FOLLOWING UP ON OUR EARLIER DISCUSSION OF PRACTICAL WAYS TO HARMONIZE LOVE, LIMITS, AND LATITUDE IN PARENTING CHILDREN AND TEENS THAT ARE SUPPORTED BY RESEARCH IN SPRING 2004, MARRIAGE & FAMILIES [AVAILABLE ONLINE AT MARRIAGEANDFAMILIES.BYU.EDU], LET'S CONSIDER A FEW MORE IDEAS.

IN APPROACHING THE TOPICS OF DISCIPLINING OUR CHILDREN AND HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN GET A GOOD START IN THEIR FORMAL SCHOOLING, I WOULD QUOTE BRIGHAM YOUNG ONCE AGAIN, WHEN HE ENCOURAGED PARENTS TO "STUDY THEIR CHILDREN'S DISPOSITIONS AND THEIR TEMPERAMENTS AND DEAL WITH THEM ACCORDingly." THAT SUGGESTS TO ME THE GUIDANCE OF A LOVING, ATTENTIVE PARENT WHO WILL SEEK TO UNDERSTAND EACH CHILD AND FIND THEIR INTERESTS, UNDERSTAND THEIR APPROACH TO LEARNING AND SEEK STRATEGIES THAT CAN ENHANCE THEIR TALENTS. IT ALSO SUGGESTS A WILLINGNESS TO CORRECT MISBEHAVIOR WITH A LOVING AND LONG-TERM APPROACH, RATHER THAN SIMPLY NEGATIVELY REACTING TO THE INCONVENIENCE OF AGE-EXPECTABLE BEHAVIORS OR BEING QUICK TO CENSURE OR CRITICIZE. AS DISCUSSED EARLIER, THERE ARE MANY TECHNIQUES THAT PARENTS CAN USE TO HELP CHILDREN OVERCOME LESS-THAN-COMPLETE ATTRIBUTES AND TO HELP BUILD UPON THEIR STRENGTHS. ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL.

Reasoning with Children

Some time ago, I came across a statement by President Joseph F. Smith that intrigued me. "Use no lash and no violence...but approach them with reason, with persuasion and love unfeigned...The man who will be angry at his boy, and try to
correct him while he is in anger, is in the greatest fault... You can only correct your children by love, in kindness, by love unfeigned, by persuasion, and reason."

This quote had particular meaning once when one of my daughters was around two years of age. She had developed a habit of standing up in her booster chair at the dinner table. Despite our consistent efforts to reason with her about falling down and getting hurt, we realized how important it was to strap her in the chair for her own protection. One day she fell off a short step in front of our house and came screaming and wailing into the house. We kissed her little "bo bo" and put a bandage on her knee (even though there was no blood) to help her feel better. That evening, as she went to stand up in her booster chair, an odd thing happened. Half way up she paused and sat down quickly while saying "don't want 'owie." We never had to strap her in again. Apparently, her experience, coupled with our reasoning had finally paid off.

With an understanding of the importance of reasoning, with young children to prepare them to understand and more willingly comply, I have focused some of my research on the effects of reasoning with young children. My colleagues and I have found that children learn to develop internal control (learning to make their own wise choices and controlling their own actions accordingly) as they learn to reason through the consequences of their actions, rather than simply being afraid to do something because they're going to get yelled at or slapped by a parent (external control). Let me hasten to add that this doesn't mean we should not punish or reprove (see D&C 121:43-44). Rather, reasoning can be a helpful tool for limit setting and helping children understand the reasons behind rules of social engagement.

As an example, let's consider a mother who has been observing how her son interacts with his playmates and has seen a few tendencies that can lead to conflict. She might say something like, "Sam, I'm happy that Jimmy can come over to play with you this morning. Remember we have had problems when one person has to have things his own way? If you always do what you want to do and not what he wants to do, he might not want to come over and play with you very often." Or she may say something like, "It doesn't feel very good when someone calls you names. Friends help friends feel good about themselves."

