one being disciplined at the time.

The truth is my first attempt at the presentation had me being too hard on the parents in that session. Because I had witnessed a shift in homeschool parenting approaches from what I saw as too hard to what I saw as too soft, I thought I had to give these Too-Soft parents a talking to. No one told me I was offensive afterward, but I knew that I had not been speaking from humility. I had also ignored the fact that these parents were coming to my session because they desperately wanted to do what was best for their children. They just didn't know what that was.

I got out of bed that night and stayed up for hours, revising the talk. When I delivered it the next day, my heart and the response I received felt just right. I thank God for showing me that the reason I've always been uneasy about giving parents answers was because it suggested that I had them all. I don't, but what I do have I offer to you in the pages that follow.

Parenting can feel like wandering in the woods without a map. But sometimes the clearest way forward is found in a simple story. Let me introduce you to a family who discovered that discipline doesn't have to be too hard or too soft—it can be just right. Before I do, here's an overview of the route we'll take.

# Goldilocks Discipline at a Glance

If you feel lost in the woods of parenting, you're not alone. Many parents find that their discipline is too hard or too soft. But as Goldilocks discovered, there's a Just-Right way for your family. The chapters ahead will lead you there.

## ***Part I: When Discipline Goes Wrong***

---

Before we can find the Just-Right way, we need to understand the paths that lead parents astray.

## ***Part II: The Just-Right Way***

---

Now we discover the balanced approach that helps children grow in responsibility and self-control.

## ***Part III: Taming the Bear Within***

---

Even the best discipline plan can fail when our emotions take over. These chapters focus on the parent's role.

## ***Part IV: Just-Right Discipline in Real Life***

---

Here's how the Just-Right approach works in the everyday challenges families face.

## ***Part V: Your Family's Story***

---

Every family writes its own story. These final chapters help you shape the ending you want.



*Discipline doesn't have to be too harsh or too permissive.  
When we try a new way, it can be just right.*

# Prologue

Before I tell you how I came to advise Papa and Mama Bear about disciplining their cubs, I have to tell you the real story of how we met.

You've heard that I was a naughty little girl who walked into the Bears' house uninvited, where I proceeded to sit in their chairs, eat their porridge, and sleep in their beds. Then when they came home from their walk, I allegedly jumped out of the window, never to be seen again.

But the truth is I had gotten lost in the woods that day. Mama Bear found me and kindly invited me home. She told me to have a seat and rest my weary feet while she made me lunch. I tried sitting in Papa's chair and then Mama's chair that weren't comfortable at all. But Baby Bear's chair felt just right.

The porridge Mama Bear served me for lunch was too hot to eat, so we talked while we waited for it too cool. But we talked so long that the porridge got cold. She warmed it for me, though, and the temperature was just right. I had never had such delicious porridge.

I was so exhausted after eating that she suggested I take a nap. I tried Papa Bear's bed, but it was too hard. Mama Bear's bed was too soft. Thankfully, Baby Bear's bed was just right. I fell sound asleep.

That is until Papa and Baby Bear came home from their walk. I woke up to Papa Bear growling about his messy bed and to Baby Bear squealing with excitement about a new friend to play with. I got up and played with Baby Bear until dinner time, when he showed me the way home.

We had so much fun that day that I frequently visited the Bear family. Baby Bear and I stayed friends even as we both married and had cubs of our own.

I became a Christian psychologist and then quit practicing

## GOLDILOCKS DISCIPLINE

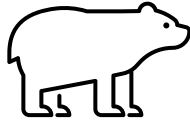
to raise and homeschool my six children.

Baby Bear started a honey company and married a beautiful bear he met at church. They became Papa and Mama Bear with two beautiful cubs of their own.

Recently they invited me over for lunch, saying they needed to talk.

PART I:

# When Discipline Goes Wrong



## CHAPTER 2

# Discipline Can Be a Bear

When they opened the front door, their oldest cub, Junior, ran into my arms with such force that I nearly fell.

“Goldilocks!” he cried.

“Junior!” his papa growled. “How many times do I have to tell you to be gentle? I’m sorry, Goldilocks,” he told me.

“No worries at all! I love bear hugs,” I said, laughing. “He is getting so big!”

“He is,” Mama Bear said. “He’s eating me out of house and home,” she joked.

“I bet! It smells like he saved me some porridge, though. You spoil me,” I said, hugging Mama Bear. “Where’s that adorable baby of yours?”

“Down for a nap,” Mama Bear said gratefully.

After we visited a while and got seated for lunch, Papa Bear frowned at Junior and said, “How many times do I have to remind you to keep your elbows off the table?” Junior scowled but put his paws in his lap.

Papa Bear said grace and I kept complimenting Mama Bear on the meal as we ate.

When his plate was licked clean, Junior pushed away from the table and scampered into the living room and picked up a game console.

“Junior!” Papa Bear bellowed. “You were not excused. Come back here right now!”

“You don’t have to yell, dear,” Mama Bear chastised him. “Let him have fun.”

