

Preparing Our Children

for General Conference

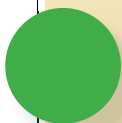


*You can help
your children—
whatever their
age—learn from
conference.*

Gislene Woodbury of Idaho took a few notes during a sacrament meeting to make sure she remembered an impression she had received. She didn't know that her eight-year-old daughter, Jessica, was watching her until Jessica asked why she wrote something down.

Sister Woodbury realized this was a great opportunity to teach her daughter about recognizing the Spirit and about responding to things she learned and felt. Jessica then asked her mother to teach her how to recognize the Spirit.

Remove the spread with photos of the General Authorities from the most recent general conference edition of the Ensign. Use it to help children learn to identify the names of the speakers.



“I was surprised. I hadn’t expected my note taking to teach anybody but myself,” Sister Woodbury says. “But I reminded Jessica that general conference was coming up and that if she wanted to write down a few impressions she had during the sessions, we could talk afterwards about what we learned.”

Sister Woodbury said she really didn’t expect her daughter to understand or remember much from conference, particularly because Jessica played with her three-year-old sister during part of it. She also thought that maybe Jessica had forgotten about their conversation several weeks earlier. But Jessica surprised her mother again. When Sister Woodbury stood up at the end of general conference to walk into another room, Jessica said, “Mom, wait! Can we talk about conference?”

“I thought we would have a quick conversation for a couple of minutes and then be done,” Sister Woodbury said. “Instead, she pulled out a notebook and started to talk about several of the speakers. She told me about parts of their talks that stood out to her and asked me about things she heard but didn’t understand.

“The whole conference was special to me, but seeing my daughter have her own spiritual experiences made it even more special.

I have learned that I need to embrace every opportunity to teach my children, especially when they show interest in learning.”

Parents can do much

to enhance their children’s experience with the doctrine and principles taught at general conference. Several members share how they have helped their children prepare for, participate in, and learn from general conference.

Before Conference

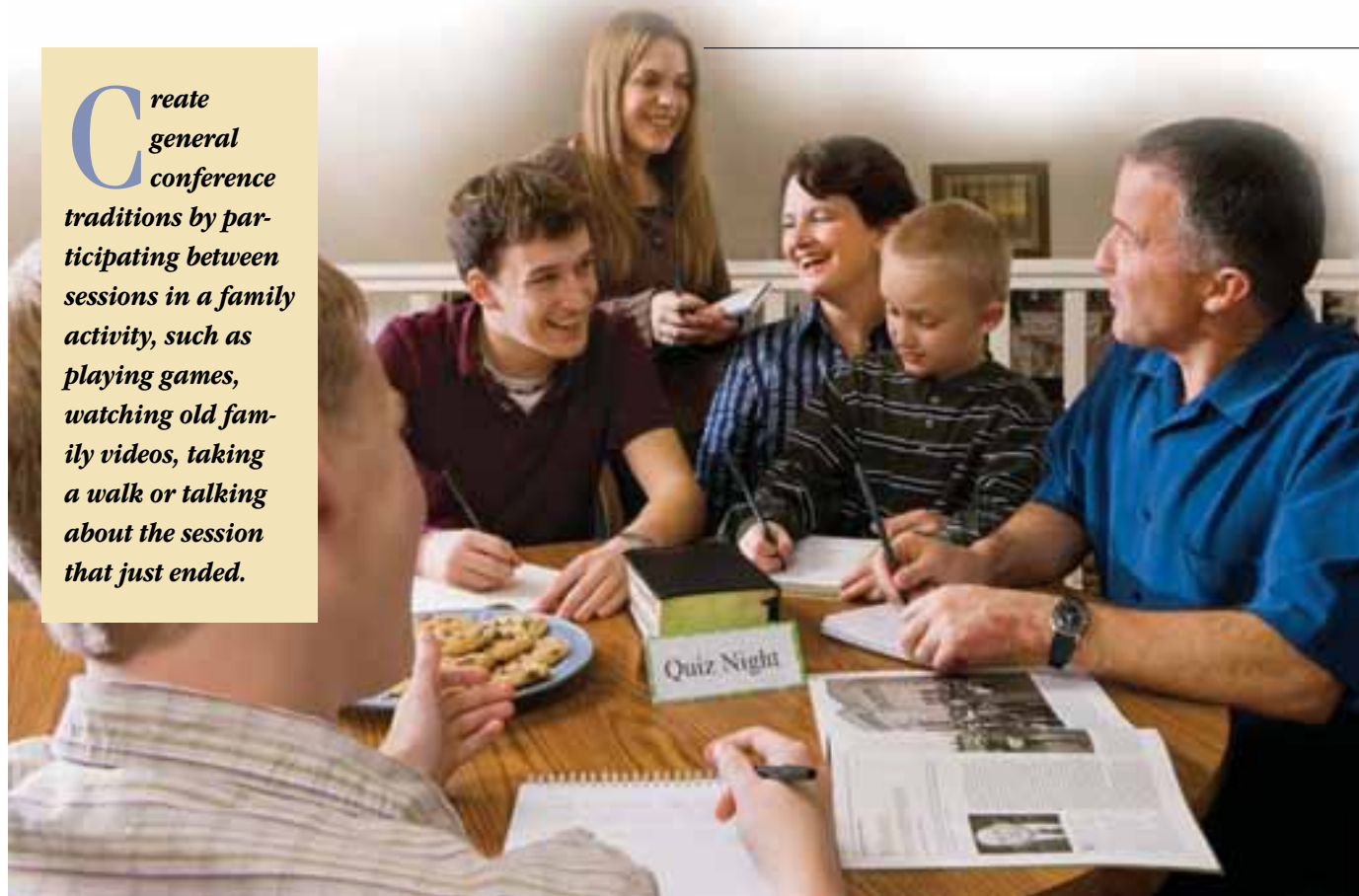
For Kimberly Olsen of Utah and her family, conference preparation is both a spiritual and temporal matter. “The week before conference, I spend a little time every day talking to my five-year-old daughter about how exciting it will be to get to hear the prophet talk to us,” says Sister Olsen. She and her daughter also look for conference-related games and activities in issues of the *Friend* magazine.