Those kinds of suggestions from parents help children develop internal control as they start reasoning through the consequences of their actions. In fact, our studies have shown that children whose parents help them learn to reason through the consequences of their behaviors are not only more sociable and more prosocial with their peers in terms of helping, sharing, and comforting others, but they're also more accepted by their peers. They are also more likely to think about how their actions will impact relationships with others for good or for ill. (As noted in the Spring 2004 issue, p. 16, parents would do well to remember that "consultant parenting" works better with adolescents and older children.) By contrast, the children of parents who used harsh, punitive, and arbitrary control—either by psychologically controlling means such as love withdrawal or guilt trips, or through coercive, verbal and physical control—tend to be more aggressive when observed on playgrounds in their interactions with their peers. They also tend to think that being mean will help them get what they want.

There has been a long-standing debate on whether spanking is a useful form of discipline. Here, I'm not talking about the kind of spanking that either borders on or goes beyond the line of abuse, but spanking where the parent is in control and trying to accentuate a point of discipline. A recent study that looked at data from several decades came to the conclusion that while "normative spanking" may help to stop a behavior, it also increases the likelihood of more oppositional and defiant behavior.
Brigham Young observed that “kind words and loving actions towards children will subdue their uneducated nature a great deal better than the rod, or, in other words, than physical punishment.” On another occasion he added, “Let the child have a mild training until it has judgment and sense to guide it. I differ with Solomon’s recorded saying as to spoiling the child by sparing the rod.” In making this bold statement of truth, Brigham Young was not in line with the thinking and practices of the 19th century. There are still many today who interpret Proverbs 13:24 as advocating corporal punishment.

On one occasion, a colleague and I were working on a book chapter that, in part, addressed the issue of whether to use or “spare” the rod. Although neither of us is a Hebrew scholar, we used several concordances to look at how and where the word rod is used in the Old Testament. We then double-checked our findings with a Hebrew scholar. We found in Micah 6:9 and Isaiah 11:4, for example, that the exact same word for rod in Hebrew was translated as “the word of God” just as we read in first Nephi 15:23-24 where the rod is referred to as the “word of God.”

We also looked at what a good shepherd uses a rod for. The shepherd’s rod is never used for beating sheep. Instead, it is used to ward off intruders; to count sheep as they “pass under the rod” (Lev. 27:32; Ezek. 20:37); to part the wool to examine for defects, disease, or wounds; and to nudge sheep gently from going in the wrong direction. The rod is viewed as a protection. In perhaps the most memorable reference to a rod in the scriptures, David, who was once a shepherd himself, said, “thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4; italics added), a passage we would never confuse with any kind of harsh punishment or beating.

As we continued our study, we decided to substitute “word of God” wherever the Old Testament says “rod,” and we checked the Hebrew to make sure it was the same word. There are numerous examples, but here are a few to consider. Proverbs 23:13-14 states, “Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.” That sounds pretty straightforward, but here’s a viable, alternative translation: “Withhold not correction from a child, for if you regulate him with the word of God, he will not die. Regulate him with the word of God, and you will deliver his soul from hell.” That conveys a whole different meaning.

Or consider Proverbs 22:15: “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.” This could be translated as “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child, but the word of God drives it far from him.” Finally, the most often-quoted verse in Proverbs 13:24 which reads “He that spareth his rod hateth his son; but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes” could just as well be read, “He who withholds the word of God hateth his son; he who loveth his son, corrects (or teaches) him early on (when he is young).”
Among the experts, there appear to be two camps in this issue of physical discipline. One line of research suggests that if physical punishment is used with a child between the ages of 2 and 6 — meaning a non-abusive, mild slap on the buttocks in the context of a warm and nurturing relationship — it can probably do some good. It gets a child’s attention. However, another body of research says that even mild physical punishment can lead some children to be more oppositional and defiant later on because of the external controls that are placed on them.  

