



Protecting Children

What can we do to better protect and empower the children in our lives?

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Out of all the groups of people Jesus taught, we know He particularly loved children. He gave attention to children even when it was not convenient. He invited children to receive an individual blessing from Him. He condemned those who hurt children. And He taught that we need to become more like children to enter the kingdom of heaven.¹

“Behold your little ones,” He told those on the American continent after His Resurrection. The heavens opened, and loving, protective angels came down and formed a circle around the children, surrounding them with fire. (See 3 Nephi 17:23–24.)

With all the dangers in the world today, we might wish that our children could be constantly surrounded by heavenly fire. It is estimated that one in four people worldwide has been abused as a child, and that average number rises when you look at specific vulnerable groups, such as those with disabilities.² The good news is that there is much we can do to be proactive about protecting children.

“Picture in your mind a child you love,” said Sister Joy D. Jones, Primary General President. “When you tell this child, ‘I love you,’ what does it mean? . . . We provide protection so that we can help those we love to become their best selves and face life’s challenges.”³

Perhaps looking more closely at the Savior’s example will prompt ideas about how we can better protect the children in our lives.



When Jesus visited the Nephites, He blessed each child individually. Likewise, we should get to know each child.

Jesus Made Time for Them

Jesus set aside time to pay attention to the young and vulnerable (see Matthew 19:14). We also can set aside time to listen to our children and try to understand their challenges.

“The more love the child feels, the easier it is for him or her to open up,” Sister Jones said. “. . . We must start the conversation and not wait for children to come to us.”⁴

One mother found it helpful to ask her children each evening, “Did you hear any words today that you didn’t understand?”

Our children’s first instinct may be to look online for answers because the internet provides immediate help and doesn’t judge, but we need to convince them that *we* are a more trustworthy source of information. And that includes not overreacting when our children tell us something uncomfortable. For example, if we have an emotional outburst when our child confesses that they sought out pornography, they might not come to us for help again. But if we respond with love, we have an opportunity to send a clear message—that we want them to talk to us about *anything*.

Sister Jones observed, “Minor troubles talked about in a loving way create a foundation of a healthy response so that when big troubles come, communication is still open.”⁵

Some of the most important, protective conversations that parents can have with children are about their bodies. These conversations should include accurate words for body parts, information about hygiene, and what changes to expect in upcoming years. We should talk about sexuality and how physical and emotional intimacy are a wonderful part of Heavenly Father’s plan for us. We could also talk about topics such as abuse and pornography. These conversations need to be age-appropriate and guided by the questions our children have. Ideally, we would have multiple conversations over time, layering additional information as our children grow up and their understanding increases. (See the end of this article for helpful resources.)

Jesus Set an Example for Them

Jesus set a perfect example for everyone (see John 8:12). As adults, we also have the opportunity and responsibility to be examples. One of the best ways we can help our children be safe is by modeling safe choices ourselves. Children notice how their parents treat others and allow others to treat them. Please, if you are in a relationship or struggling with an addiction that puts you or your family in danger, get help. Reach out to civil authorities and counseling professionals, as well as your bishop or Relief Society president, who can help you connect

with appropriate Church and community resources. You deserve safety and respect.

We should also set an example of caring for our spiritual strength. Do our children see us pray? Do they know we read the scriptures? Have they heard our testimonies? Do we put on “the whole armour of God” as a family in the morning before heading out into the world? (see Ephesians 6:11–18; Doctrine and Covenants 27:15–18).

Jesus Spoke Up for Them

The Savior spoke out against those who hurt children (see Matthew 18:6). We too can be advocates for the children in our lives.

“Children need others to speak for them,” taught President Dallin H. Oaks, First Counselor in the First Presidency, “and they need decision-makers who put their well-being ahead of selfish adult interests.”⁶

While we do not need to be overly fearful or suspicious of others, we should be aware of potential threats and make wise safety decisions. Primary leaders should follow Church abuse-prevention guidelines⁷—there is protection in having two teachers in each classroom and someone from the presidency checking on the classes.

Parents and leaders should counsel together and decide if there are additional precautions they can take to minimize specific threats. For example, many Church buildings have windows in classroom doors. If your building does not, you may consider leaving the doors slightly open during classes and talking to your local facilities-management representative to see if installing windows is an option. Regardless of their callings, all adults can pay attention in church and help when needed, such as welcoming visitors who are roaming the halls, or encouraging a wandering child to return to class.

Sadly, sometimes children are hurt by other children. If we notice any kind of bullying or inappropriate physical contact at church or anywhere, we need to intervene immediately. If we are a leader, we need to be willing to talk with the families involved—even if the conversations are uncomfortable—to make sure that all children are safe.

