

# Love, Limits and



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**D**espite the many joys of childrearing, fathers and mothers often find their skills as parents tested. A three-year-old defiantly says no to all food placed before him at dinner. Siblings tussle over a coveted toy as the all too familiar squealing and crying reverberate through the house. A 10-year-old refuses to go to bed at a reasonable hour, insisting he should be able to stay up as late as his teenage sister. And a 16-year-old tearfully argues with her parents, saying, “Why can’t you trust me?” after failing to get permission to go on an unsupervised overnight excursion with friends.

The way parents handle such situations affects their relationship with each child as well as the spiritual climate in the home. Because no two children are alike or respond exactly the same way, President Brigham Young (1801–77) wisely counseled parents to “study [children’s] dispositions and their temperaments, and deal with them accordingly.”<sup>1</sup> President James E. Faust (1920–2007) reminded us that “child rearing is so individualistic. . . . What works with one [child] may not work with another.”<sup>2</sup> In seeking for solutions to challenges, parents will achieve better results as they approach each child’s needs with a carefully

# Latitude

*With the assistance of the Lord, parents can employ a tailored approach to help children reach their full potential.*

love

tailored combination of three parenting principles—*love*, *limits*, and *latitude*.

## LOVE

Love fosters relationships and security. Brigham Young taught that “kind looks, kind actions, kind words, and a lovely, holy deportment towards them will bind our children to us with bands that cannot be easily broken; while abuse and unkindness will drive them from us.”<sup>3</sup> One mother learned the power of leading with love after she realized that her escalating temper was not helping

her 10-year-old son make it to bed any earlier at night. Prompted by reading the counsel of President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918) that “you can only correct your children . . . in kindness, by love unfeigned, by persuasion, and reason,”<sup>4</sup> she tried a gentler approach. As they talked through the problem, she gained new insight into his needs and concerns. Together they agreed on bedtime guidelines, and their relationship improved.

Kind words and gentleness during times of disagreement show respect for the relationship—as does controlling one’s emotions. Of course, developing parental self-control is easier said than done. As Brigham Young noted, “I have seen more parents who were unable to control themselves than I ever saw who were unable to control their children.”<sup>5</sup> With heavenly help, we can learn to respond to frustrations with patience.

## Be Companionable

President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) encouraged parents to be “companionable” with their children.<sup>6</sup> Arriving home each evening after a long day at work, a father found himself frustrated with his young children who were eager for his attention and quick to contend if he was preoccupied. Before entering the house each evening, he decided to offer a prayer that he could meet his children’s needs better. He set aside the evening paper, spent his first 10 minutes greeting and playing with the children, and periodically took the children one-on-one on a walk or outing. His frustrations disappeared, his children seemed more satisfied, and many rewarding experiences followed.

President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) said, “Take time to be a real friend to your children.”<sup>7</sup> This includes spending time with them, showing affection, praising what they do well, teaching new skills, reading to them, conversing often, and assuring children they are loved during moments of correction. A loving, patient response to a son

**L**oving our children involves spending time with them, showing affection, praising what they do well, teaching new skills, reading to them, conversing often, and assuring them they are loved during moments of correction.

or daughter whose behavior is immature, inconvenient, or annoying assures the child of the constancy of parental love while teaching a better way (see 1 Corinthians 12:31).

### Reward the Good

Seeking and rewarding the good in children are remarkably effective ways to show parental love. Try to offer at least five positive comments for each correcting one. For example, give compliments (“The flowers look great—thanks for pulling those weeds”), provide earned rewards (“If you finish your homework early, you can go to the movie with your friends”), and share the satisfaction that comes from service (“It was sure great seeing the smile on Sister Walker’s face when we delivered the dinner we prepared”).

