

TEACHING CHILDREN THROUGH EXAMPLE AND INSTRUCTION

12

IDEAS FOR APPLICATION

According to your own needs and circumstances, follow one or both of these suggestions.

- Ponder the needs of your children or the needs of grandchildren, nieces and nephews, or other children you know. Plan for opportunities to teach these children through your actions and words.
- Review the material on teaching in the family that is found in *Teaching, No Greater Call* (36123), pages 127–43, and the *Family Guidebook* (31180), pages 4–10. If you are married, read and discuss this material with your spouse.

READING ASSIGNMENT

Study the following articles. If you are married, read and discuss the articles with your spouse.

THE GREATEST CHALLENGE IN THE WORLD—GOOD PARENTING

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Being a Parent Is a Divine Calling

I feel moved upon to discuss a subject which I have chosen to call the greatest challenge in the world. It has to do with the privilege and responsibility of being good parents. On this subject there are about as many opinions as there are parents, yet there are few who claim to have all of the answers. I am certainly not one of them.

I feel that there are more outstanding young men and women among our people at present than at any other moment in my lifetime. This presupposes that most of these fine young people have come from good homes and have committed, caring parents. Even so, the most conscientious parents feel that they may have made some mistakes. One time, when I did a thoughtless thing, I remember my own mother exclaiming, “Where did I fail?”

The Lord has directed, “Bring up your children in light and truth” (D&C 93:40). To me, there is no more important human effort.

Being a father or a mother is not only a great challenge, it is a divine calling. It is an effort requiring consecration. President David O. McKay stated that being parents is “the greatest trust that has been given to human beings” (*The Responsibility of Parents to Their Children* [pamphlet, n.d.], 1).

Creating Successful Homes

While few human challenges are greater than that of being good parents, few opportunities offer greater potential for joy. Surely no more important work is to be done in this world than preparing our children to be God-fearing, happy, honorable, and productive. Parents will find no more fulfilling happiness than to have their children honor them and their teachings. It is the glory of parenthood. John testified, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (3 John 1:4). 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. This is especially so when moral foundations of honor and decency are eroding around us. To have successful homes, values must be taught, and there must be rules, there must be standards, and there must be absolutes. Many societies give parents very little support in teaching and honoring moral values. A number of cultures are becoming essentially valueless, and many of the younger people in those societies are becoming moral cynics.

As societies as a whole have decayed and lost their moral identity and so many homes are broken, the best hope is to turn greater attention and effort to the teaching of the next generation—our children. In order to do this, we must first reinforce the primary teachers of children. Chief among these are the parents and other family members, and the best environment should be in the home. Somehow, some way, we must try harder to make our homes stronger

so that they will stand as sanctuaries against the unwholesome, pervasive moral dry rot around us. Harmony, happiness, peace, and love in the home can help give children the required inner strength to cope with life's challenges. Barbara Bush, wife of [United States] President George Bush, a few months ago said to the graduates of Wellesley College:

"But whatever the era, whatever the times, one thing will never change: Fathers and mothers, if you have children, they must come first. You must read to your children and you must hug your children and you must love your children. Your success as a family, our success as a society, depends not on what happens in the White House but on what happens inside your house" (*Washington Post*, 2 June 1990, 2).

To be a good father and mother requires that the parents defer many of their own needs and desires in favor of the needs of their children. As a consequence of this sacrifice, conscientious parents develop a nobility of character and learn to put into practice the selfless truths taught by the Savior Himself.

I have the greatest respect for single parents who struggle and sacrifice, trying against almost super-human odds to hold the family together. They should be honored and helped in their heroic efforts. But any mother's or father's task is much easier where there are two functioning parents in the home. Children often challenge and tax the strength and wisdom of both parents.

How Often Do You Have Family Prayer?

A few years ago, Bishop Stanley Smoot was interviewed by President Spencer W. Kimball. President Kimball asked, "How often do you have family prayer?"

Bishop Smoot answered, "We try to have family prayer twice a day, but we average about once."

President Kimball answered, "In the past, having family prayer once a day may have been all right. But in the future it will not be enough if we are going to save our families."

I wonder if having casual and infrequent family home evening will be enough in the future to fortify our children with sufficient moral strength. In the future, infrequent family scripture study may be inadequate to arm our children with the virtue necessary to withstand the moral decay of the environment in which they will live. Where in the world will the children learn chastity, integrity, honesty, and basic human decency if not at home? These values will, of course, be reinforced at church, but parental teaching is more constant.

Parents Must Set the Example

When parents try to teach their children to avoid danger, it is no answer for parents to say to their children, "We are experienced and wise in the ways of the world, and we can get closer to the edge of the cliff than you." Parental hypocrisy can make children cynical and unbelieving of what they are taught in the home. For instance, when parents attend movies they forbid their children to see, parental credibility is diminished. If children are expected to be honest, parents must be honest. If children are expected to be virtuous, parents must be virtuous. If you expect your children to be honorable, you must be honorable.

