



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

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.”<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>
- Too much exposure to an unrealistic virtual or pretend world, causing distorted self-images, anxiety, depression, and lower self-esteem.<sup>7</sup>
- 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.”<sup>8</sup>
- A world with infinite options that distract, disparate voices that confuse, and a life of ease that can desensitize youth and adults 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*.

The world is changing. The Lord has reserved for today spirits who are capable of thriving in the face of today’s challenges. 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 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. Being charitable without nurturing self-reliance is Santa Claus. Expecting self-reliance without kindness is Scrooge.<sup>9</sup> 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 far wiser to teach them the art of



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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.<sup>10</sup> In their Santa-like approach to raising their daughter, Helen's hovering parents were overprotective and overindulgent, with the counterproductive results of stunting Helen's intellectual, spiritual, social, and emotional growth.

Conversely, Anne Sullivan, Helen's private teacher, recognized that Helen had received too much indulgence and therefore began helping Helen confront her problems and become more self-reliant. In the end, it was Anne Sullivan, not Helen's parents, 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 all obstacles from their path. Or to minimize their disappointment and failure, we may be tempted to do the hard work for them, as Helen's parents did. 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 being overprotective and coming to their rescue too quickly, we should consider the Savior's approach. He strengthens us to "bear up [our] burdens" (Mosiah 24:15) and often does not come to our rescue as quickly as we would like (see Doctrine and Covenants 121:1–3).

## 2. Opposition: The Blessing of Hard Things

One of the ways Heavenly Father, our perfect parent, 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).

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- 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?

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 the Apostles Peter and John did, who after being imprisoned and beaten "[rejoiced] 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

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of unlimited second chances that enables us to move forward with resilience.<sup>11</sup>

### 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,<sup>12</sup> the greatest and most enabling thing a parent can teach a child is to recognize 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 children.

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

“Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

“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 homework assignment, for example, we don't do the assignment 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 work through and conquer their trials helps them think for themselves, reason through problems, and recognize 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 Russell M. Nelson: “In coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>13</sup>

### 4. Honoring Agency at the Crossroads

I have heard President Nelson share the story of his eight-year-old daughter who came to him one Sunday and asked if she could go sleigh riding with a family in the ward. He said, “I knew it was not wise to answer either yes or no. We opened the Bible to Exodus 31:13: ‘Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations.’ Then I asked her how she felt about going sleigh riding on the Sabbath. She said, ‘Dad, I want to show Heavenly Father that I love Him, so I'm not going.’”



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President Nelson continued: “After a generation had passed and my daughter was now a mother, I was in her home when her young son asked her permission with a very similar request. It was fascinating and gratifying for me to watch her open the Bible with my grandson and read that same verse.”

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.”<sup>14</sup> 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. But didn’t our Father in Heaven take that same risk in the premortal life and consequently lose a third part of His spirit children? Because the doctrine of agency was indispensable to the plan of salvation, the risk was inevitable, contrary to Lucifer’s protests.

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.”<sup>15</sup> 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 “Raising Resilient Children” by Lyle J. Burrup in the March 2013 Liahona.*

#### 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,” [merriamwebster.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; *Liahona*, Mar. 2013, 11.
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. Scrooge is the miserly character in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*.
10. See Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (1902).
11. See Lynn G. Robbins, “Until Seventy Times Seven,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2018, 21–23.
12. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Wilford Woodruff* (2004), 49.
13. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2018, 96.
14. Sometimes attributed to Polybius or Sophocles.
15. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 284.