### Avoid Coercion

A natural response to misbehavior can be to simply demand, rather than invite, obedience. Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles related the story of a man who was determined to train a colt by simply pulling on the lead rope. Each time he yanked, the colt fell down. After a few minutes, the man had successfully taught the colt to fall down. Then the man’s wife made an excellent suggestion: Walk beside the colt. “To my friend’s chagrin,” said Elder Ballard, “it worked.”<sup>8</sup> Parents will have more success if they lead by example. President Boyd K. Packer, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, suggested that parents may need to give up parental behavior that produced bad results in the past and try a better way.<sup>9</sup>

Inappropriate attempts to force obedience, like “yanking the rope,” create difficulty in fostering companionable relationships with young children and teens. Coercion—physical or psychological—is not appropriate. Coercive behavior includes physical and verbal abuse, threats, shouting, manipulating, withdrawing love, and shaming. While coercion may lead to momentary obedience or compliance, it rarely results in a long-term solution. President Gordon B. Hinckley reiterated that “discipline

with severity, discipline with cruelty inevitably leads not to correction but to resentment and bitterness”<sup>10</sup> (see also D&C 121:41–44). “Children don’t need beating,” he emphasized. “They need love and encouragement.”<sup>11</sup>

One young father became frustrated when “time out” seemed to fail as a discipline strategy for his very energetic young son. Shouting and spanking seemed only to feed the misbehavior. Afraid he might lose control and harm his child, the father took his own “time out.” He left the room and silently prayed for help. When he returned, he invited the son to build a train with blocks and then to play catch—two favorite activities. He tried to focus on the son’s increasing skills, and he offered ample praise. To the father’s surprise, the son behaved well for the rest of the evening, with only a few gentle reminders. Leading with love worked better than leading by force.

**A natural but ineffective response to misbehavior can be to simply demand obedience. One father found that spending positive time with his son encouraged positive behavior much more than shouting or spanking did.**

### LIMITS

Leading with love requires that parents set clear limits for children’s behavior. Limits protect children and help them develop self-discipline. President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) noted, “Setting limits to what a child can do means to that child that you love and respect him.”<sup>12</sup> The Lord has entrusted us as parents with the responsibility to teach our children (see D&C 68:25). Correcting misbehavior can be one of the most challenging parts of this responsibility. At times, children may chafe, complain, or resist the limits placed upon them. Parents can hold firm with the understanding that teaching values is a lengthy process and that reasonable standards and expectations ultimately help children and teens feel secure and become more successful.

### Set Appropriate Rules

Limits should match children’s maturity level. Elder M. Russell Ballard encouraged parents to “set limits in accordance with the importance of the matter involved and the child’s disposition and maturity.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, a family may have some expectations or rules, perhaps about chores or



**L** leading with love requires that parents set clear limits on behavior that match the maturity level of each child. When we enforce rules, the method of correction must treat the child with consideration and dignity.

# Limits

telephone use, that differ from child to child. When establishing family rules, it is important to distinguish between mountains and molehills. For example, it is important for parents to set limits that help guard their children from potentially harmful influences. Standards associated with media, dress, dating, and other guidelines found in *For the Strength of Youth* can serve as a helpful limit-setting guide.

With their children approaching teen years, one family decided to discuss *For the Strength of Youth* during family home evening. They talked about reasons for adhering to prophetic counsel and the blessings that would result. Later, as the teens came home with questions about things they had seen at school and in the media, these previous conversations about standards helped them feel more comfortable discussing their questions and concerns with their parents.