Among the other values children should be taught are respect for others, beginning with the child's own parents and family; respect for the symbols of faith and patriotic beliefs of others; respect for law and order; respect for the property of others; respect for authority. Paul reminds us that children should "learn first to shew piety at home" (1 Timothy 5:4).

Disciplining Children

One of the most difficult parental challenges is to appropriately discipline children. Child rearing is so individualistic. Every child is different and unique. What works with one may not work with another. I do not know who is wise enough to say what discipline is too harsh or what is too lenient except the parents of the children themselves, who love them most. It is a matter of prayerful discernment for the parents. Certainly the overarching and undergirding principle is that the discipline of children must be motivated more by love than by punishment. Brigham Young counseled, "If you are ever called upon to chasten a person, never chasten beyond the balm you have within you to bind up" (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. John A. Widtsoe [1954], 278). Direction and discipline are, however, certainly an indispensable part of child rearing. If parents do not discipline their children, then the public will discipline them in a way the parents do not like. Without discipline, children will not respect either the rules of the home or of society.

A principal purpose for discipline is to teach obedience. President David O. McKay stated: "Parents who fail to teach obedience to their children, if [their] homes do not develop obedience society will demand it and get it. It is therefore better for the home, with its kindness, sympathy and understanding to train the child in obedience rather than callously to leave him to the brutal and unsympathetic discipline that society will impose if the

home has not already fulfilled its obligation" (*The Responsibility of Parents to Their Children*, 3).

Teaching Children to Work

An essential part of teaching children to be disciplined and responsible is to have them learn to work. As we grow up, many of us are like the man who said, "I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours" (Jerome Klapka Jerome, in *The International Dictionary of Thoughts*, comp. John P. Bradley, Leo F. Daniels, and Thomas C. Jones [1969], 782). Again, the best teachers of the principle of work are the parents themselves. For me, work became a joy when I first worked alongside my father, grandfather, uncles, and brothers. I am sure that I was often more of an aggravation than a help, but the memories are sweet and the lessons learned are valuable. Children need to learn responsibility and independence. Are the parents personally taking the time to show and demonstrate and explain so that children can, as Lehi taught, "act for themselves and not . . . be acted upon"? (2 Nephi 2:26).

Luther Burbank, one of the world's greatest horticulturists, said, "If we had paid no more attention to our plants than we have to our children, we would now be living in a jungle of weeds" (in *Elbert Hubbard's Scrap Book* [1923], 227).

Special Challenges for Parents

Children are also beneficiaries of moral agency by which we are all afforded the opportunity to progress, grow, and develop. That agency also permits children to pursue the alternate choice of selfishness, wastefulness, self-indulgence, and self-destruction. Children often express this agency when very young.

Let parents who have been conscientious, loving, and concerned and who have lived the principles of righteousness as best they could be comforted in knowing that they are good parents despite the actions of some of their children. The children themselves have a responsibility to listen, obey, and, having been taught, to learn. Parents cannot always answer for all their children's misconduct because they cannot ensure the children's good behavior. Some few children could tax even Solomon's wisdom and Job's patience.

There is often a special challenge for those parents who are affluent or overly indulgent. In a sense, some children in those circumstances hold their parents hostage by withholding their support of parental rules unless the parents acquiesce to the children's demands. Elder Neal A. Maxwell has said, "Those who do too much *for* their children will soon

find they can do nothing *with* their children. So many children have been so much *done for* they are almost *done in*" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1975, 150; or *Ensign*, May 1975, 101). It seems to be human nature that we do not fully appreciate material things we have not ourselves earned.

There is a certain irony in the fact that some parents are so anxious for their children to be accepted by and be popular with their peers; yet these same parents fear that their children may be doing the things their peers are doing.

Helping Children Internalize Values

Generally, those children who make the decision and have the resolve to abstain from drugs, alcohol, and illicit sex are those who have adopted and internalized the strong values of their homes as lived by their parents. In times of difficult decisions they are most likely to follow the teachings of their parents rather than the example of their peers or the sophistries of the media which glamorize alcohol consumption, illicit sex, infidelity, dishonesty, and other vices. They are like Helaman's two thousand young men who "had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them" from death (Alma 56:47). "And they rehearsed . . . the words of their mothers, saying: We do not doubt our mothers knew it" (Alma 56:48).

