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Resilience

SPIRITUAL ARMOR FOR TODAY'S YOUTH

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The story is told that during British rule of colonial India, an unacceptable number of venomous cobras lived in and around Delhi. To solve the problem, local authorities began paying a bounty for dead cobras. The ill-advised bounty backfired when enterprising locals began breeding cobras for profit. When the bounty ended, the breeders set the cobras free, further compounding the problem.

The phenomenon of unintended consequences sometimes causing more harm than intended benefits is known as the “cobra effect.”¹

The Cobra Effect on the Rising Generation

During my visit to Brigham Young University–Idaho in the fall of 2017, the school's new president, Henry J. Eyring, told me that his foremost concern was the high drop-out rate of college freshmen. Students leave college for a variety of reasons, but a lack of resilience is one of the leading reasons that many universities across the United States are experiencing this same challenge.²

Resilience is “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.”³ Discovering a lack of resilience among its recruits, the U.S. Army started offering the Master Resilience Training (MRT) program to fortify soldiers against the stress, demands, and hardships of military service.⁴

We face the same concern in the Church with a higher percentage of full-time missionaries returning home early from their missions than in previous generations. Some missionaries face serious health challenges or other trials that necessitate early release, but others simply may not have developed enough of the virtue of resilience.



Understanding and applying powerful gospel principles can help youth strengthen their resilience.

Lyle J. Burrup, who served as a mental health counselor in the Church's Missionary Department, has observed that the most common cause of emotional problems faced by missionaries is a lack of resilience. "In many cases," he says, "the missionary just hadn't learned how to deal with challenges well."⁵

Universities, the military, and the mission field aren't causing the problem; they are simply revealing it. Lower resilience among today's youth may actually be an unintended consequence—a modern-day cobra effect—resulting from such factors as:

- Too much time on the couch and on digital devices, and not as much exercise and physical activity as earlier generations.⁶
- Too much exposure to an unrealistic virtual or pretend world, causing distorted self-images, anxiety, depression, and lower self-worth.⁷
- Impatience in a world of instant gratification and answers at Google speed. (Conversely, resilience is developed in great part through the virtue of patience.)
- Protection from rough seas. "Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors."⁸
- Innumerable options that distract us; fake news and half-truths that confuse us; and a life of ease that desensitizes us to the things of the Spirit.

- Too much digital face time and not enough face-to-face time, resulting in underdeveloped interpersonal skills.

Many books have been written addressing this complex and formidable challenge, including this one with the telling title *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*.

Fortifying Our Youth

In our highly digital age—with countless modern conveniences—we might conclude that children and youth today have it easy. But in truth, youth are inundated with challenges, trials, and temptations that previous generations never faced.

The good news is that youth today are exceptional. President Russell M. Nelson recently told them: "Our Heavenly Father has reserved many of His most noble spirits—perhaps, I might say, His finest team—for this final phase. Those noble spirits—those finest players, those heroes—are *you!*"⁹

The bad news is that Satan knows this as well. He is doing all in his power to derail, detract, diminish, and destroy these noble members of the Lord's team. But our children are capable of thriving in the face of Satan's onslaught. Our charge as nurturing parents is to help prepare them to meet those challenges head-on by cultivating and encouraging their resilience, faith, and fortitude.

With powerful gospel principles to assist us, we can help youth strengthen their resilience, enabling them to become more like the Savior



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by “increas[ing] in wisdom [intellectually] and stature [physically], and in favour with God [spiritually] and man [socially and emotionally]” (Luke 2:52). I want to discuss four of these gospel principles: (1) self-reliance, (2) opposition in all things, (3) the gift of the Holy Ghost, and (4) moral agency.

1. Raising Self-Reliant Children—Santa Claus vs. Scrooge

In efforts to help the needy, we strive to find the right balance between two complementary principles: charity and self-reliance. Charity without self-reliance is Santa Claus. Self-reliance without kindness is Scrooge.¹⁰ Either extreme by itself is unbalanced.

Charity (giving someone a fish) and self-reliance (teaching someone the art of fishing) also apply to parenting. We could make every decision for our children, but it would be wiser to teach them the art of decision-making and thus help them become intellectually, spiritually, socially, and emotionally self-reliant.

