

Benjamin Wadsworth on Children's Duties to Their Parents ^[1]

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For many families in Colonial America, religion outlined the roles and duties of each family member. Although only approximately 60% of North Carolinian men would have been literate in the early eighteenth century, many more were familiar with the words of the bible through the teachings of religious leaders.

*Benjamin Wadsworth was a Bostonian minister and served as the president of Harvard College from 1725 until 1737. Many of his sermons were published during and after his life. Below is a synthesis of several of Wadsworth's sermons detailing the relationships and expectations of family members, published in 1712 as The well-ordered family: or, Relative duties. *Italicized headings have been added for clarity.**

Love

Parents & Children should love mutually, love one another; if they don't, they're without natural affections, which is mention'd among the worst crimes of [Heathens](#) ^[2] and [hypocrites](#) ^[3]. If Children [duly](#) ^[4] consider, they'll find they have abundant cause to love their Parents, they are very [base](#) & [vile](#) ^[5] if they neglect it. Unless they love their Parents, they can't do other duties which they owe to them, as they should.

Fear

Children should [fear](#) their Parents. Lev. 19: 3. "[Ye shall fear every man his Mother and his Father.](#)" God requires that every person should fear his Parents, not only his Father, but also his Mother. Yea the Mother is here mention'd first, possibly because Persons are more apt to disregard their Mothers, tho' they stand in some awe of their Fathers. But children should fear both, fear to offend, grieve, disobey, or displease either of them. The great God of Heaven, bids children fear their Parents; if therefore they fear them not, they rebel against God.

Reverence ^[6] and Honour

Children should Reverence and Honour their Parents. [This is one of those commands](#), which the great God uttered immediately with his own mouth. Our Saviour repeats this [precept](#) ^[7]. Matt 15:4. And so does the [Apostle](#), Eph 6:2. They should in their words put respect and honour on their Parents; by no means speak rudely or saucily to them.

They should by way of respect acknowledge the relation between them and their Parents as [Isaac](#) did, "My Father," Gen. 22: 7. And [Solomon](#) said, "My Mother," 1 King 2:20. They did not disown their Parents, they did not scornfully call them the Old Man or the Old Woman, but respectfully said, My Father, My Mother. ...

Children should not only in Words but also in bodily Gesture [put honour on their Parents](#). The children of the [virtuous](#) ^[8] woman [rise up](#) and call her blessed, Prov. 31: 28. They rose up, showing reverence therein and called her blessed, they spoke respectfully and thankfully to her. ... And [woe](#) ^[9] to them that despise, condemn or abuse their parents. He that [smiteth](#) ^[10] Father or Mother shall surly be put to death; Exod 21:15. 'Twas not death a [capital crime](#), merely to smite another person, but God's law made it a capital crime for any to smite Father or Mother. Prov. 30: 17. "The eye that mocketh at his Father or despiseth to obey his Mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it." That is, such an one shall come to a shameful and [untimely death; die so shamefully as that the birds of prey should feast upon him.](#) Children therefore should take heed that they don't dare to mock at parents, or despise to obey them. ...

If parents are grown Old, [Crazy](#), [infirm](#) ^[11], sickly; able to do little or no business, and need much [tendance](#) ^[12]; if they're weak or [shatter'd in the abilities of their minds](#); nay if they're chargeable with evident Sinful failings & [infirmities](#) ^[13]; yet children should not despise them, but honour them still. Tho' Children should [hate the sins](#), yet they should love & honour parents. Noah's drunkenness was a great sin in him, yet 'twas base for his son to mock or [jeer](#) ^[14] at him ([as Ham probably did](#)) and 'twas commendable in Shem and Zaphet, to cover and hide as far as lawfully they could, what might expose their Father to further shame or contempt, Gen. 9:21-25. Oh it is a very great and dangerous crime, for children to despise or disrespect their parents.

Be corrected by, and take advice from, their parents

Children should patiently bear, and grow better by, the needful [chastisements](#) ^[15] and corrections their parents give them. Heb. 12. 9. "We had Fathers of our flesh which corrected us and we gave them Reverence." Children should reverence

their Parents, in patiently bearing and deserv'd corrections, and in growing more dutiful and obedient thereby. They should not be proud, [stout](#), stubborn, [refractory](#) ^[16], refusing the corrections their Parents would justly give them, or refusing to be mended and reformed thereby.

Obedient

Children should be faithful and obedient to their parents. They should be faithful to their interests, and not wrong them in their [estate](#) ^[17]. It may be some children are apt to think that what's their Fathers is theirs, and so will make bold to take almost what they please of their Father's estates, without their Father's [leave](#); and will spend, give or [game away](#) the same as they lift. But those who are thus free with their parent's estates, thus waste and diminish them without their parents leave; they sin greatly. ... Well then, let Children be true and faithful to their Parents, not [defrauding](#) ^[18] or wronging of them at all in their estates what their parents give them they should be thankful for, but they should not take what's their parents, without their knowledge and good liking.

Children should obey their parents in all lawful things. Children, if you find your hearts ready to rise, and rebel against your parents, then read these plain commands of God now mention'd, wherein your Maker requires you to obey your parents. In this very case (as well as in a thousand more) [endeavor](#) ^[19] to impress an awful sense of God's authority on your consciousness. When you disobey the lawful commands of your parents, you disobey God himself.

... Oh Children, consider those things, they are not light or small matters; lay them seriously to heart. It may be your Parents bid you go to work, bid you do these or those things; but you won't, you disregard what they say. It may be you idle away your time, [you'd be abroad very late on nights, very unseasonably](#); you'll get into [ill](#) ^[20] company, frequent Taverns, take to Gaming and other ill practices, and all this quite [contrary](#) ^[21] to the plain commands of your Parents, is it so? If it is, then you disobey and rebel against God himself. Tis no small evil you're guilty of; you greatly provoke the Holy God, you're in the way to ruin. Consider that awful place concerning the Sons of Eli, 1 Sam 2:25 "They hearkened not to the voices of their Father, because the lord would [slay](#) ^[22] them." [When children are stubborn and disobedient to Parents, they're under awful Symptoms of terrible ruin.](#)

... Alas Children, if you once become disobedient to parents, you don't know what vile [abominations](#) ^[23] God may leave you to fall into. When persons have been brought to die at the [gallows](#) ^[24] for their crimes, [how often have they confessed, that disobedience to Parents led them to those crimes?](#) As for my own part; except what's openly irreligious and profane, scarce any thing is more grating and [rolling](#) ^[25] to me, than to see Children rude, saucy, unmannerly, and disobedient to their parents.

Primary Source Text:

Wadsworth, Benjamin. *The well-ordered family: or, Relative duties. Being the substance of several sermons, About family prayer. Duties of husbands & wives. Duties of parents & children. Duties of masters & servants.* Boston: B. Green, 1712.

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