

PROACTIVE PARENTING

We shouldn't wait to arm our children against the evils of the world.

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Raising teenagers in a fallen world isn't easy, particularly when the adversary is so relentless in his efforts to lead youth astray. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles described it this way:

"Some days it seems that a sea of temptation and transgression inundates [our children], simply washes over them before they can successfully withstand it, before they should have to face it. And often at least some of the forces at work seem beyond our personal control.

"Well, some of them may be beyond our control, but I testify with faith in the living God that they are not beyond His."¹

As parents, we work in tandem with Heavenly Father and the Savior to fortify our youth and help them put on the whole protective armor of God to withstand "the fiery darts of the adversary" (1 Nephi 15:24).

But we shouldn't wait until after the battle is raging to do so. We should do it long before the battle even begins.

Proactive Parenting

Scholarly research and parenting books often focus on *reactive* parenting, or what can parents do *after* their child has done something wrong. But waiting for bad behavior to occur before taking action means that destructive patterns may already have become established, making them harder to change.

In contrast, *proactive* parenting refers to a parent's efforts to anticipate temptations and other challenges children might experience in the future and to provide protection or tools they can use when faced with these situations. In the gospel sense, this is akin to helping children put on the whole armor of God (see Ephesians 6:11–17).



Three Proactive-Parenting Practices

Parents may use three common proactive-parenting practices with different frequency, depending on the age of the child. For each of these practices, keep in mind counsel from the Children and Youth introductory guide:

- “Pray for guidance.”
- “Help your children seek and recognize the influence of the Holy Ghost.”
- “Express love.”
- “Frequently compliment your children in their efforts to do well and for the Christlike qualities you see in them.”
- “Offer support, help, and encouragement along the way.”²

1

COCOONING

(protecting your children)

The first, and most restrictive, proactive-parenting practice is called *cocooning*. In this method, parents protect their children from anything that poses a potential threat. Cocooning is common during early childhood and may include forbidding certain television shows or avoiding potentially dangerous activities. By doing this, parents teach children right from wrong.

2

PRE-ARMING

(preparing your children for danger)

A second approach to proactive parenting is called *pre-arming*. This means that parents provide guidance, coaching, and instruction to their children to help them know how to respond to potentially harmful situations. For example, parents may ask a child to practice exact dialogue that could be used if a peer were to offer the child a dangerous substance. Or, parents may ask a child to share specific actions that could be taken to steer away from damaging situations.

This method allows parents to teach why something is right or wrong and becomes more effective as children mature. Pre-arming conversations might teach:

- Healthy sexuality and intimacy.
- Responsible media use, including safeguards against pornography.
- Modesty and other standards from *For the Strength of Youth*.³



3

DEFERENCE

(respecting your children's agency)

The third proactive strategy is called *deference*, which allows children to make their own decisions as they practice choosing between right and wrong. Deference demonstrates great trust in a child. Because of the complexities in granting a child sufficient responsibility to make decisions, deference requires that a child have adequate maturity to understand the consequences of decisions. Deference works well with adolescent or older children after parents have employed strategies like pre-arming and cocooning for several years.

Using a balanced approach to these three practices while raising children—especially within a gospel context—allows them opportunities to grow as they exercise their agency and learn to choose between right and wrong.

When the Savior called His disciples, He used a similar pattern. First, He showed them the importance of shunning the world (cocooning; see Matthew 4:10, John 16:33). Then, through discussion and example, He taught them why His ways were best (pre-arming; see 3 Nephi 27:21–22). Finally, He left their presence and allowed them, with guidance from the Holy Ghost, to use what they had learned to lead the Church and preach the gospel (deference; see John 16:7–13).



Keeping the lines of communication open is essential.

Frequent, Open, Age-Appropriate Discussions

Implementing a flexible approach to these three teaching strategies allows parents to effectively respond to different situations a child may face. An essential component to these techniques is keeping open the lines of communication, especially as children ask questions.

The Children and Youth introductory guide encourages parents to “be involved in their [children’s] lives” and “to talk with and listen to [their] children.”⁴ Children need to know they can talk with and learn from their parents.

For example, if my seven-year-old son asks me a question about sexuality, I have a great opportunity to teach him that he can come to me when he has a question—any question. Given his age, however, I might cocoon him from some of the specific details of sexuality, saving those for when he’s a little older and more mature. The scriptures counsel, “Line upon line, precept upon precept” (2 Nephi 28:30). So, I share only those things he is ready to hear.

But allowing the conversation to take place is key at any age.

Joint Decision-Making

Open communication also allows parents and children to engage in joint decision-making, which increases the likelihood that adolescents will “buy into” family rules.

For example, when we wanted to establish a curfew with our older children, rather than deciding on a time and informing them, we had a family discussion and asked for their input. My husband and I felt more comfortable with 10:00 p.m., and the children were pushing hard for midnight.

After a lengthy family council, we settled on 11:00 p.m. We also added a caveat that unique opportunities with friends might allow for an extended curfew. Both parents and children sacrificed, but because the children were part of the decision, they were very good about coming home on time and keeping us informed of what they were doing. I believe that allowing them to take part in the decision-making process was key to this positive outcome.⁵

Knowing Which Technique to Use

Pre-arming combined with cocooning may be more appropriate when children are younger and more willing to be sheltered from negative influences.

Most teens, however, want greater independence. As a result, they may balk at the idea of being controlled or may even interpret well-meant parental suggestions as infringing upon their ability to make their own decisions. Some conflict is bound to arise as parents and teens figure this out, but if parents use these techniques with young children, welcome their questions and communication, continue teaching them sound principles and doctrine as they mature, and give them opportunities to exercise their agency, parents will be able to increasingly stand back and defer to their children.

Knowing Our Children’s Vulnerabilities

Being proactive parents also means taking time to get to know our children and their vulnerabilities so we can help them prepare to combat Satan’s influence. Where are the chinks in their armor, so to speak? Do they easily fall victim to peer pressure? Are they too attached to digital devices or games? Do they have difficulty recognizing the influence of the Spirit? Do they struggle with personal prayers or scripture study?

By knowing where Satan may try to influence our children, we can know which gospel principles we should focus on in our teaching and create opportunities for our children to develop in that specific area. This watchful, mindful, active, and strategic approach is at the heart of proactive parenting.

With the help of Almighty God and Jesus Christ, we can seize the opportunity to be proactive today in the lives of our children. Doing so will help shield them in enemy territory and lead them, ultimately, back to our Heavenly Father with honor. ■

NOTES

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, “A Prayer for the Children,” *Ensign*, May 2003, 85.
2. *Children and Youth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: An Introductory Guide for Parents and Leaders* (2019), 4.
3. *For the Strength of Youth* (booklet, 2011).
4. *Children and Youth*, 10.
5. The Lord used this parenting model as He taught the brother of Jared an important lesson about finding answers (see Ether 2–3).