

# Giving Children Love, Limits, and Latitude

*These three L's apply to parenting children of any age.*

**By Larry Nelson**

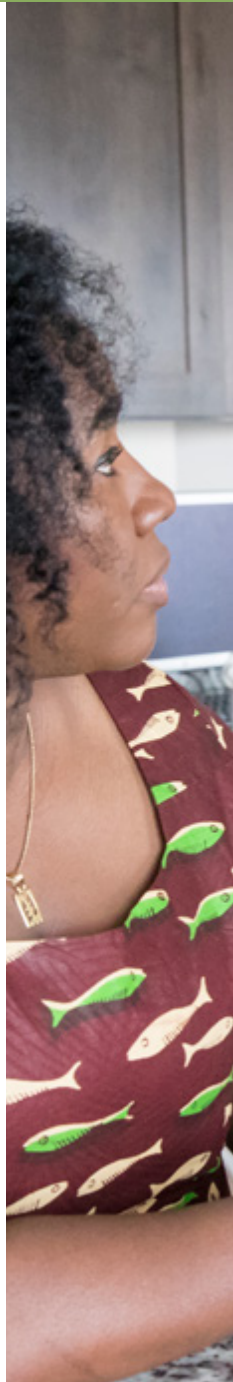
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**I**n our family, my son is nine years younger than his siblings. When he was little, we often heard him say, “But why? They [his older sisters] don’t have to do that!” For example, as a preschooler, he was usually sent to bed long before his teenage sisters, and he never felt this was fair.

Many parents may find themselves wondering how to be fair, consistent, or equal in their parenting. But let me tell you something I’ve learned from years of studying parenting and raising children myself: it’s not as important to be perfectly equal in parenting *practices* as it is to be consistent in following sound principles of parenting. Children differ in age, gender, personality, needs, strengths, and weaknesses. So instead of trying to treat them exactly the same—which will keep us from really focusing on the needs of each one—we can focus on making sure our parenting is guided by the important principles of love, limits, and latitude.

## Love

Love is essential at every age, but it may take different forms as children grow up. Parents may show love to toddlers by reading them bedtime stories, cuddling them when they fall, and giving hugs and kisses. Love for older children may take the form of help with homework, rides to rehearsals, and appropriate physical affection. For teenagers, love might evolve to include staying up late to hear how a date went, allowing more verbal give-and-take, and patiently listening to concerns and problems. As children transition into young adulthood, parents might show love through supportive texts, giving advice when asked, or talking through big decisions.





Why is love so important? Think about the parable of the sower (see Matthew 13:3–8). The scattered seeds ended up in different environments. Some landed in stony or thorn-covered ground, and others landed in good ground. While all of the seeds had the potential to grow, only the ones in the good ground actually did. Similarly, parenting isn't just about teaching good things. It's also about creating a loving climate that prepares the hearts of our children to be like the good ground—where seeds of righteous teaching can take root and flourish. In other

words, when we foster a loving climate in our home, relationships are strengthened, and when relationships are strong, children are more likely to receive our teachings.

#### **Limits and Latitude**

It's hard to think about limits without also thinking about latitude, because we often



think that one restricts the other. But this isn't the case. Both limits and latitude can work together in parenting. The tricky thing is making sure we understand them correctly.

For example, someone in Sunday School once asked, "Isn't it okay to control our children as long as it is for their own good?" In the pre-earth life, Satan's opposition to the Father's plan probably sounded eerily similar. As President Russell M. Nelson taught: "To rule children by force is the technique of Satan, not of the Savior. No, we don't own our children. Our parental privilege is to love them, to lead them, and to let them go."<sup>1</sup>

Setting limits should not be confused with controlling our children. Instead, setting limits is about providing boundaries so children can safely practice making choices. And—as is true with love—what limits look like will change over the years. But within these limits, even young children need to have choices. For example, parents may have a rule that vegetables must be eaten at dinner. This is an example of a limit.

Within that limit, parents may allow the child to choose which vegetable is served at dinner.

