

How Many Warnings?

Question: *I've read your spankings of a child and a marriage article. We have a three-year-old and more times than not, she's put in her room for under five minutes. But we have spanked her and then comforted her after a few short minutes. What or when is a good time for spanking? I, the mother, spank after the third verbal warning of the consequences. What do you think?*

Response: Let me start with an illustration. When you are going up a flight of steps, without even giving it any intentional thought, your brain will figure out how tall and deep each step is based upon the first few that you climb. After that you will only lift your foot high enough to clear the steps. You won't lift it three inches higher just in case. You'll just skimp by. If a builder accidentally makes one step just 1/4 of an inch higher than the others, you will trip on it, and so will everyone else. If you use the staircase enough, your brain will eventually readjust and you'll clear the step (just barely) without even thinking about it.

This is the way we are in a lot of things. When it comes to any form of discipline, we will figure out exactly what the standard is and adjust accordingly. If we only have to obey at 85 MPH, then we'll drive 85. If we can get away with 80 then we'll do that, but if 82 will also keep us from getting a ticket, then 82 will become the standard we hold.

If your child learns that she only needs to obey after the fifth warning, then the first four warnings will become routine verbiage that hold no significant meaning to her. In other words, why should she obey any of them when there are no consequences?

Another related example is the use of a raised voice. If we correct a child in a normal voice and she doesn't obey, the natural tendency is to raise our voice. When she doesn't obey a raised voice, that makes us even madder, and so we raise it even more...then more...then pretty soon we're yelling. If we don't discipline until we reach the yelling stage, then our child will learn that she doesn't need to obey until Dad or Mom starts yelling.

So what's the answer? You should give the same number of warnings as the number of times you want your children to consistently disobey. If you consistently spank after one warning, your child will adjust her obedience accordingly. If you consistently discipline after ten warnings, that will become the standard.

I'm sure a lot of other factors come into play such as the age of the child, the environment (Are you at a funeral, or a children's party?), the seriousness of the offense, and the black-and-white nature of the disobedience, but generally speaking we wouldn't give more than one warning, and sometimes none at all.

For a three-year-old I'd be careful to use simple clear commands. For instance, saying, "Pick up your doll, your blanket, and your pillow," is clearer than saying, "Pick up your room." "Come touch my hand," is clearer than saying, "Come here". "No words," is clearer than, "Calm down."