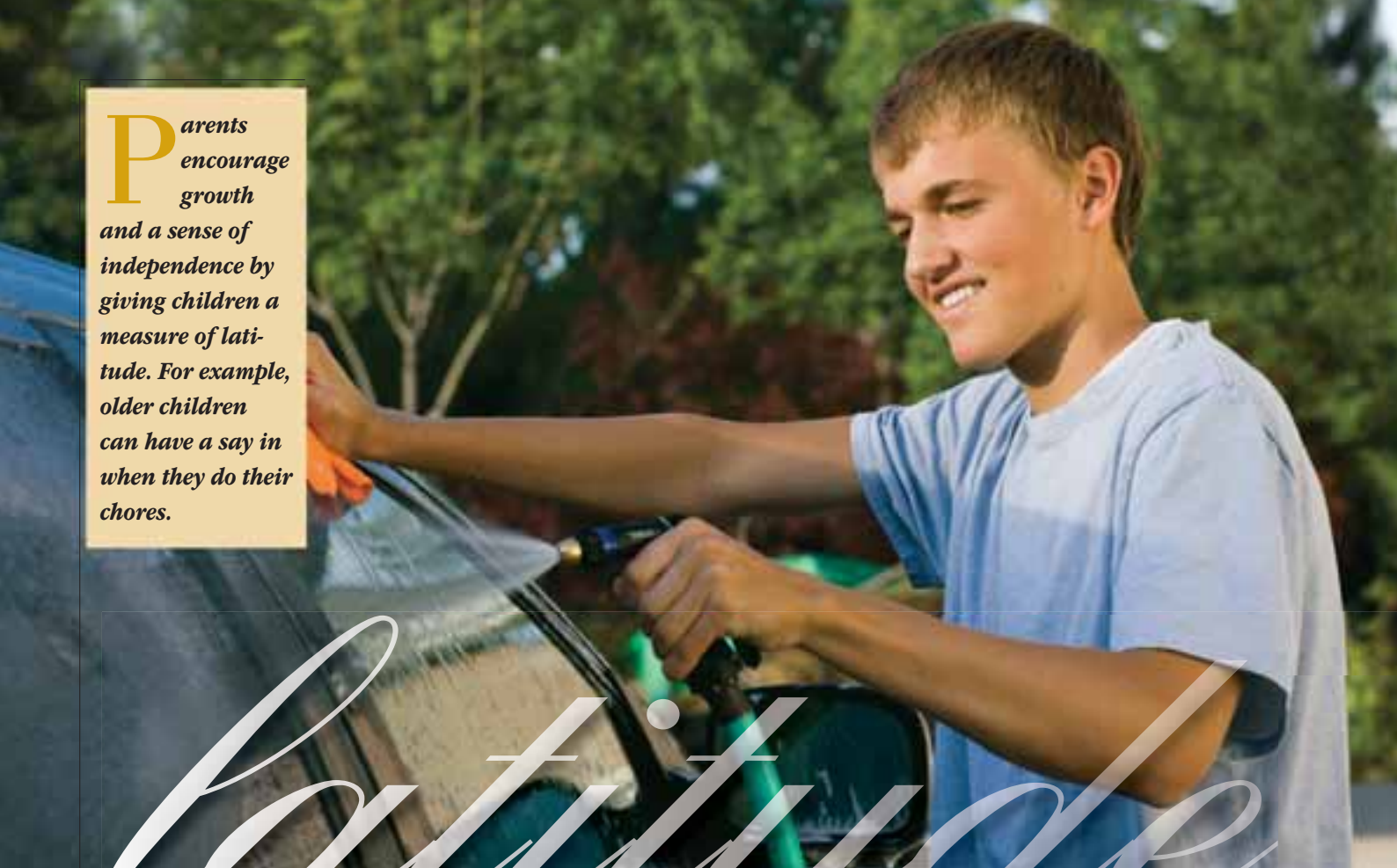
## Enforce the Rules

When children do not meet family expectations, parents must decide whether to make an issue of the misbehavior. Milk will spill; children will sometimes be less than careful on the playground; teens may let their social life sabotage

their grades. These experiences can teach them that certain actions are not productive. Helping to clean up the milk, bandaging the wound, or talking through an improved study schedule would be more effective than scolding a child in an attempt to teach a lesson that is already obvious.

Sometimes parents must address more serious indiscretions with appropriate consequences. President Faust encouraged parents to use “prayerful discernment”<sup>14</sup> as they select consequences for misbehavior. No matter the seriousness of the offense, the method of correction must treat the child with consideration and dignity. For example, private reproof is generally better than public reproof. Address the specific infraction without dragging previous misdeeds into the conversation. Stay composed. Discuss the behavior rather than label or demean the child. Short explanations of parental expectations generally work better than extensive lecturing.

When parents remain calm, reasonable consequences are more likely to emerge. President Hinckley said, “I have never accepted the principle of ‘spare the rod and spoil the child.’”<sup>15</sup> He also recalled that “his father never laid a hand on him except to bless him, and he intended to follow suit.”<sup>16</sup>



**P**arents encourage growth and a sense of independence by giving children a measure of latitude. For example, older children can have a say in when they do their chores.

