Thoughts and Reflections of Craig H. Hart

From the time he was a university student—taking a child development class to learn something about the baby he and his wife, Kerstine, had just had—until now, Professor Craig H. Hart has been studying children, parents, and families from both an academic and a personal perspective. His research has included time spent systematically observing children interact with peers on numerous playgrounds, including the BYU Child and Family Studies Laboratory (a preschool). He has published numerous studies from parent-child interaction data gathered in China, Russia, Australia, Japan, and various parts of the United States. An internationally recognized scholar and the father of four children, Professor Hart is chair of Marriage, Family, and Human Development at Brigham Young University. Marriage & Families recently discussed parenting and families with Professor Hart, from which the following observations are drawn. (The next issue of Marriage & Families will feature the second part of this discussion, with a particular emphasis on issues of discipline and schooling.)

There is a myth prevalent among some scholars that parents don’t matter. The past 24 years of study and observation have convinced me otherwise. As one example, a growing body of scientific evidence indicates that children’s success or failure in life can often be traced to how well they get along with peers—and that parents can provide the foundation for how well children adjust to their peer groups in ways that no one else can. (I appreciated the opportunity of discussing research along this line that debunks the myth that parents don’t matter in the August 2000 Marriage & Families [available online at marriageandfamilies.byu.edu].)

Peer group behavior that stems, in part, from the quality of parenting that children receive is important for life-long adjustment.1 Children who are more socially competent are more capable of regulating their impulses and emotions. They tend to be more friendly and cooperative, and they are more adept at joining in a group of their peers. To illustrate, several years ago, we were observing children at the Louisiana State University Child Development Laboratory, and we noticed a child who was carefully watching other children play with a farm set. After a few moments, he started playing with a wooden dowel next to this group. When there was a break in the action, this child started marching the wooden dowel across the floor toward the group, telling them, “This is Farmer
Jones," and asking them, "Which tractor would you like him to drive?" He was immediately accepted into the ongoing play.

On the same day, we observed another less socially competent child trying to gain entry into this same group. He did so by calling attention to himself by saying irrelevant things like, "Hey, I'm wearing a black shirt today." He even tried to get the children to do something else after telling them that he didn't like playing with farm toys. The peer group basically ignored him.

Not surprisingly, our studies on early peer interaction show that a number of family factors contribute to the development of children's social skills—or to the lack thereof. Some of these factors include the type of parenting children receive, the level of marital satisfaction in the home, and the nature of sibling relationships. For example, we recently completed a study in Russia showing that physical and relational aggression directed toward peers at school occurred less frequently when fathers were more patient, responsive, and playful, and when mothers were less coercive in their interactions with their children. Further, when low marital conflict was combined with measures of positive parenting in our statistical model, even less aggressive behavior was observed in the peer group at school.

Differing Temperaments

There are very clear differences in children's behavioral styles that can be observed beginning in early childhood. Various studies have identified a multitude of differing temperament types. From that, some researchers have boiled the types down into three broad classifications that I think are very descriptive. First, there is the category of "reactivity-negative emotionality," which is manifest as irritability, anger, inflexibility, and frequent distress. Second, there is "self-regulation," which is seen in emotional control, low tractability, and persistence in completing tasks. Third, there is "approach-inhibition," which involves an inclination to approach new situations and people or to be wary and withdrawn.

In addition, genetic predispositions can create differences in children within the same family, as most every parent has experienced. For example, some children are more impulsive and more inclined to thrill-seeking than others, which means parents have to work harder to help them discover ways to manage their impulsiveness. That can be challenging to those parents who believe their children should all be alike, but researchers have now identified an actual genetic marker—DRD4—that has been modestly associated with impulsive, novelty-seeking behavior. However, individuals can choose to override these types of biological proclivities, if they are willing to work at it. And, recent research has demonstrated that appropriate parenting can help diminish negative predispositions and enhance child characteristics that are less than complete.2

The relevance of this research to day-to-day parenting involves recognizing that children reared in the same home will likely display different interests, personalities, and behavior because of unique biological blueprints provided by parents, coupled with the predispositions, talents, and desires children bring into this world with them. I believe that some of these
characteristics stem from spiritual predispositions. God referred to Cain, for example, as  
"the father of lies, . . . for thou was also [a liar] before the world (Moses 5:24).  
Alternatively, there were many "noble and great ones" who "were good"  
from before the world (Abr. 3:22-23). Research is uncovering how different child  
characteristics lend themselves to parents reacting differently to each  
child. In fact, studies are now showing how parent-child  
interactions are dynamic and transactional in nature, with  
parents and children influencing each other in myriads of ways  
across development.  