What seems to help cement parental teachings and values in place in children's lives is a firm belief in Deity. When this belief becomes part of their very souls, they have inner strength. So, of all that is important to be taught, what should parents teach? The scriptures tell us that parents are to teach their children "faith in Christ the Son of the living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost," and "the doctrine of repentance" (D&C 68:25). These truths must be taught in the home. They cannot be taught in the public schools, nor will they be fostered by the government or by society. Of course, Church programs can help, but the most effective teaching takes place in the home.

A Thousand Threads of Love

Parental teaching moments need not be big or dramatic or powerful. We learn this from the Master Teacher. Charles Henry Parkhurst said:

"The completed beauty of Christ's life is only the added beauty of little inconspicuous acts of beauty—talking with the woman at the well; . . . showing the young ruler the stealthy ambition laid away in his heart that kept him out of the kingdom of Heaven; . . . teaching a little knot of followers how to pray; . . . kindling a fire and broiling fish that his disciples

might have a breakfast waiting for them when they came ashore from a night of fishing, cold, tired, and discouraged. All of these things, you see, let us in so easily into the real quality and tone of [Christ's] interests, so specific, so narrowed down, so enlisted in what is small, so engrossed with what is minute" ("Kindness and Love," in *Leaves of Gold* [1938], 177).

And so it is with being parents. The little things are the big things sewn into the family tapestry by a thousand threads of love, faith, discipline, sacrifice, patience, and work.

Children of the Covenant

There are some great spiritual promises which may help faithful parents in this church. Children of eternal sealings may have visited upon them the

divine promises made to their valiant forebears who nobly kept their covenants. Covenants remembered by parents will be remembered by God. The children may thus become the beneficiaries and inheritors of these great covenants and promises. This is because they are the children of the covenant (see Orson F. Whitney, in Conference Report, Apr. 1929, 110–11).

God bless the struggling, sacrificing, honorable parents of this world. May He especially honor the covenants kept by faithful parents among our people and watch over these children of the covenant.

From an address by Elder Faust in the October 1990 general conference of the Church (see Conference Report, Oct. 1990, 39–43; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1990, 32–35).

A TABLE ENCIRCLED WITH LOVE

Elder LeGrand R. Curtis
Of the Seventy

Much has been written about the importance of the home. Elder Marion G. Romney has told us that "at the heart of society's fatal sickness is the instability of the family."¹ We recognize that some homes are large, graciously appointed, even luxurious. Others are very small and humble, with scant furnishings. Yet each and every "home can be a heav'n on earth when we are filled with love, . . . where we want to be," as one of our beloved hymns reminds us.²

One of the more important furnishings found in most homes is the kitchen table. Now it may be small, it may be large, or in the form of a little counter with barely room to put the food and utensils. Its major function seems to be a place for the different members of the family to receive nourishment.

On this special occasion my desire is to bring your attention to a deeper, more important function for the kitchen table, where we can receive much more than nourishment for our physical well-being.

Gospel Discussions around the Table

A family generally has two or more members of differing ages, but the family needs to meet—preferably not just to eat but to pray, to talk, to listen, to relate, to learn, and to grow together. President Gordon B. Hinckley has stated it so well:

"My plea—and I wish I were more eloquent in voicing it—is a plea to save the children. Too many

of them walk with pain and fear, in loneliness and despair. Children need sunlight. They need happiness. They need love and nurture. They need kindness and refreshment and affection. Every home, regardless of the cost of the house, can provide an environment of love which will be an environment of salvation."³

Most family members are subjected to the many forces of the world outside of the home, as well as the powerful influence of radio, television, videotapes, and many other things which we bring into our homes.

Picture a family gathering around a table, perhaps the kitchen table, talking about the gospel, talking about the sacrament meetings, the messages, talking about the current *Ensign* or the current *New Era*, talking about school with all of its ramifications, talking about general conference, talking about the Sunday School lessons, listening to good music, talking about Jesus Christ and His teachings. The list could be expanded. Not only parents but all family members would be wise to make certain that each person present has a chance to talk and ample opportunity to participate.

Family Prayer around the Table

Think of the potential of a family kneeling around a table (without television), praying, pleading for help, thanking our Father for blessings—teaching all ages the importance of a loving Father in Heaven. Family prayer with little ones may well develop older ones who someday will pray with their families.

Elder Thomas S. Monson stated it well:

“The Lord directed that we have family prayer when he said: ‘Pray in your families unto the Father, always in my name, that your wives and your children may be blessed.’ (3 Nephi 18:21.)

