One of the reasons parents tend to shy away from spanking is because they don’t have a good understanding of what it is, and what it isn’t. Disciplining children amounts to giving them a measured amount of pain in close association with something they have done wrong. The reason spanking is so often criticized, and justly so, is that parents are often out of control when their children are misbehaving.

A report issued by the American College of Pediatricians in 2007 made a helpful distinction between appropriate and inappropriate corporal punishment (spanking), describing disciplinary spanking as “physically non-injurious intended to modify behavior” and physical abuse as “non-accidental injury inflicted by a parent or a caregiver.”

There’s a vast difference between abusive, physical harm to a child and a measured amount of pain that’s administered by a loving parent. A parent who loves their child, who is involved with the child, is going to administer spanking out of love, and with the purpose of modifying the child’s behavior.

In addition to the attitude of the parent, which is love, and the degree of the pain, which is measured, the physical posture of the parent is also important. Whereas an angry or abusive person would tend to stand above the child, corrective discipline calls for eye-level contact. The parent needs to communicate love to the child throughout the process. A key way to accomplish this is by getting down on their level and holding them. And by all means, pray with the child at the end. If you can’t pray, then you’ve probably done it wrong.

To be clear, spanking was not the only form of discipline we used in our home; we are often asked to talk about it more than other forms because it is so often misunderstood and misused. We stopped using spanking as our children grew older (it was different for each one, but usually around age 9 or 10). By then they understood that all discipline, though bringing them some pain, was for their good.

Parents aren’t hoping for just one or the other, but need to recognize that right behavior comes from the inside out.

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

—Ezekiel 36:26–28

Excerpt taken from pages 66–67 of FamilyLife’s Art of Parenting® Workbook. For more resources like this, visit FamilyLife.com/parenting.