The debate continues in light of evidence for both sides, with new data supporting one side or the other emerging on a regular basis. Given the controversy surrounding all this, I have tried to err on the side of less physical punishment in light of prophetic counsel. President Gordon B. Hinckley, for example, echoing the words of Brigham Young stated, “I have never accepted the principle of ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’. Children don’t need beating. They need love and encouragement.”

When I present these principles and research findings, some parents respond, “Okay, if my child runs out in the street, am I just supposed to let him go?” In this situation, my experience is that a firm reproof, coupled with picking up the child and bringing him back to the sidewalk, definitely sends the same message without the hitting part. The greater and more powerful part of discipline is not the spank, it is the quick, consistent follow through that removes a child from a dangerous situation or teaches a child how to more effectively handle a challenging situation and a clear directive that helps children to realize that the parent has their best interest at heart.

Sometimes, the way a parent disciplines his or her children has more to do with the parent’s needs, convenience or even vanity, than with the child’s actions. To quote Brigham Young again—a religious and political leader who had strongly held views on almost every issue, ranging from settling the West to raising responsible children—”I have seen more parents who were unable to control themselves than I ever saw who were unable to control their children.” The research clearly shows that anger is more likely associated with tendencies toward coercion, venting, and hostility, meaning it’s easier for parents to lose control if they’re more inclined to use coercive or authoritarian forms of discipline (i.e., yelling, demeaning, unreasonably harsh consequences, etc.).

This is one area, in particular, where the example we set as parents will likely have long-lasting effects. Our ability to act as disciples of Christ, showing forth long-suffering, gentleness, meekness and love unfeigned (see D&C 121:41), will teach our children by example these principles of successful family relationships. President David O. McKay said, “Children are more influenced by the sermons you act than by the sermons you preach.”

From what we can glean in our research, children pick up a lot in terms of the way they interact with peers by the way they see their parents interacting with family members in the home setting. When negative patterns of coercive behavior are used frequently, these patterns can carry forward from one generation to the next as learned behavior.

“Showing forth afterwards an increase of love” will help ensure that when children need correction, the message that we love them will not be lost. We have many positive tools at our disposal, such as reasoning, setting limits, following through with the consequences we’ve outlined ahead of time, giving rewards, letting our children know when we’re pleased with their behavior. Perhaps, we even surprise them occasionally by taking them out for an ice cream cone when they’ve completed their chores — and having that connection time. We can use the “rod” or word of God as the scriptures teach by helping children understand the principles of the gospel and exemplifying those same important human relationship skills in our interactions with them.

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Apologizing

I know from my own experience as a parent that it’s so easy to fall into the coercive mode. Every parent probably does to some degree. Some days are better than others. And when
we know we’ve stepped over the line, it is appropriate that we use principles of repentance and forgiving by learning to apologize to our children when we make mistakes.

As parents, we can become frazzled in our responsibilities. There’s a lot of stress in our lives. Sometimes, we forget to keep our family as our highest priority. Sometimes we don’t think ahead. Perhaps, we don’t do what we need to in the way that we should. Every time I’ve been coercive with my children, I’m left with an empty feeling and the influence of the Spirit is diminished. Though I may have felt justified at the moment, when I step back, get away from it and have some time to reflect, I always think, “You know, there are much better ways I could have handled that.” And that’s the time to apologize.

There are some parents who feel that apologizing to their children weakens their role as the parent. It actually tends to strengthen the relationship to learn how to work together—loving, forgiving and understanding each other. Children realize that we’re human and that we have frailties. They can learn to appreciate that we are sincerely doing the best we can. Apologizing shows that we’re trying to do better. It’s important for children to see that we’re trying to improve, just as we expect them to.