As parents work to adapt to the individual nature of each  
of their children, it would  
be well to remember the words  
of Brigham Young, who encour-  
aged parents to "study their  
[children's] dispositions and  
their temperaments and deal  
with them accordingly."  

Another leader of The Church  
of Jesus Christ of Latter-day  
Saints, Neal A. Maxwell said,  
"Of course our genes, circum-  
stances, and environments mat-  
ter very much, and they shape  
us significantly. Yet there  
remains an inner zone in which  
we are sovereign unless we  
abrogate. In this zone lies the  
esSENce of our individuality and  
our personal accountability."  

How People Parent  
Decades ago, researcher Diana  
Baumrind identified three  
distinct styles of parenting that  
are still applicable in our scientific study of parenting today:  
• Coercive  
• Permissive  
• Authoritative  
Most people can readily  
identify the styles of coercive  
and permissive parenting, but  
authoritative parenting is a term  
that may not be familiar to  
some. And yet for most chil-  
dren, parents who adapt a  
carefully tailored balance of  
three authoritative parenting  
principles—what I call love,  
limits, and latitude—can teach  
them correct behavior and help  
them develop sound social  
skills.  
Now, authoritative parenting  
should not be confused with
Authoritarian—or coercive—parenting. Authoritarian parenting denotes spanking, yelling, withdrawing love, guilt tripping, and other arbitrary forms of punishment meted out in response to a child's behavior, often in the heat of the moment. It is not a parenting style that focuses on teaching and preparing children. The focus, instead, is on regulation and control strategies that are often manifest in harsh and punitive ways. Although these may result in immediate compliance, research indicates that they often result in more defiance and child emotional and behavioral problems later on, particularly for children with biological proclivities towards anxiety and hostility. Some of my colleagues in the School of Family Life have recently published studies examining parental overcontrol, another form of coercion that is manifest in directive, overprotective parenting. This form of parenting appears to lend itself to children with socially inhibited temperaments becoming even more withdrawn from peers.

With authoritative parenting, there is still regulation and the parent is still the authority. But this style of parenting grows out of what the adolescent research literature suggests as the three things that we are finding younger children basically need as well: an emotional connection with parents (love), regulation (limits), and autonomy (latitude). The major advantage of authoritative parenting is that it is adaptable to each child’s unique strengths and weaknesses. It is not prescriptive. Children, for example, may require heavier doses of limit setting in some areas and more latitude in others, depending on their temperaments, developmental stages, and child-rearing circumstances.

This type of parenting fosters a positive emotional connection with children, provides for regulation that places fair and consistent limits on behavior, and allows for reasonable autonomy in decision making. Authoritative parenting has been documented to create a positive emotional climate that helps children be more open to parental input and direction. Such children are better adjusted to school, less aggressive and delinquent, less likely to abuse drugs, more friendly and accepted by peers, more capable of moral reasoning, and more self-controlled.

Connecting with Your Kids
Children need a healthy dose of love from and connection with parents and other family members who care about them. Expressing that love and finding those ways to connect is the foundation of authoritative parenting. Parents lovingly connect with their children by showing affection, praising what they do, reading to them, and assuring them of the relationship during moments of correction. All of this, obviously, takes energy, inspiration, dedication, and, above all, time.

Parents should learn to be appropriately playful with their children. That requires parents to recognize the social cues of their children and to follow the lead of the children as they play. I used to play “run around the shed” with my boys when they were young, where we’d run around one way and meet in the middle and scare each other, and then run around the other way. But there comes a point when a parent has to realize that children are being over-stimulated and the activity needs to be toned down, or perhaps the children have outgrown a favorite activity. Research suggests that parents who model appropriate “social cue reading” in playful interactions and conversations have children who are more likely to accurately read their social environments and perform favorably in interactions with peers.
Parents should also help their children with homework, show an interest in their activities, and attend their sporting and musical events. Those kinds of things may seem obvious to some, but they are very important. Gordon B. Hinckley spoke volumes in these few words of counsel to parents: “Be kind to your children. Be companionable with them.” On another occasion he stated, “Every child is entitled to grow up in a home where there is warm and secure companionship, where there is love in the family relationship, where appreciation for one another is taught and exemplified.”

There are people who say you really shouldn’t be friends with your children—that you’re the parent! Keep in mind Ezra Taft Benson’s admonition for parents to “be a real friend to your children.” We know from research that children who have good relationships with their fathers and their mothers—which involves parents responding promptly and appropriately to their cues—are more secure in their attachments with their parents. And, because they have that secure base to work from, they’re usually better adjusted in their peer groups. The trick for parents is figuring out how and when to balance connection with responsibilities to be “the parent” in their limit-setting roles.