Speak up with compassion and clarity to help establish a culture of kindness.

If we believe a child is being abused, we should report those concerns to civil authorities right away. In many countries, hotlines exist that offer crisis intervention, information, and support services. We should also tell the bishop of suspected abuse, especially involving anyone who might have access to children through the Church. In addition to taking measures to prevent a perpetrator’s future access to children, the bishop can provide comfort and support to victims and help them connect with additional resources from Family Services.

Jesus Blessed Them One by One

Jesus knew and blessed children one by one (see 3 Nephi 17:21). Likewise, we should get to know each child and try to help him or her specifically.

How can we make church safer for children with medical conditions? Do we have a plan for helping Primary children with disabilities? Are the Primary lessons we teach sensitive to different home situations? What else can we do to be more inclusive?



Racist comments, condescending remarks about other cultures, and condemning attitudes toward members of other faiths should have no place in the messages we share. In one Primary class, a boy did not speak the same language as the other children very well. To help him feel welcome, teachers made sure to print handouts in both languages. Simple acts of thoughtfulness show children that we know and care about them individually, and these acts can set an example for them to follow.

We may discover that some children need help in an urgent way. For example, although some mood swings are a normal part of growing up, if a child is angry, withdrawn, or sad for several weeks, there might be a more serious problem that needs professional help. While righteous habits like prayer and scripture study are important, often more support is needed for those who are dealing with an emerging mental illness or coping with a secret trauma. Ignoring the situation will not make things better. In many areas, bishops can provide financial assistance to individuals and families for counseling through Family Services or other providers.



Jesus Empowered Them

While protecting children, Jesus also empowered them. He pointed to children as examples (see Matthew 18:3). After His visit to the Americas, young children were able to teach adults “marvelous things” (3 Nephi 26:16).

We can empower the children we know by teaching them to recognize how the Spirit speaks to them and then to follow the Spirit when making decisions—helping them develop an internal filter to guide their actions. As Sister Jones taught, “Helping children create their own internal reasoning for wanting to [make safe decisions] is essential.”⁸ Here are some ideas that empowered other families:

- One mother taught her children to pay attention to their “uh-oh feelings” and be careful around people who seemed “tricky.” This paid off when some people tried to convince her son to follow them into a bathroom, and he heeded his warning feelings and refused.
- Some families create a getaway plan ahead of time to use when they encounter something harmful. For example, one family’s getaway plan was called “crash and tell” and consisted of turning off the computer monitor and telling a parent right away if a bad image popped up. Their children never had to wonder about how to deal with bad media—they knew what to do!
- Another family created a code word their children could text to their parents or say over the phone if they needed to be picked up right away.
- You could help your children practice saying, “No!” when someone tries to convince them to do something that makes them



uncomfortable. Every child should know that they can ask for help, and they should keep asking until they are safe.

Our Role as Adults

Let's recall again the scene in 3 Nephi 17, when Jesus "took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them. . . . And they were encircled about with fire; and the angels did minister unto them" (verses 21, 24). Perhaps a key point of this story is not only to teach us how important children are but also to illustrate what *our* role should be, as adults. We are the caretakers of the next generation. *We* should be the angels that encircle and minister to children. Let's continue to look to Jesus as our perfect example and then do the best we can to surround our little ones with love and protection. ■

NOTES

1. See the scripture references under each section heading in this article to find these stories in the scriptures.
2. See "Child Maltreatment (Child Abuse)," World Health Organization, who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/child/en.
3. Joy D. Jones, "Addressing Pornography: Protect, Respond, and Heal," *Liahona*, Oct. 2019, 38.
4. Joy D. Jones, "Addressing Pornography," 39, 40.
5. Joy D. Jones, "Addressing Pornography," 39.
6. Dallin H. Oaks, "Protect the Children," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2012, 43.
7. See "Preventing and Responding to Abuse," newsroom.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
8. Joy D. Jones, "Addressing Pornography," 40.

A NEW CHURCH RESOURCE

The Church has a new site about preventing and addressing abuse. Go to abuse.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- Abuse.ChurchofJesusChrist.org
- AddressingPornography.ChurchofJesusChrist.org
- *A Parent's Guide* on ChurchofJesusChrist.org
- "Abuse," Gospel Topics, topics.ChurchofJesusChrist.org
- "Abuse," Lesson Helps by Topic, lessonhelps.ChurchofJesusChrist.org

TIPS FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN

At Home

- Create a family plan for staying away from bad media or escaping harmful situations.
- Talk in age-appropriate ways about bodies, sexuality, and intimacy.

At Church

- Follow Church guidelines for teaching, including having two adults in every classroom.
- Encourage a culture of kindness and do not allow bullying.