“Fun? That’s all he does is have fun. When I was his age, I worked,” Papa Bear said, glowering.

“Let’s not do this now,” Mama Bear pleaded.

Junior put the console down and reluctantly returned to his

seat at the table.

“You’ll help your mother with the dishes,” Papa Bear told him firmly.

Before he could respond, I suggested that Junior and I take our dishes to the sink. We worked together with Mama Bear to get the dishwasher loaded quickly.

Then we all moved to the living room, where Junior had a hard time sitting still. I whispered to Papa Bear, “I brought Junior a bunch of things for his tree fort. Would it be okay if I let him play with those now? I thought it would give us time to talk.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said, head bowed.

“You didn’t have to be so nice to me the day I ended up napping in your bed,” I said, laughing.

Papa Bear joined me in laughing and agreed to let Junior help me unload my car. I showed him the boxes of toys and games I’d brought and asked him to organize everything in his tree fort. He hugged me and began toting one of the boxes into the woods.

“Thank you,” Papa Bear said solemnly when I returned to the living room. “The truth is we’ve been having problems with Junior.”

“Oh?” I replied.

“Yes. He often ‘forgets’ to do his chores,” Papa Bear said, using air quotes.

“He does. But he’s a little bear. That’s normal,” Mama Bear said, defending him.

“He’s a growing bear and if we don’t train him, he’ll be too lazy to hunt for food. And there’s no way he could run our honey business when we retire,” Papa Bear said gruffly.

“You’re too hard on him,” Mama Bear said, frowning.

“You’re too soft on him!” Papa Bear retorted.

Mama Bear sighed and turned to me. “You’re a psychologist and you’ve raised six children—you and your

husband. They're good kids! How did you do it?"

I smiled. "We did our best and God handled the rest," I said. "But if you're asking about discipline, we had to find an approach that was just right for our family."

"Can you tell us what it is? That's what we need," Mama Bear said.

Papa bear sighed and agreed. "We could use some advice."

"I really don't like giving parenting advice," I said, shaking my head.

"Why not?" Papa Bear asked, frowning.

"For one, I don't want you to be mad at me. Few things make bears angrier than being told how they should raise their cubs," I said.

"I won't get mad at you. I promise!" Mama Bear said.

I smiled again. "You probably wouldn't. But there's another reason I don't like to give parenting advice: I don't know how to parent Junior."

Mama Bear gasped. "He's that bad?"

I laughed. "No, no. He's a great bear. But I don't live with him. I'm not with him all the time to know his needs like you are."

"Do you want Junior to live with you for a while? I'd be okay with that if you could get him to behave," Papa Bear said seriously.

"Oh no. That's not what I'm saying," I protested.

"Then what *are* you saying?" Papa Bear asked impatiently.

"Remember when your mama told me to take a nap that first day at your house? I tried your papa's bed, and it was too hard and your mama's bed, and it was too soft. I couldn't get any rest until I tried your bed that felt just right.

"After years of parenting and talking to other Christian parents, I learned that discipline is a lot like that. The Bible tells us in Hebrews 12:11 that discipline is the key to getting what we want for our kids. It says, 'No discipline seems pleasant at

the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.' Yet in our desire to provide discipline, we may try either a Too-Hard approach or a Too-Soft approach that are not only uncomfortable but can cause long-term pain.

"Fortunately, I discovered that there's a discipline approach that is just right for every family. When you find it, you enjoy the benefits of less anger, stronger relationships, and well-adjusted kids."

"Ooh, that's what we want! Right, dear?" Mama Bear said, asking her husband to agree.

"Yes," Papa Bear said. "If you can help us discipline Junior, we are all ears," Papa Bear said.

This is what I told them.

## CHAPTER 3

# When You're a Too-Hard Bear

A Too-Hard approach to discipline, also known as authoritarian discipline, was popular when my husband and I started homeschooling, so we gave it a try. We'd heard how polite and mature homeschooled kids were and that's what we wanted. We thought their discipline approach was the key.

Like other parents who used a Too-Hard approach, we wanted successful kids who got good grades, got into college, and got good jobs. We also wanted them to be successful in life with healthy habits, fun hobbies, close relationships, and most important of all—a strong faith.

We knew we wanted our kids to avoid making the mistakes we'd made as teens and young adults. I wanted them to learn how to manage money well and date with marriage in mind—both things I'd struggled with as a young adult. We were also desperate to avoid the heartaches we'd seen other parents have—kids who were addicted to drugs, kids who moved away and never saw their parents, and kids who rejected God.

There is nothing inherently wrong with desiring success for our kids. But we had a fear that made the desire unhealthy: We were afraid of being blamed if our kids failed.

Although God only holds us responsible for training our children and not for their adult choices, other people can be quick to place blame. The truth is, we had silently blamed some parents for their kids “not turning out well.” The fear of being judged in the same way led to panic at the onset of misbehavior.

As homeschoolers, my husband and I felt people judging our children's behavior more closely. And as a psychologist, I felt that pressure even more keenly. A Christian homeschooling psychologist's kids should be perfectly