### Being Reasonable

If children start taking advantage of your use of reasoning and your gentle reminders, which some children do, parents may need a little firmer hand with more consequences. This is part of studying children’s dispositions and recognizing what appropriate degree of influence a child may require to guide his actions. For example, a parent may try to reason with a child, “Come on, Katelyn, let’s think about how Natalie feels when you hit her or when you take her toys.” If the child just keeps repeating a behavior and it is getting worse and worse, it may be an indication that the reasoning will need to be accompanied by a little stronger form of regulation (or discipline). For example, when Katelyn does share, compliment her. When she doesn’t, provide reminders and a warning that the disputed toys may be put away for a while on a closet shelf. Let her try again the next day, so she learns that there are consequences to poor choices and that you will follow through with the reasonable consequences that were calmly explained to her.

Again, you have to know your child well. While giving choices to children is important in light of my earlier comments on providing latitude (see Spring 2004 Marriage & Families), I’ve seen parents who really go overboard. Instead of choosing between a red and blue toothbrush, the parents have 40 toothbrushes for the child to choose between. Then the child can spend all night manipulating the parent, turning that whole strategy around on the parent and controlling the parent rather than the parent being able to provide guidance to the child by using a choice-giving approach.

Sometimes creativity can only go so far, and a parent needs inspiration. In fact, that is the most important principle of parenting. Years ago, when one of my daughters was going through a difficult period in her life and couldn’t sleep, after prayerful consideration, my wife got the idea one night to start playing the be-thankful game. So when she rocked our daughter before she went to bed, they would come up with five things that she was thankful for. That just seemed to calm her right down, and they did that for months, every night. Now I don’t think I could have gone to a parenting book and found that idea, so we need to be open to inspiration.

### Principle-based Parenting

Since children have unique needs and styles and parents often must be creative to be successful in their parenting, I advocate a principle-based kind of parenting, rather than an
adherence to rigid rules and formulas. Let's suppose that your teenager does something unusual for him or her and stays out late one night without letting you know his/her whereabouts, so you follow through with consequences and take the car away for a week. If the situation is unusual, it would be appropriate to discuss with the teenager the reason for the infraction before the consequences are imposed. There is little chance in a rigid adherence to rules and consequences for understanding needs and applying parental inspiration and creativity. Perhaps there's an unfulfilled need or some other issue that just taking the car away doesn't address. Especially in cases where the misbehavior is new or not typical, it is helpful to find out what is motivating the infraction.

Perhaps a child is going through a stage of growth that is affecting his behavior, like a 14-year-old who seems to be going through the wonderful twos all over again as a result of all the hormonal changes that are taking place and natural stirrings for more autonomy. Maybe a child who has loved to go to school and all of a sudden just won't go is being bullied at school. In those cases, a punishment wouldn't be the most appropriate way to deal with the issue. Or maybe there's an unfulfilled need as simple as the child being tired or hungry. A good night's sleep may be better than making a youngster sit in the corner.

Or maybe a child doesn't know any better, like the child who comes home and utters a swear word at the dinner table that you haven't heard for years. But then you realize, as you see the innocent look on your child's face, that she just doesn't know any better, so it's a good teaching opportunity. Maybe the child has a mood or a thought disorder that requires professional intervention and help. All the punishment in the world would not solve such a problem—it would only make it worse.

Research shows that parents who provide moral training and development in the home, particularly in a religious or spiritual context, help children learn to regulate themselves from within. Such guidance gives children a moral and ethical foundation so that even if they come into the world with propensities that may be less than desirable, their weaknesses actually can become strengths. And it can't be forced. With regard to rearing teenagers, Robert D. Hales reminded us that we should:

Act with faith; don't react with fear. When our teenagers begin testing family values, parents need to go to the Lord for guidance on the specific needs of each family member. This is the time for added love and support and to reinforce your teachings on how to make choices. It is frightening to allow our children to learn from the mistakes they may make, but their willingness to choose the Lord's way and family values is greater when the choice comes from within.

than when we attempt to force those values upon them. The Lord's way of love and acceptance is better than Satan's way of force and coercion, especially in rearing teenagers."