The Olsens don’t stop there, however. They complete chores, homework, grocery shopping, and other standard weekend activities by Friday night. “We are able to devote the rest of the weekend to our family and conference,” says Sister Olsen. “It makes our experience fabulous.”

Clearing the family’s schedule is also important to Heather Ann Turner of Utah. Sister Turner remembers that as a missionary in Argentina, she had no choice but to completely clear her schedule in order to participate in general conference. “In two of the areas where I served, the entire ward got on a bus and traveled for two hours to get to a stake center where we could watch conference. These members’ dedication and devotion to the gospel was clear. They saved their money to be able to afford the trip. They took time off work. They packed up their families for two days. They did all of this to turn their hearts toward the prophet and participate in this great semiannual event. That was a powerful lesson to me.”

Create general conference traditions by participating between sessions in a family activity, such as playing games, watching old family videos, taking a walk or talking about the session that just ended.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN LUKE



Now Sister Turner and her husband, Jeremiah, show their family that general conference is a top priority by talking about conference weeks in advance, writing it on the calendar, and working with their children to prepare spiritually.

During Conference

The Turners also make conference memorable by developing family traditions that coincide with general conference. Their favorite is holding a family testimony meeting for family home evening on the Monday following conference. “This gives us an opportunity to reflect on the messages we heard over the weekend and to ponder their meanings for each of us personally,” Sister Turner says. “We learn from and strengthen one another with the added light we gain from general conference.”

The Turner family also suggests creating traditions by turning a favorite food the family enjoys into a special treat served at conference time, or participating between sessions in a family activity, such as playing games, watching old family videos, taking a walk, or talking about the session that just ended.

Kristin Keller of Texas also remembers special traditions her parents created for her and her siblings. These,

she says, helped establish in her mind that conference was something to look forward to.

“When I was 12 or 13, I realized that there was a wide array of activities I could choose to do on Saturday instead of watching conference. Although Mom and Dad always set an example of participating in all of the sessions of conference, they didn’t mandate that we do the same. They did, however, provide incentives. For instance, we would have a family picnic in the backyard between sessions, or on the Monday after conference we’d go out for ice cream and talk about the talks that stood out to us the most.”