And that leads us to the idea of latitude, or giving children chances to express ideas, give input, and help make decisions. Allowing children to make choices now prepares them to make more significant choices as teenagers and emerging adults. And don't worry—this doesn't mean that teenagers get to do whatever they want! Their brains are still developing, and they are still learning about decisions. But as we shift to more latitude, we can include them in the process of setting limits. For example, parents and teenagers could talk about why a curfew might be appropriate (such as safety concerns and how we need enough rest to function the next day) and then decide together what the curfew should be.

This gradual shift from limits to latitude, done in the context of a loving relationship, allows our children to learn to make wise choices. As Elder Larry Y. Wilson, an emeritus member of the Seventy, said, "Wise parents prepare their children to get along without them." He cautioned:

"If parents hold on to *all* decision-making power and see it as their 'right,' they severely limit the growth and development of their children.

"Our children are in our homes for a limited time. If we wait until they walk out the door to turn over to them the reins of their moral agency, we have waited too long. They will not suddenly develop the ability to make wise decisions if they have never been free to make any important decisions while in our homes."<sup>2</sup>

### A Note about Learning

So we see that limits aren't about controlling our children, latitude isn't about letting them do anything they want, and both are about providing safe boundaries for children to make choices. They will learn through trial and error as they exercise agency. "This means," as Elder Wilson said, "children will sometimes make mistakes and learn from them."<sup>3</sup> Although learning from mistakes is part of God's plan, it can be tough for parents. During trying times, parents might benefit from this comforting advice from Elder Robert D. Hales (1932–2017) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles:

"Act with faith; don't react with fear. When our teenagers begin testing family values, parents need to go to the Lord for guidance on the specific needs of each family member. This is the time for added love and support and to reinforce your teachings on how to make choices. It is frightening to allow our children to learn from the mistakes they may make, but their 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 and acceptance is better than Satan's way of force and coercion, especially in rearing teenagers."<sup>4</sup>

### Remember

The scriptures say God's work and glory is "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). In other words, in His heavenly home, God is focused on His role as a parent. Indeed, out of all His divine titles, He asks us to refer to Him as our Father. We can follow His example and make it our primary focus to rear our children "in love and righteousness."<sup>5</sup> As we consider the needs of each child in our home and apply the principles of love, limits, and latitude, we can help each individual reach their full potential. ■

#### NOTES

1. Russell M. Nelson, "Listen to Learn," *Ensign*, May 1991, 22.
2. Larry Y. Wilson, "Only upon the Principles of Righteousness," *Ensign*, May 2012, 104.
3. Larry Y. Wilson, "Only upon the Principles of Righteousness," 104.
4. Robert D. Hales, "Strengthening Families: Our Sacred Duty," *Ensign*, May 1999, 34.
5. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, May 2017, 145.

### A BOOK OF MORMON EXAMPLE

The story of Jesus visiting the land of Bountiful includes examples of love, limits, and latitude that might be helpful to think about:

- **A small voice (3 Nephi 11:3).** God used a soft voice. We can also avoid yelling at our children. A small voice can have a powerful effect at home.
- **An expression of love (3 Nephi 11:7).** God spoke about how He loved His Son. Our children need to hear love and affection expressed verbally.
- **Physical touch (3 Nephi 11:14).** As a witness of His love, the Savior allowed each person to touch Him. Appropriate physical touch can let our children know we love them.
- **Teaching and correction (3 Nephi 11:31; 18:34).** Much of the Savior's visit was spent teaching. He didn't leave this important job only to His disciples.
- **Time together (3 Nephi 17:5–8).** Jesus didn't rush off as soon as possible. Do we spend time with our children?
- **Listening (3 Nephi 26:14).** This scene with the Savior reminds us that, given the opportunity to speak, children can often teach their parents.
- **A decision (3 Nephi 28:1).** The Lord made expectations clear but then allowed people to make decisions. Do we follow that example with our children?
- **A period of peace (4 Nephi).** The Savior's visit resulted in a remarkable period of peace. As we follow the examples above and lovingly set boundaries, teach correct principles, and then let children make decisions, we can foster greater peace in our homes.