Young Children and Formal Education

I have also had the opportunity to conduct research studies that provide insight into how parents can help children get off to a good start in formal schooling. While obvious to most, in all the research I've conducted around early childhood education, it is quite clear that parents have to make very conscious decisions about their children and their education. One thing we've found is that where parents push young children too hard and too early to excel academically, the children can end up disengaged and disinterested. Now, these are statistical probabilities. There are some children who have the temperament and the resilience
and the interest to do well even when pushed by parents, but, again, we need to know and be sensitive to our children's needs and abilities.

As an example, I was visiting a kindergarten class a number of years ago, at a time when state core standards required that by the end of kindergarten the children should be able to tell time. From the developmental data, we know that 5- to 6-year-old children are in the preoperational stage of development, meaning they are limited in their abilities to think abstractly. They're more concrete and hands-on; in simple addition and subtraction problems, they are accurate with the real objects in front of them, but are often not as accurate if given the story problem verbally.16

So, here was a kindergarten teacher who was becoming very frustrated because she had been going over the concept of time for weeks. She would ask them, “Where’s 12:15 on the clock? Where’s 12:45?” (How many five-year-olds do you know who can count to 45, by the way?) At that age, kids have tendencies to center on one aspect of a problem, so if you have the big hand going around, they’re going to focus on that; and they don’t differentiate between it and the small hand. These kids were just being pushed and pushed and pushed, and they were also laying their heads on the desks and yawning and just totally checked out of this teacher’s presentation. Children's minds are wired in ways during the early years that help them learn foundational principles about their physical and social world, but which preclude temporarily some concepts that adults find easy. Much educational effort and time can be wasted if teachers and parents are not tuned into the divinely-ordained process of development. Providing developmentally appropriate educational experiences, on the other hand, keep children eager, active and engaged in developing knowledge, skills and dispositions that will help them throughout their lives. When very young children are pushed into lots of workbook and abstract worksheet activities in school classrooms or even at home—flashcards, drills, memorization—there may be some success. However, research shows that for many children, this dampens their natural motivation toward learning, as well as their curiosity.

Education needs to be developmentally appropriate in order to meet age group and individual child abilities. I remember observing in the BYU Child and Family Studies laboratories some time ago, and the teacher had a real fish lying there on a platter for the children to examine. This teacher had masterfully constructed the learning environment. One of the kids was trying to use a toothpick to pick up the Gill and look inside. Another kid was starting to count the scales, and then said, “There’s more here than I can count.” That led to discussions of how fish breathe in the water, and then the students went over to the aquarium and looked in the tank and saw how the fish were breathing and then went back and looked at the fish. That lead to children dictating stories about fish that the teacher wrote down for all the children to observe how their thoughts could be translated to paper. This teacher had created a nice mix of math and literacy and biology all intertwined into one activity that the kids were so engaged in and so excited about. And that’s the kind of hands-on learning that’s quite developmentally appropriate for very young children—more foundational, experiential-based learning that prepares them so that later on when they’re exposed to the words about fish in writing and reading, they’ve got a more comprehensive understanding of what might otherwise be just an abstract concept.

In the early childhood years, we should be doing more of that. What our research shows is that children who are exposed to highly structured, rote, lock-step approaches to learning are less likely to do well later on in school. In a recent study just completed with colleagues in
with direct instructional approaches that are tailored to individual child and age-group developmental needs. Alternative one-size-fits-all curriculum practices appear likely to do more harm than good.

A Final Thought

When we’re talking about any aspect of family life—whether it is discipline or education or anything else—it’s important to remember that many families are not in ideal situations. There are economic struggles. There are those single parents who have dealt with a death or divorce and who have to juggle by themselves all the day-to-day demands that having children brings. There are families who face extreme challenges in their lives, such as a child with a disability or a father who is unemployed that can bring a great deal of ongoing stress into one’s life. But I think despite whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, if we think about how we are helping them learn in ways appropriate to their developmental level, and applying the appropriate doses of love, limits, and latitude that are tailored to the individual temperaments of our children, those principles can be a guiding force for increasing the likelihood that they will be happy, well-adjusted adults—the ultimate hope of every parent.

References

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