Sister Keller says that when she was a teenager, the incentives were what drew her to participate with her family, but over time, gleaning from all four sessions of conference became a habit. “I came to understand that general conference was more than just fun family time, although it was also that. It was an opportunity to learn from prophets and receive guidance for my life. I am grateful to have been taught those patterns early in my life.”

Participating in conference can be challenging for families with small children. When Matt and Stephanie Sorensen of Minnesota had three children under the age of four, they decided to watch general conference via satellite

Each time children hear a key word spoken from the pulpit, let them help themselves to a small treat. You might be surprised by how much young children can and do listen. Praise them for their reverence and their attentiveness.



from their own home. Sister Sorensen knew that in order to view, hear, and enjoy the talks peacefully, she would need to make “substantial preparation.”

Like the Olsen and Turner families, the Sorensens talk about the importance of general conference ahead of time. “We pray individually and with our children that our hearts will be prepared for the messages of conference,” Sister Sorensen explains. “We try to convey that we are excited about general conference weekend and that we look forward to it.”

Sister Sorensen knows that it can be difficult for children to sit quietly through conference, but she and her husband have found age-appropriate activities that engage their children in conference.

- They remove the center spread with photos of General Authorities from the most recent conference edition of the *Ensign* and hang it near the television. Each time a new speaker appears on the screen, the children study the poster and try to find the speaker’s picture. They are rewarded with a sticker to place on the poster or in a notebook of their own. “They quickly learn to identify the First Presidency and others by name,” says Sister Sorensen.

- The Sorensens set out a bowl

of small treats for each session.

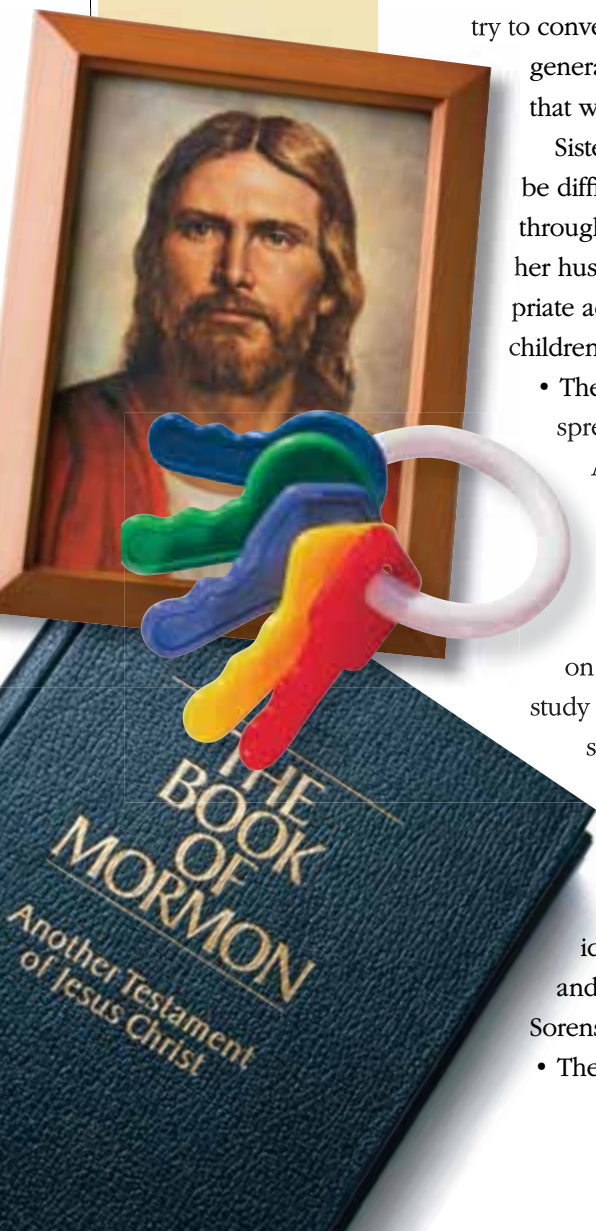
Next to the bowl, they place objects that represent key words for that

session. Each time the children hear one of those words spoken from the pulpit, they can help themselves to one treat. Sister Sorensen notes: “It’s surprising to see how much young children can and do listen. Their enthusiasm is priceless as you hear them say, ‘Mommy, he said *temples!*’ ”

- For the sessions that fall during typical mealtimes, the Sorensens prepare a picnic basket and lay out a blanket in front of the television. Brother and Sister Sorensen tell their children that they are like the families in the Book of Mormon who sat on the ground and listened to their prophet, King Benjamin, teach them about the gospel of Jesus Christ. “We thank our children for allowing us to listen and praise them for their reverence and attentiveness. We bear testimony throughout the day of the things we have heard and felt and reiterate our love for living prophets and apostles.”

