



# Becoming an Influential Father

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Not long ago, I had a conversation with a friend of mine about his recently deceased father. I told my friend how his father had frequently shared with me how much he loved his son—my friend. My friend responded, “I only wish he had told *me* how much he loved me.”

Sadly, we live in a world that increasingly challenges the sacred role fathers play in the lives of their children. Career, church, and community responsibilities, along with a multitude of personal distractions, can

*Fathers who are actively engaged increase their ability to influence their children for good.*

diminish the role of fathers if they are not carefully balanced.

At the same time, we live in a wonderful era, in which the marvelous light of the Restoration and the guidance of living prophets help us better understand how fathers can magnify their potential roles. By focusing on core gospel principles, as Church leaders so frequently counsel, fathers will be able to succeed. We know what many of these principles are—personal and family prayer, personal and

family scripture study, personal worthiness, temple attendance, and service.

In addition to teaching gospel principles, there are a number of things fathers can do that will influence their children for good, no matter what stage of life they are in. These include living a gospel-centered life, showing appropriate affection, disciplining with love, listening effectively, spending one-on-one time together, and seeking creative ways to participate in a child's life.

Children benefit from a father whose life is in harmony with the teachings of Jesus Christ, who strives to keep the commandments, who honors the covenants he has made with Heavenly Father, and who shows respect and love to his wife, the mother of his children.

### Show Affection

Children need affection. They need the security that comes from knowing they are wanted and loved by their family. Fathers can show appropriate affection physically, verbally, and through acts of service, each of which sends a strong message of love.

Physical affection can be healing, affirmative, and reassuring. It can take many forms: a pat on the head or arm, a kiss on the cheek, a hug, or an arm around the shoulder. Appropriate physical affection is a great facilitator of bonding between fathers and children.

Other expressions of affection can include sending positive notes or letters, shining shoes, fixing a bike, providing a favorite food, or doing a chore. Positive comments can include expressions such as: "I really liked what you did," "Thanks a lot for helping," "You did a great job on that project," and "You know, you are really good at that." One young father often left notes of praise or appreciation for



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his children before he left for work in the morning. Another father had cuddle time as he read to his children at night.

Showing affection verbally means focusing on the good things more than the negative things. Sometimes, especially when disciplining, it may be easier to comment on the negatives as a way of correcting the wrong. However, even then, when fathers can find ways to

focus on what their children do well, praising rather than criticizing, it is helpful. Positive comments will build their confidence, uplift their spirits, and inspire them to be their best. Oftentimes even a negative behavior can be corrected by helping the child see and understand a positive path of action.

### Discipline with Love

All children need guidance and discipline to mature in a healthy way. Setting reasonable limits and boundaries is a part of responsible fathering. This means that fathers will remind their children of the consequences of their actions, both good and bad.

As a father reinforces good behavior, he needs to remember that "reproving betimes with sharpness" means



with timeliness and clarity, not anger, and always “showing forth afterwards an increase of love” (D&C 121:43). Success in disciplining for long-term behavior and attitude change is directly related to the quality of the relationship a father has with his children.

President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918) gave counsel on this topic: “Fathers, if you wish your children to be taught in the principles of the gospel, if you wish them to love the truth and understand it, if you wish them to be obedient to and united with you, love them! And prove to them that you do love them, by your every word or act to them. For your own sake, for the love that should exist between you and your [children]—however wayward they might be, . . . when you speak or talk to them, do it not in anger; do it not harshly, in a condemning spirit. Speak to them kindly: get down and weep with them if necessary, and get them to shed tears with you if possible. Soften their hearts; get them to feel tenderly towards you. Use no lash and no violence, but . . . approach them with reason, with persuasion and love unfeigned.”<sup>1</sup>

### Listen Effectively

One of the best ways to develop relationships with children is to take the time to listen to them. As parents listen, children will share their ideas, feelings, and problems. Parents will discover what their children’s dreams, hopes and wishes are, what their struggles are, and what their

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children are doing and with whom.