“Will you join me as we look in on a typical Latter-day Saint family offering prayers unto the Lord? Father, mother, and each of the children kneel, bow their heads, and close their eyes. A sweet spirit of love, unity, and peace fills the home. As [a] father hears his tiny son pray unto God that his dad will do the right things and be obedient to the Lord’s bidding, do you think that such a father would find it difficult to honor the prayer of his precious son? As a teenage daughter hears her sweet mother plead unto the Lord that her daughter will be inspired in the selection of her companions, that she will prepare herself for a temple marriage, don’t you believe that such a daughter will seek to honor this humble, pleading petition of her mother, whom she so dearly loves? When father, mother, and each of the children earnestly pray that these fine sons in the family will live worthy that they may in due time receive a call to serve as ambassadors of the Lord in the mission fields of the Church, don’t we begin to see how such sons grow to young manhood with an overwhelming desire to serve as missionaries?”⁴

As many have said, “How could you possibly send your parents and your children out into the world each day without gathering together and talking to the Lord?” Wise parents will examine their schedules and plan at least one time daily to gather the family for the blessings of prayer. Very soon, young members learn how to take their turn and learn the precious values found in family prayer.

Make Home a Happy Place

I have stated before that “home should be a happy place because all work to keep it that way. It is said that happiness is homemade, and we should endeavor to make our homes happy and pleasant places for us and our children. A happy home is one centered around the teachings of the gospel. This takes constant, careful effort by all concerned.”⁵

A busy teenager in a rather large family complained about the amount of time that family prayer was taking. As the wise mother was praying the next day, she intentionally left that youngster out of the prayer. As the prayer concluded, the busy child said, “Mother, you left me out of the prayer!” The loving mother explained that she was just responding to the youngster’s complaint. The busy child complained, “Don’t leave me out.”

Scripture Study around the Table

Visualize a family surrounding a table with the scriptures open, discussing the many truths and lessons to absorb. This indeed is a table encircled with love!

Educators agree that children need to read much more outside of school. We can bless our children by reading the scriptures with them on a daily basis—at the kitchen table.

To have a time when the family meets at the kitchen table may take considerable adjustment and careful planning, but what could be of more importance to the unity of the family, the spiritual growth of the family, the bridges built between members of a family as they talk, listen, and respond, surrounded by love? Our major success is simply trying—over and over.

Strengthen Family Ties

There are many forces in the world today seeking to decimate the family and the home. Wise parents will strive to strengthen family ties, increase spirituality in the home, and focus on Jesus Christ and temple activity. President Howard W. Hunter has told us:

“I pray that we might treat each other with more kindness, more courtesy, more humility and patience and forgiveness. . . .

“Secondly, and in that same spirit, I also invite the members of the Church to establish the temple of the Lord as the great symbol of their membership and the supernal setting for their most sacred covenants. It would be the deepest desire of my heart to have every member of the Church be temple worthy.”⁶

The direction given by President Hunter can be markedly enhanced by what takes place around the kitchen table.

In our homes we should practice how to treat others. As Goethe said so well, “If you treat [an individual] as he is he will stay as he is, but if you treat him as if he were what he . . . could be [and might be], he will [become what he ought to be].”⁷

Make Homes Places of Devotion

Elder Boyd K. Packer stated: “To bring some of the things of heaven into the home is to insure that family members will graduate to church participation. The family home evening is, of course, ready-made for this—a meeting at home that can be organized to fit every need; and it’s just as much a church meeting, or can be, as those held at the chapel.”⁸

This counsel also agrees with what Elder Dean L. Larsen has told us: "Our church buildings are not the only places where we can worship. Our homes should also be places of devotion. It would be well if each day we could 'go home to church.' There should be no other place where the Spirit of the Lord is more welcome and more easily accessible than in our own homes."⁹

As we work to accomplish all of this in our homes, we will do well to remember the important statement of President Harold B. Lee: "Remember

that the most important of the Lord's work that you [and I] will ever do will be . . . within the walls of [our] own home."¹⁰

My plea today is that each of us will look carefully at our homes and at the kitchen table and continually strive to bring heaven into our homes and come unto Jesus Christ.

From an address by Elder Curtis in the April 1995 general conference of the Church (see Conference Report, Apr. 1995, 109–11; or *Ensign*, May 1995, 82–83).

NOTES

1. "Scriptures As They Relate to Family Stability," *Ensign*, Feb. 1972, 57.
2. "Home Can Be a Heaven on Earth," *Hymns*, no. 298.
3. In Conference Report, Oct. 1994, 74–75; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1994, 54.
4. *Pathways to Perfection* (1973), 26–27.
5. In Conference Report, Oct. 1990, 13; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1990, 12.
6. In "President Howard W. Hunter: Fourteenth President of the Church," *Ensign*, July 1994, 4–5.
7. In Emerson Roy West, *Vital Quotations* (1968), 171.
8. "Begin Where You Are—At Home," *Ensign*, Feb. 1972, 71.
9. In Conference Report, Oct. 1989, 78; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1989, 63.
10. *Strengthening the Home* (pamphlet, 1973), 7.