- Brother and Sister Sorensen make sure they spend time with their children before and after sessions. They let them have active or outdoor play “to get out all their wiggles.”

Sister Sorensen says that these things not only help her children participate, but they also help her and her husband to be able to watch and learn from all the sessions of general conference. “There is a great sense of spiritual safety as we gather our family around the Lord’s messengers,” she says. “The Spirit is present in our home, and it is truly a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that “all thy children shall be taught of the Lord;



and great shall be the peace of thy children' ” (3 Nephi 22:13).

After Conference

Linda Beverley of England recalls growing up in Scotland in a time when she and other members listened to a radio broadcast of general conference while slides of the various speakers were projected onto a wall. She and her husband, Malcolm, are grateful that by the time they were married and had their six children, they could watch general conference by satellite broadcast.

To set general conference apart as a special event, Brother and Sister Beverley designated the family home evening following conference as “Quiz Night,” when each member of the family would ask three questions about the talks, the reports, or things they observed. It quickly became tradition, and even years later, as the Beverleys’ sons and daughters left home to serve missions and attend college, the children insisted on continuing to share Quiz Night questions via letters and e-mail.

“When our children were young, we wondered whether questions like ‘What color was the prophet’s tie?’ would really make a difference in their lives,” Sister Beverley admits. “However, Quiz Night established a pattern that has matured with the children.”

Sister Beverley notes that it takes longer to complete Quiz Night now because the family discusses at length their thoughts and feelings about the talks given. These conversations “give rise to greater insights than any of us could have achieved alone,” she adds. “Even though our family is now scattered throughout the world, we feel united, sure in the knowledge that like the sons of Mosiah, we are ‘still . . . brethren in the Lord; yea, and [we have] waxed strong in the knowledge of the truth’ (Alma 17:2). This simple tradition has helped our children learn to



HELP CHILDREN DEVELOP GOOD HABITS

“It is when children are young that parents must be innovative in

helping them develop good habits regarding conference participation. As our children are given opportunities to observe and learn the role of these special witnesses, they will receive a spiritual confirmation of the sacred calling of their Church leaders, and they will feel a deeper love for and interest in these leaders and their message.”

Elder Neil L. Andersen of the Presidency of the Seventy, “Teaching Our Children to Love the Prophets,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1996, 47.

focus on the content and power of the talks and to realize the importance of general conference.”

Several years ago, Dave and Christine Heiner of Utah began using the most recent conference edition of the *Ensign* as their family home evening manual. As soon as the new issue became available, the Heiners purchased one copy for every member of their family and wrote each person’s name on the cover. Each Monday night they would read a talk together, paragraph by paragraph, pausing to ask and answer questions, to discuss thoughts, and to liken what they learned to their lives.

“We gave the children each a highlighter and taught them to highlight words, sentences, and paragraphs that felt important to them. To keep our younger children engaged, we let them use their highlighters in any way they wished. They colored the umbrellas, statues, General Authorities’ ties—whatever they felt needed a splash of color. We also discovered that photographs in the conference issues are wonderful vehicles for teaching children. One or two beautiful photographs usually accompany each conference sermon. Our family learned to find the ways the photographs enhanced the talks and taught the same principles.”

That tradition began many years ago. The Heiners’ children are married now and have families of their own. “They continue to treasure their conference copy of the *Ensign*, and their children have their own magazines with their names on the cover,” Sister Heiner says.

“My husband and I still use our conference *Ensign* on Monday nights. Prior to our family home evening, we choose a sermon and read, mark, and ponder it individually. Then we come together to discuss what we have learned. Our discussions inevitably cause the words of the prophets to sink deeper into our hearts and change us.” ■