



How do we guide our children without becoming helicopter parents?



HELPING WITHOUT HOVERING

Five ways to help your children become independent.

By Mark D. Ogletree

There are not many things more rewarding than raising righteous and successful children. At the same time, few things in life are as taxing and demanding as being a good parent. Years ago, President James E. Faust (1920–2007) declared, “In my opinion, the teaching, rearing, and training of children requires more intelligence, intuitive understanding, humility, strength, wisdom, spirituality, perseverance, and hard work than any other challenge we might have in life.”¹

One of the challenges facing parents today is a tendency to hover over their children and become overprotective to the point of being so involved that children can’t function or make decisions for themselves. Such overparenting is often referred to in today’s culture as “helicopter parenting.”

Such parents have wonderful intentions. However, by constantly hovering over their children, they send the message that they have little faith that their son or daughter can make it through the day without their aid. Helicopter parents may even interfere in the lives of their adult children, negotiating salaries for their child’s first job and coming to his or her defense against employers, difficult neighbors, or seemingly unfair Church leaders. These parents cushion their children’s lives as they make sure that their problems are solved and that pain, harsh reality, and the natural consequences of living in a fallen world are minimized.

This parenting style competes with the gospel teaching that during our mortal probation we will and must face trials, heartaches, and struggles. These challenges can serve to develop our character, forge our identity, strengthen our faith, and expand our commitment to the Savior. Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (1915–1985) explained that “life never was intended to be easy. It is a probationary estate in which we are tested physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually.”²

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve adds, “Salvation is not a cheap experience.” That is why, Elder Holland believes, the work of salvation “is supposed to require some effort, something from the depths of our soul.”³

So how do we learn to protect our children from harm without becoming helicopter parents? Here are five suggestions you might consider.

1. Look for opportunities to allow your children to do things for themselves, even if it means more work for you.

I am aware of a wonderful family of faithful Church members. The mother and father are devoted, loving parents. However, their teenage children are not allowed to pour their own juice or make their own breakfast. Their parents do those things for them. The mother has explained that this is her way of maintaining control of “her kitchen” and keeping it clean.

Of course cleanliness and order in the home are important. But perhaps some extra chaos and clutter caused by amateur chefs in the kitchen is worth it if it means your children are learning how to cook and clean up after themselves. Allowing and even expecting children to do things on their own prepares them to live independently in the future. Parents should try to not do things for their children that they can do for themselves.

President Boyd K. Packer has written, “I think one of the major mistakes in teaching children is the tendency for parents to be bothered when children want to participate and to learn something. . . . Our children were allowed to help when they were little, urged to help when they grew a little older, and sometimes ordered to help when they were teenagers. They have, accordingly, learned to do many things for themselves, and very expertly.”⁴

2. Teach your children to work.

Children who learn to work enjoy high levels of self-esteem and confidence. They discover that the world does not revolve around them and that they are happier when they focus on the needs of others. Elder D. Todd Christofferson has explained that work can even help our children negotiate some of life’s pain and discouragement: “By work we sustain and enrich life. It enables us to survive the disappointments and tragedies of the mortal experience. Hard-earned achievement brings a sense of self-worth. Work builds and refines character [and] creates beauty.”⁵

If our children learn to appreciate work while they are young, then they will be better prepared when they are older to provide for themselves, shoulder their responsibilities in their own future families, and serve in the Church.

3. Teach your children that choices have consequences.

Children need to understand that they cannot simply do whatever they want and then have things work out exactly how they want. Consider giving your children clear communication about rules in your home and what will

happen if those rules are disobeyed—and then consistently follow through with the consequences when necessary.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve has counseled, “Just as God has bestowed some gifts on all of His mortal children without requiring their personal obedience to His laws, parents provide many benefits like housing and food even if their children are not in total harmony with all parental requirements. But, following the example of an all-wise and loving Heavenly Father who has given laws and commandments for the benefit of His children, wise parents condition some parental gifts on obedience.”⁶

If we attempt to mitigate or erase the consequences of our children’s choices, our children may have a difficult time understanding and following divine laws.

4. Stand up and be courageous.

Even as we limit how much we interfere in our children’s lives, we should be careful that we do not become too permissive. Parents today may feel more peer pressure as adults than they ever did as youth. Children are often quick to point out what “other parents” allow their children to do. Teens may challenge their parents on any number of issues, including whom to date, when to date, how late to stay out, whether or not sleepovers should be allowed, and what movies are appropriate. Many parents cave in to their children’s wishes, so those who stand up for the right and follow prophetic counsel may find themselves in the minority.

Elder Larry R. Lawrence of the Seventy recently spoke about the need for courageous parenting. He warned parents about some of the moral lapses that can take place when children spend the night at friends’ homes.⁷ Many parents today would love to put an end to sleepovers but are not willing to battle their children over the issue. Elder Lawrence explained in his talk that parents need to be more concerned with following the Lord than pacifying their children: “What the world really needs is courageous parenting from mothers and fathers who are not afraid to speak up and take a stand.”⁸

Elder Lawrence continued, “It takes courage to gather children from whatever they’re doing and kneel together as a family. It takes courage to turn off the television and the computer and to guide your family through the pages of the scriptures every day. It takes courage to turn down other invitations on Monday night so that you can reserve that evening for your family. It takes courage and willpower to avoid overscheduling so that your family can be home for dinner.”⁹

5. Allow your children to have heartaches and setbacks.

All people will face disappointments and unpleasant experiences at some point in their lives. If children can learn how to handle less-than-ideal situations when they are young, they will be more resilient and resourceful as adults. Help your children to see that they can develop creative solutions for their problems instead of ignoring or avoiding them. For example, if a teenage son or daughter doesn’t like a certain school class, find out the real reasons why. Then consider discussing with your child ways to improve the circumstances before using the last resort of transferring out of the class. In this way you help your child resolve concerns and find solutions that will magnify his or her knowledge and abilities.

Good parenting sometimes means allowing our children to fail and to deal with some heartbreaking



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experiences. President Thomas S. Monson reminds us that “life was never intended to consist of a glut of luxury, be an easy course, or filled only with success. There are those games which we lose, those races in which we finish last, and those promotions which never come. Such experiences provide an opportunity for us to show our determination and to rise above disappointment.”¹⁰

As parents help their children make righteous decisions by letting them experience natural consequences, they will foster strong, independent, spiritually minded leaders in the kingdom. It takes courage, faith, spiritual sensitivity, patience, and persistence, but the rewards are eternally worth it. ■

For more on helping your children cope with difficulty, see Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin’s talk “Come What May, and Love It,” *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 26.

NOTES

1. James E. Faust, “The Greatest Challenge in the World—Good Parenting,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1990, 33.
2. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Dead Who Die in the Lord,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1976, 106.
3. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Missionary Work and the Atonement,” *Liahona*, Oct. 2001, 31–32; *Ensign*, Mar. 2001, 15.
4. Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently* (1975), 114, 115.
5. D. Todd Christofferson, “Reflections on a Consecrated Life,” *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 17.
6. Dallin H. Oaks, “Love and Law,” *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2009, 28.
7. See Larry R. Lawrence, “Courageous Parenting,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 98.
8. Larry R. Lawrence, “Courageous Parenting,” 98.
9. Larry R. Lawrence, “Courageous Parenting,” 100.
10. Thomas S. Monson, “Go For It!” *Ensign*, May 1989, 44.