

# TALKING ABOUT TOUGH TOPICS

By Sheree Lyn Clarke

Clinical Psychologist, LDS Family Services

*When your children face challenges, it's important to talk to them in ways that will strengthen your relationship with them.*

As a parent, you know the value of challenges and trials to your children's growth, but it's still difficult to see your children struggle. These struggles, however, can be a chance for you to build solid relationships with your children as you foster an environment of love at home. President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) encouraged parents to provide such an environment: “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.”<sup>1</sup>

There are many difficult issues your children could face, such as bullying, bad language, cheating at school, same-sex attraction, eating disorders, depression, and suicidal thoughts, for example. As a Latter-day Saint parent, you know you “have a sacred duty to rear your children in love and righteousness,”<sup>2</sup> but how do you go about that when your children struggle with

difficult issues, whether in their own lives or in the lives of their friends? Here are some guidelines:

**Ask questions that invite conversation.** You can ask a question like this: “It looks like something may be bothering you. Do you want to talk about it?” This question not only acknowledges that you have noticed that something is bothering your child, but it also opens a door for your child to share as much (or little) as he or she chooses.

After your child has shared some thoughts about the issue, your response could be: “Thank you for sharing that with me, and thank you for trusting me with this information. I can only imagine what that must feel like. How can I be helpful?”

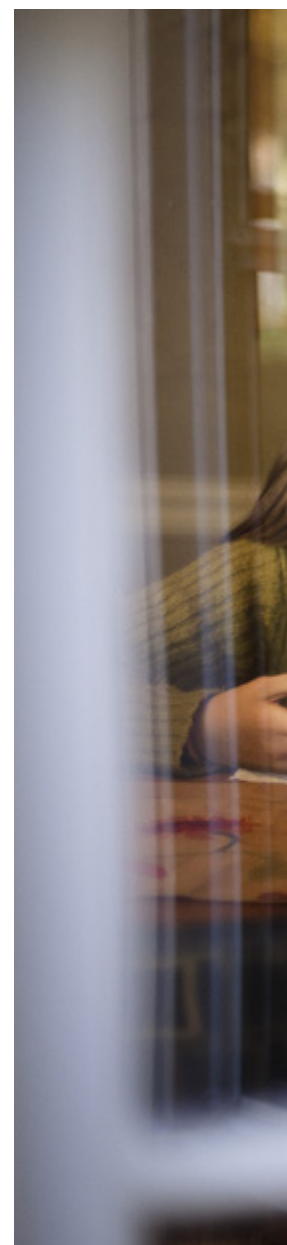
These kinds of loving responses tend to open the door to ongoing dialogue. It is important that children know of your sincerity. A hug or a loving look can also help to express genuine, heartfelt concern.

**Listen to understand.** Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of

the Twelve Apostles said: “The time to listen is when someone needs to be heard. Children are naturally eager to share their experiences. . . . If they try to express their anguish, is it possible for us to listen openly to a shocking experience without going into a state of shock ourselves?

Can we listen without interrupting and without making snap judgments that slam shut the door of dialogue? It can remain open with the soothing reassurance that we believe in them and understand their feelings. Adults should not pretend an experience did not happen just because they might wish otherwise.”<sup>3</sup>

**Show respect.** The scriptures give excellent guidance on how to create an environment of love and respect.





Notice some of the key words in Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–42: *persuasion* (not force), *long-suffering* (not immediate, forced compliance or impatience), *gentleness* (not loud, aggressive, intense communication), *meeekness* (not proud or domineering responses), *kindness* (not cruel manipulation), and *love unfeigned* (genuine, sincere expressions of love). As we deepen our conversion, “the way we treat others becomes

increasingly filled with patience, kindness, a gentle acceptance, and a desire to play a positive role in their lives.”<sup>4</sup>

**Avoid criticism.** Latter-day Saint parents try to pattern their lives after the Savior. His interactions were filled with love, empathy, and genuine concern. Even when people had committed serious sins, He called for repentance but did not condemn (see John 8:3–11). Avoid criticizing your

children, which can lead them to poor self-esteem and a lack of confidence; rather, find and emphasize the good in each of your children.

**Control your anger.** “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty” (Proverbs 16:32), and “the spirit of contention . . . is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger” (3 Nephi 11:29). Anger drives away the Spirit and has

the potential to destroy fragile parent-child relationships. In general conference, President Hinckley said, “I plead with you to control your tempers, to put a smile upon your faces, which will erase anger; speak out with words of love and peace, appreciation, and respect. If you will do this, your lives will be without regret. Your marriages and family relationships will be preserved. You will be much happier.”<sup>5</sup>

**Strengthen the relationship.** All of these suggestions can be helpful, but if you can’t remember them when you are in the middle of a difficult conversation with your child, simply ask yourself, “How can I use this situation with my child as an opportunity to strengthen our relationship?” Then listen to and follow the inspiration you receive.

**Keep trying.** Parenting can be very difficult, yet you can succeed if you keep trying. President Howard W. Hunter (1907–95) offered these words of encouragement: “A successful parent is one who has loved, one who has sacrificed, and one who has cared for, taught, and ministered to the needs of a child. If you have done all of these and your child is still wayward or troublesome or worldly, it could well be that you are, nevertheless, a successful parent.”<sup>6</sup> ■

*The author lives in South Africa.*

**NOTES**

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Save the Children,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1994, 54.
2. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
3. Russell M. Nelson, “Listen to Learn,” *Ensign*, May 1991, 22.
4. Marvin J. Ashton, “The Tongue Can Be a Sharp Sword,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 20.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Slow to Anger,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 66.
6. Howard W. Hunter, “Parents’ Concern for Children,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1983, 65.

## TALKING WITH TEENAGERS

Talking about challenges is difficult enough but can be even more so with teenagers, who are struggling to form their own identities— independent of their parents. Adolescents deal with enormous academic, emotional, and social pressures. Their belief and value systems are sometimes called into question by friends and peers. Their relationships with their parents can become fragile at this stage of their development, and it is not uncommon for teenagers to end up feeling confused, alone, anxious, uncertain, helpless, isolated, and even depressed.

Parents who understand and are sensitive to these developmental challenges can better help their teenagers at a time when they need their parents most.