# Latitude

The best consequences are generally related to the breach of rules and are designed to help the child achieve the hoped-for outcome. Examples of enforcing limits could include reducing a teen's weeknight activities with friends until grades improve, helping a young child with simple chores before friends come to play, or separating a child from her siblings after an emotional outburst until she is ready to rejoin the family board game.

## **Avoid Permissive Parenting**

Although it is important to remain flexible with discipline, parents who turn a blind eye to serious misconduct or do not calmly and consistently enforce boundaries with reasonable consequences provide insufficient direction and guidance. Elder Ballard explained that it can be “destructive when parents are too permissive and overindulge their children, allowing them to do as they please.”<sup>17</sup> Some children and teens will make poor decisions despite the most conscientious parenting. But they are more likely to stray when there is little supervision and they are not held accountable for their whereabouts and activities.

Establishing a routine for discussing plans and checking in is helpful. Some families have found that a family council on Sunday is a good time to coordinate schedules and establish expectations. For example, when 16-year-old Jan forgot to let her parents know that she had gone to a friend's house after soccer practice was cancelled, they discussed why this was a problem. She was reminded to let them know in the future when there were changes to a planned activity. Loving, firm boundaries give children the best chance to succeed.

## **LATITUDE**

As parents lead with love and enforce limits, they can encourage children's sense of independence. Granting autonomy, or latitude, allows children to express their individuality and helps them learn to make good choices. Speaking of the Saints, Joseph Smith said, “I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves.”<sup>18</sup> In a similar way, parents need to prepare their children in small steps to govern themselves so that they will be prepared for the day when they eventually leave home.

Parents facilitate this process by giving children a



## HELPS FOR HOME EVENING

Parents should read and study this article together in advance.

1. Read the section “Avoid Permissive Parenting.” Discuss what a family council is and how it might benefit your family. List items that could be discussed in family council meetings.

2. Demonstrate the need for limits by slowly pouring water into a glass and seeing how full you can fill it without the water spilling over. Talk about reasons for limiting the amount of water in the glass. Compare this to the boundaries set by family rules. Read the first paragraph under the section “Limits.” Discuss or establish appropriate family rules.

and acceptance is better than Satan’s way of force and coercion, especially in rearing teenagers.”<sup>20</sup> Appropriate latitude sends a message of trust and respect.

### Seeking the Lord’s Assistance

The Savior cherished His relationships and interactions with children. As we seek to view our children as He does, we can be filled with charity toward them. The insights we receive through prayer will help us respond appropriately to their needs and challenges. It helps to remember that

measure of latitude appropriate to their maturity. From the time children are toddlers, parents can let them make reasonable decisions within established boundaries. For example, young children can help choose what to wear on a play day. Older children can have a say in when they do their chores, as long as the chores are completed by a specified time. Teens can be allowed to make media choices so long as they fall within family expectations. Giving children some say in decision making prepares them to make more important decisions later.

Giving children latitude also means negotiating and compromising on rules when appropriate. Elder Ballard emphasized the need for parents to “be prepared to appropriately adjust some rules, thus preparing children for real-world situations.”<sup>19</sup> For example, suppose that you have established the rule that children can play only after chores are done. What happens if cousins stop in unexpectedly for a short visit? In this case, parents and children might decide to be flexible and finish their chores another time. Being willing to negotiate and compromise provides reasonable expectations, gives children more control over their lives, and prepares them for real-world problem-solving situations.

Providing latitude also gives children space to develop their own feelings about the gospel. Teens who have learned to recognize the Spirit and to make choices based on their understanding of right and wrong—rather than simply on parents’ demand for obedience—will be better equipped to make wise decisions in the face of stress or peer pressure. Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught that teenagers’ “willingness to choose the Lord’s way and family values is greater when the choice comes from within than when we attempt to force those values upon them. The Lord’s way of love

parenting is a fluid, dynamic process. It can take time to see the results of our efforts. What works today may not work next year or even tomorrow. And no parent handles every situation perfectly. When we fall short, it is important to apologize and try to do better. After all, parents are growing and learning too. With the Lord’s help, parents can provide appropriate love, limits, and latitude that will enable their children to reach their full potential as sons and daughters of God. ■

### NOTES

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