Helping Children Live with Limits
While love is the foundation of authoritative parenting, children also need appropriate limits. Spencer W. Kimball taught that “setting limits to what a child can do means to that child that you love and respect him.” What is appropriate in setting limits depends on a given child’s disposition and maturity. In that way, parenting is like riding a horse, with some children needing tighter reins and some needing looser. There are children who respond well to limits and those who become defiant. So, knowing when to let up on the reins and when to tighten your grip takes a lot of creativity and inspiration.

Many limits can be implicit. For instance, children who grow up with parents who strive to eat dinner as a family, always wear their seatbelts, and never curse may not need explicit rules about such matters.

When parents do create explicit limits, it helps if they distinguish between mountains and molehills—and not make the number of rules overwhelming. If rollerblading on the new hardwood floors is a mountain (which is understandable), then it’s good to have a rule in place, as well as logical consequences. (I like the idea of “logical consequences” because they help the child to see that the punishment fits the crime, so to speak.) Following through with consequences is important. The child should know that if he skates through the kitchen, the rollerblades are going to be put away for a couple of days, at which point he can try again and see if he can get it right.

Our research shows that it is also important that, when possible, parents provide reasons for rules in advance. If you’re taking young children to the library, let them know before you get there that other people are reading and that they can stay as long as they are quiet and respectful of others. Children will be far more responsive when parents don’t react arbitrarily to their misbehavior. Studies show that this type of predisposing can ward off misbehavior in young children 60 to 70 percent of the time.

For older children, reasoning and reproof are often necessary. However it can come across as preaching and may provoke opposition and testiness. Rather than telling teens what to do, I have personally found that playing a consultant role often works better. Consider saying things like, “I can certainly understand your frustration.” Or, “Given the options we’ve talked about, what do you think you should do?” Or, “What do you want to have happen here?” Or, “I’m confused about why you want to drop Algebra. You seemed so excited about a career in electrical engineering.” These kinds of approaches can often
help teenagers come up with their own solutions in more autonomous ways.

Again, it’s important to remember that every child is different—and will respond differently. One of our teens never required curfews. He knew when he should be home, and he came home. With another one of our teens, we found that curfews mainly aroused resentment and hostility. For a period of time, we found it was better to let him set his own times, which we discovered were generally reasonable. But we also helped him understand that there were three rules when he left the house: He needed to let us know who he was with, where he was going, and when he’d be back. Otherwise, I would go out looking for him. There are other children, of course, who might take advantage of that, and that’s why parents need to enforce boundaries and not become permissive.8

Some time ago, we had an instance in our family where one of our children decided to break with family tradition and not do any chores on Saturday. My wife calmly reminded this child that if there was going to be a late night with friends, the chores had to be done first. Ten minutes were provided to allow for some decision-making time, and the stove timer was set. Nine minutes and forty-five seconds later, the vacuum was humming.

Of course, there are instances of misbehavior that require punishment. In all of this, James E. Faust reminds us that “child rearing is so individualistic. Every child is different and unique. What works with one may not work with another. I do not know who is wise enough to say what discipline is too harsh or what is too lenient except the parents of the children themselves, who love them most. It is a matter of prayerful discernment for the parents. Certainly the overarching and undergirding principle is that the discipline of children must be motivated more by love than by punishment.”9

Allowing For Autonomy

Children are no different from adults in wanting to be involved in making the decisions that affect them. And from the time children are toddlers, parents can let them make reasonable decisions within established boundaries. For example, young children can

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help choose what clothes they’ll wear. Older children can have a say in how they accomplish their chores. Teens can be allowed to make decisions about movies and shows they want to watch—as long as they fall within family guidelines. Giving children some say in decision making helps them experience what it’s like to be in the “driver’s seat” and prepares them to make farther-reaching decisions later on in life.

Giving children latitude means negotiating and compromising on rules when appropriate. Some rules can be adjusted under certain conditions. Suppose a family rule is that children can play only after chores are done, but a cousin stops by unexpectedly for a short visit? If the parents won’t budge, they may create a lot of resentment in their children. Instead, the parents and children might decide to consider that day exceptional and work out an alternate plan. Being willing to negotiate with children and compromise when flexibility is possible—and reasonable—gives them more control over their lives and prepares them for real-world negotiation and compromise. In speaking of Heber J. Grant, his daughter recalled that “In matters of small importance, father seldom said ‘no’ to us. Consequently, when he did say ‘No,’ we knew he meant it. His training allowed us to make our decisions whenever possible.”

Research backs up the need to allow children latitude. Children who experience an appropriate amount of autonomy tend to be better at sharing power and understanding others’ viewpoints. They have fewer disputes with their parents and are more respectful of adults in general. They better manage their activities. And, in their relationships with peers, they place more emphasis on persuasion and negotiation to get their way.

References
3 Brigham Young (1998), Discourses of Brigham Young, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book), 207.