Children need to know parents are truly listening. Some parents fall into the trap of trying too hard to multitask—trying to do other things at the same time they are holding a conversation. Unfortunately, when a father divides his attention between two activities, neither activity gets his best attention and effort. Children will feel the loss.

When an opportunity to talk with your children arises, a father shouldn’t just mute the TV. It should be turned off. A father will be more successful if he adjusts his schedule to listen when they want to talk; if he waits, he may lose a valuable moment. Some fathers have learned to be available when their children come home from school, from dates, or other activities so that they can catch the freshness of the activity with them. When a father is there as a positive support at the crossroads of his children’s activities, he becomes an intimate part of their lives.

It takes patience, skill, and sacrifice to listen effectively. Parents must be patient as children take the time to form thoughts and words. If your children respond slowly, you may want to be cautious not to offer answers for them. Often none are needed, and your children will eventually say what they want and need to say.

The prompts parents use to engage children in conversation can also make a big difference. Open-ended questions, rather than those that will yield a yes or no answer, are more likely to draw children into conversations. Also, fathers need to make sure not to overreact to the unexpected twists and turns their children’s stories take. Fathers who resist the temptation to judge, fix, or lecture—listening instead and gently prompting—will build children’s confidence in them and establish a trusting relationship. Listening effectively can make the difference between relationships that grow and those that flounder.



## Spend One-on-One Time Together

Sometimes children will be more likely to share thoughts and feelings with their dads in a more private setting when it is just the two of them. Many fathers already have one-on-one time with a child—driving in the car, playing basketball in the driveway, working on a project, or over a chocolate milk shake. The important thing is that the two are together and that Dad is doing most of the listening. It's best not to worry much about tasks, focusing instead on thoughts and feelings. This is one of the greatest bonding experiences two people can have.

## Creative Participation

As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explains, “We [are] not surprised that when 2,000 children of all ages and backgrounds were asked what they appreciated most about their fathers, they answered universally, ‘He spends time with me.’”<sup>2</sup>

Loving relationships develop best as fathers take time to play, laugh, work, read, pray, talk, walk, and engage in other wholesome family activities with their children. Parents often must plan and schedule these activities; they likely will not happen very often by coincidence. In fact, children grow up so quickly that if parents do not look for opportunities to change and adapt, to spend time with their children, precious opportunities may be missed.

When circumstances make it impossible for parents to be at special events, they may find ways to participate indirectly. Perhaps someone could capture an audio or video recording of the event to watch or listen to later with the child. Or dad could sit down with a child and ask him or her to tell about the missed event.

There are other creative approaches to show affection. One father who traveled frequently on business recorded audio messages for his children so they would hear his voice and know he loved them. Another father in graduate



school deferred his evening studies until after his children were in bed so that he could spend time with them each day after dinner. Both examples sent strong messages of love to their children.

When a father prayerfully strives for an inspired and prudent balance among the competing priorities of work, church, home, personal time, and other commitments, the Lord will help him set boundaries on his time.

## Faithful Fathers

With so many competing commitments and distractions today, fathers can ill afford to be emotionally distant or physically absent from their children. Fathers need to be wise and courageous enough to rearrange schedules and to say “I’m sorry,” and “I love you.” As fathers stop and listen, show appropriate affection, correct with patience and charity, and prioritize to spend one-on-one time with their children, they will be able to provide the warmth, nurture, and security that their children need. ■

### NOTES

1. Joseph F. Smith, “The Love of Mother,” *Improvement Era*, Jan. 1910, 278. See also “Love of Mother and Father,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2004, 10.
2. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Hands of the Fathers,” *Ensign*, May 1999, 15.



## FIND TIME FOR YOUR CHILDREN

Some of our most important choices concern family activities. Many breadwinners worry that their occupations leave too little time for their families. There is no easy formula for that contest of priorities. However, I have never known of a man who looked back on his working life and said, ‘I just didn’t spend enough time with my job.’”

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Good, Better, Best,” *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 105.