An inspiring example is found in the touching production *The Miracle Worker*, a dramatic work derived from the autobiography of Helen Keller, who suffered an illness as an infant that left her deaf and blind.¹¹ In their Santa-like approach in raising their daughter, Helen’s hovering and coddling parents were overprotective and overindulgent, with the counterproductive results of stunting Helen’s progress.

Conversely, Anne Sullivan, Helen’s private teacher, recognized that Helen had received far too much indulgence and therefore began helping Helen confront her problems and become more self-reliant. In the end, it was Anne Sullivan, who helped Helen live up to her true potential.

Because we love our children, we want to see them succeed. We may be tempted to remove obstacles from their path, which would make us “snowplow” parents.¹² Or to minimize their disappointment and failure, we may be tempted to do the hard work for them, like Helen’s parents. When we do so, however, we may be unwittingly impeding our children from developing the resilience they need to be strong, independent disciples of Christ.

Rather than raise our children as Helen’s parents did, we should consider the Savior’s approach. Rather than remove our burdens, He strengthens us to “bear up [our] burdens” (Mosiah 24:15). Often, He does not come to our rescue as quickly as we would like (see Doctrine and Covenants 121:1–3).

The path is often steep and rocky, and we will all have our share of stumbles and setbacks.



2. Opposition—the Blessing of Hard Things

One of the ways Heavenly Father raises us to be resilient and to prepare us for our future happiness is by sending us into a world where our resilience will be tried and refined, as evidenced in the following scriptures:

- We will be “tried, even as Abraham” (Doctrine and Covenants 101:4).
- Adversity “shall give [us] experience, and shall be for [our] good” (Doctrine and Covenants 122:7).
- “There is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11), so Heavenly Father allows us to “taste the bitter, that [we] may know to prize the good” (Moses 6:55).
- We “receive no witness until after the trial of [our] faith” (Ether 12:6).

Learning to develop the Christlike virtues of faith, patience, diligence, and resilience, among many others, cannot happen without opposition or the “furnace of affliction” (Isaiah 48:10). Our Father in Heaven, therefore, allows us to face difficult challenges and do hard things. How can we ever become like our great Exemplar if we don’t face trials similar to those that made Him who He is? Likewise, how can we as parents help our own children progress if we don’t allow them and even encourage them to do hard things?

The greatest and most enabling thing a parent could teach a child is to recognize the whisperings of the Holy Ghost.

I often tell missionaries, “In the mission field you’re going to be enrolled in high-level courses: Diligence 501 and Patience 505, among many others. It is only through this advanced curriculum that you will learn to become great missionaries and later outstanding husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. If you have a tough day, celebrate your suffering as did the Apostles Peter and John did, who after being imprisoned and beaten, “rejoic[ed] that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (see Acts 5:18, 40–41; see also 1 Peter 4:13; Colossians 2:8).

It is the hardships, the struggling, and the stretching that help us develop resilience—the ability to get up, dust ourselves off, and continue on the strait and narrow path. That path is often steep and rocky, and we will all have our share of stumbles and setbacks. It is the Lord’s gift of unlimited second chances that enables us to move forward with resilience.¹³

3. The Holy Ghost and Inspired Decision-Making

Rather than receiving easy answers, children need to grow in the art of decision-making. We can provide guidance but should allow them to think for themselves and begin making even the smallest of decisions.

Because the gift of the Holy Ghost is the greatest gift that mortal man can receive,¹⁴ it would logically follow that the greatest and most enabling thing a parent could teach a child is to recognize and follow the whisperings of the Holy Ghost. Teaching children to be worthy of this great gift and how to receive personal revelation is the foremost thing we can do to raise spiritually self-reliant and resilient children. The Holy Ghost, along with the other members of the Godhead, is every parent’s strongest ally in raising resilient youth.

We learn an important lesson from Oliver Cowdery, who asked in prayer and didn’t receive. The Lord told him:

“But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right” (see Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–8).

When our children come to us and ask for help with a math assignment, for example, we don’t do the homework for them. We provide guidance, and then, as the Lord said to Oliver, say, “Now, go work on it, and when you’re finished, come back and I’ll see if you have the right answer.”

