

Ten Ideas for Mastering Strong Emotions at Home

To fill our hearts and homes with love, we must bridle all our passions and help our children do the same.

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Several years ago I came home from work to find my wife frazzled. Our four young children had drawn with markers on the walls and spilled fingernail polish in the carpet. At dinner, one of our children defiantly refused to try the food. My wife and I were so impatient and overwhelmed when it was time to put the kids to bed that we rushed through songs and family prayer, which only riled our kids even further.

One big happy family, right?

I'm guessing you've had days like that, too, when frustrations (both yours and your children's) are rising to a boiling point. Maybe voices are raised. Maybe a tantrum is thrown. Maybe your teens get into such a shouting match that you worry what the neighbors will think.

Strong emotions confront every family, but if left unchecked they can do serious harm.

The solution is found in the scriptures when Alma counsels his son Shiblon to “see that ye bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love” (Alma 38:12).

To fill ourselves, our children, and our homes with love, therefore, we must learn to bridle—or master—strong emotions.

Achieving that isn't easy, but these ideas may help.



1. Beware the natural parent.

Our bodies were designed to experience all kinds of emotions, including anger, confusion, frustration, and exasperation. A “natural” parent gives in to these impulses and lashes out. This natural parent—much like the natural man—is an enemy to his or her children and spouse, “unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural [impulses] and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love” (Mosiah 3:19).

In short, when we replace our unbridled, natural emotions with compassion and Christlike love, we become more like the Savior and thus better equipped to help our children manage their own emotions.





2. Avoid frustration triggers.

Identify triggers and circumstances when you or your children get easily frustrated. For example:

- When adults and children are hungry or tired.
- When there are underlying feelings of fear, jealousy, loneliness, rejection, guilt, or pain.
- When a parent’s expectation is greater than the child’s abilities (example: giving more tasks than a three-year-old can remember).

You may have other triggers in your home that aren’t mentioned here. Recognizing these triggers helps you avoid them and the frustrations they ignite.



3. Take preventive measures.

A little prevention goes a long way. For example, place fingernail polish where young hands won’t find it. Or, if strong emotions

arise while you’re outside the home, bring some snacks or a favorite toy to prevent any whining. Or, if technology use is often a source of friction, confront the problem head on:

- Have an open discussion or “tech talk” about technology use in your home. Listen closely, express empathy, and seek understanding rather than express anger and make demands.
- Hold a family council to come up with a family media plan or agreement (see examples at healthychildren.org/mediauseplan or commonsensemedia.org/family-media-agreement).



4. Be aware of your child’s emotions.

Pay close attention to what your children are feeling and when. When you notice strong emotions, calmly and compassionately label their emotions with words. “I can see that you’re angry.” “You seem frustrated.”

This will validate their feelings and communicate that you care.



5. Show empathy.

The covenant to “mourn with those that mourn” and “comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9) applies to our own children. When they are sad, lonely, or frustrated, we shouldn’t lecture them about character and patience. That only makes them sadder, lonelier, and more frustrated. Instead, we should show compassion, understanding, and empathy. Doing so will strengthen the relationship, soften hearts, and create an opportunity to connect.

Years ago, as I picked up my daughter from dance class, I heard her start to cry in the back seat. “I hate dance,” she said. “I want to quit.”

I could have dismissed or disapproved of her emotions with words such as, “You don’t hate dance. Why would you say that?” or “You are not quitting dance, because we just paid a lot of money for your costume.” This would not have been helpful.

Instead, I remembered that we humans have a difficult time learning anything when our brains are “flooded” with chemicals. I turned and said, “Wow! Sounds like you had a rough day at dance. What happened?”

As she sobbed through her story of girls teasing her, I validated her emotions again, saying, “That must have been embarrassing. No wonder you want to quit dance.” On the ride home I continued to listen and validate her emotions, never arguing with her about them. Later that night on her bed, when she had calmed down, we had a conversation and brainstormed together some possible solutions. Feelings must be validated before behavior can be improved.



6. Set limits.

Wise parents set limits on choices. Established limits help us communicate which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. President M. Russell Ballard, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, counseled parents to “set limits in accordance with the importance of the matter involved and the child’s disposition and maturity.”¹

For example, we allow young children to choose what shirt to wear to school, but we set limits on bedtimes. Or we may allow teenagers to go out

with friends, but we ask that they be home by a certain time. Allowing children to participate in some decisions gives them opportunities to demonstrate responsibility and develop toward adulthood.

These rules must be known by everyone in the family, however. Shared expectations avoid frustrating situations in which we correct children for rules they didn't know existed.



7. See things from your child's perspective.

When we honestly try to see things from our children's perspective, we will be reminded that we were children once—we made messes and were disrespectful. We can remind ourselves that all humans, including children, do things for reasons that make sense to them. And when we slip and say or do things we regret, we can be quick to apologize to others, including to our spouse and children.



8. Model good coping skills.

Children often learn how to handle their emotions by watching how we handle our feelings and frustrations. During difficult times, therefore, we can conscientiously model the behavior we want to see in our children. This could include making time for self-care and self-soothing, such as taking a few deep breaths in the midst of strong emotions or reaching out and talking with others. If our own hearts are not right, then what we say or do will rarely be helpful.

Modeling good behavior is enormously effective. It's one of the ways Jesus Christ teaches us. "For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15).



9. Don't take the hook.

When we recognize strong emotions in ourselves or our children, we can also remember not to "take the hook." A hook is anything a child says or does that immediately brings anger or frustration.

One evening after we quickly finished a family dinner, my wife and I were rushing to get to a meeting and we asked our teenage children to please help us out by putting away food and cleaning up the kitchen. I looked at my oldest daughter and said, "Will you please load the dishwasher? It won't take too long and it isn't that hard."

I remember her eyes rolling as she sarcastically replied, "If it's not that hard, then why don't you do it?" Yep, that is a classic hook.

I was tempted to launch into a lecture about not talking to parents that way, but I recognized the hook and instead put my arm around her, gave her a hug, and said, "You all can have a bowl of ice cream as soon as the kitchen is clean."



10. Turn to the Savior.

In those moments when our anger and frustration are high, when our own "tempest is raging," we need the Master Himself to calm us and help us bridle our passions.

Alma teaches us how:

"And now I would that ye should be humble, and be submissive and gentle; easy to be entreated; full of patience and long-suffering; being temperate in all things; being diligent in keeping the commandments of God at all times; asking for whatsoever things ye stand in need, both spiritual and temporal; always returning thanks unto God for whatsoever things ye do receive.

"And see that ye have faith, hope, and charity, and then ye will always abound in good works." (Alma 7:23–24).

Learning to manage our emotions as parents requires both faith in Jesus Christ and good works. It requires us to ask for help in sincere prayer and to learn and apply gospel and research-based principles and practices.

No parent is perfect, of course. If there's room for improvement in our lives, Christ invites us to repent and strive to be more loving, more compassionate, and more understanding beginning today. The result will be greater peace in our homes and love in our hearts.

And that's worth every effort. ■

NOTE

1. M. Russell Ballard, "The Sacred Responsibilities of Parenthood," *Ensign*, Mar. 2006, 32.