Teaching children how to face, work through, and conquer their trials helps them think for themselves, reason through problems, and recognize and understand the whisperings of the Holy Ghost. Only through their own experience in solving problems do they develop common sense and wisdom and grow in their ability to “study it out” and receive revelation.

Not teaching our children spiritual self-reliance and resilience comes with this sobering warning from President Nelson: “In coming days, it will



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not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost.”¹⁵

4. Honoring Agency at the Crossroads

Many years ago, I read of a father who awakened his son one Sunday to get ready for church. The son replied, “I’m not going to church today.” Many parents in a moment like that would be tempted to say, “Oh, yes you are” and then add a threat. This father was wiser and simply said, “Son, you don’t need to explain why to me, because this isn’t my Church. But you ought to get down on your knees and give your excuse to your Father in Heaven.”

The father then left his son at the crossroads with the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost can bother our children far better than we can if we will just trust in that great gift. “There is no witness so terrible or no accuser so powerful as the conscience.”¹⁶ Within a few minutes, the teen was up and getting ready for church. Had the father forced his son to go to church, he might have planted seeds of resentment and rebellion, with the cobra effect slithering in.

There is risk in honoring the agency of our children and leaving them at the fork in the road. Because the doctrine of agency was indispensable to the plan of salvation, our Father in Heaven took that same risk in the premortal life.

If I could amend slightly a quote by the Prophet Joseph Smith, I would state it this way regarding children: “We teach them correct principles because whether we like it or not, they will govern themselves.”¹⁷ The day will come when our children will leave home. Our only hope as parents is to teach them correct principles about the plan of salvation and help them recognize the whisperings of the Spirit to guide them in the wise use of their agency. Otherwise, they may lack the spiritual self-reliance and resilience to face future trials, with a chance that we could lose them.

We are all profoundly and eternally grateful for the greatest act of resilience in the history of the world—the Atonement of Jesus Christ. The Savior did not shrink from facing His crucible, even when under incomprehensible pressure and stress.

The gift of the Holy Ghost and spiritual self-reliance nurture spiritual resilience, which is a synonym for enduring. And those who faithfully “endure to the end . . . shall have eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:20).



May the Lord bless us as parents in our imperative duty of raising intellectually, physically, spiritually, socially, and emotionally resilient children. ■

For additional practical ideas, see Lyle J. Burrup, “Raising Resilient Children,” *Ensign*, Mar. 2013, 12–17.

NOTES

1. Horst Siebert, a German economist, is credited with coining the phrase “cobra effect,” which occurs when a solution to a problem worsens the problem.
2. See Connie Matthiessen, “Why Are So Many College Students Returning Home?” Jan. 9, 2019, [greatschools.org](https://www.greatschools.org).
3. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (2003), “resilience,” [merriam-webster.com](https://www.merriam-webster.com).
4. See “Master Resilience Training (MRT) in the U.S. Army: PowerPoint & Interview,” Positive Psychology Program, [positivepsychologyprogram.com](https://www.positivepsychologyprogram.com).
5. Lyle J. Burrup, “Raising Resilient Children,” *Ensign*, Mar. 2013, 13.
6. See Meena Azzollini, “Declining Physical Activity Levels in Children and Teens,” *WellBeing*, July 10, 2017, [wellbeing.com.au](https://www.wellbeing.com.au).
7. See Rachel Ehmke, “How Using Social Media Affects Teenagers,” Child Mind Institute, June 6, 2016, [childmind.org](https://www.childmind.org).
8. African proverb.
9. Russell M. Nelson, “Hope of Israel” (worldwide youth devotional, June 3, 2018), [HopeofIsrael.ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.HopeofIsrael.ChurchofJesusChrist.org).
10. Scrooge is the miserly character in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*.
11. See Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (1902).
12. “Snowplow parents have it backward. . . . The point is to prepare the kid for the road, instead of preparing the road for the kid” (Julie Lythcott-Haims, in Claire Cain Miller and Jonah Engel Bromwich, “How Parents Are Robbing Their Children of Adulthood,” *New York Times*, March 16, 2019, [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)).
13. See Lynn G. Robbins, “Until Seventy Times Seven,” *Ensign*, May 2018, 21–23.
14. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Wilford Woodruff* (2004), 49.
15. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2018, 96.
16. Sometimes attributed to Polybius or Sophocles.
17. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 284.