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For the Strength of Parents

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For the Strength of ~~Youth~~ Parents

By MaCall Smith

Since the October 2022 General Conference, parents like you have started perusing the new *For the Strength of Youth Guide*. As you've read it, were you intrigued by the fact that principles like "treat your body—and others' bodies—with respect" are highlighted instead of commandments like the word of wisdom, law of chastity, language, and more? After looking at the updates more closely, did you notice that the pamphlet no longer explicitly says "do not participate in passionate kissing" or that it is much less direct about topics like modesty? Perhaps you are worried that these vague instructions will result in some creative interpretations from your children and, consequently, in more disagreements as you enforce these commandments. Another heated conversation with your teen is the last thing you need.

If your reaction to this announcement¹ or these changes was similar to what I have just described, you are not alone! The *For the Strength of Youth Pamphlet* has been around since 1965 and has always consisted of do's and don'ts.² So, the big question is, why the sudden changes? And what does this mean for you and your teen?

If you know, as I do, that the prophet and apostles are inspired, then you know there is good reason for these changes. With this in mind, let me help you understand why this update to the *For the Strength of Youth Pamphlet* is also inspired, how we as parents and members of Christ's church can get on board, and why this is all so important.

The Parable of the Powdered Donut

During my time in the young women program, I participated in (or gritted my teeth through) many lessons on the law of chastity. Throughout the church, we often use metaphors in these lessons to help illustrate the point of being sexually pure—in my case, one teacher compared us to powdered donuts. The point of this metaphor was that once someone else has touched the donut, the beautiful powder is gone. This metaphor meant



that once we had done something to jeopardize our sexual purity, we would also lose that piece of us—our beauty. This type of metaphor compares us to a used, beaten down, powdered donut that no one would ever want.

Though this was never the intended outcome, most youth leave these types of lessons feeling just like the beaten down powdered donut. Children growing up in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can easily list off the don'ts regarding the law of chastity as illustrated in this parable. However, if you had asked me when I was younger why I personally live the law of chastity or why it is important to do so, the only answer I would have been able to come up with is, "Well, God told us to." This can result in youth being afraid of or ashamed of sexual feelings even if they've done nothing wrong,³ or they may disregard these expectations altogether because they feel they could never measure up.

There is no doubt, it is important to understand the details of the law of chastity, keeping the sabbath day holy, or any of God's commandments, but what is more important is the why: the principles behind the commandments.



In regard to the law of chastity, the new *For the Strength of Youth Guide* says, "Because sexual feelings are so sacred and so powerful, God has given you His law of chastity to prepare you to use these feelings as He intends."⁴ This phrase is much more empowering to our youth than the old phrase of "never do anything that could lead to sexual transgression."

This new approach teaches our youth the meaning behind the commandment, which perfectly exemplifies Joseph Smith's philosophy to "teach them correct principles and they govern themselves." And, youth don't have to leave law of chastity lessons feeling like a beaten down powdered donut!

A Principle Based Focus

Not only does the gospel point us in the direction of a principle-based focus, but so does research! For years, research has shown that when parents create an environment with high support and love for their child, establish guidelines (teach principles), and allow their child to make their own decisions, it can lead to children

doing better socially, academically, and psychologically.⁵ Research on this type of parenting style (authoritative parenting) has also shown that it is linked to higher levels of self-motivation, self-control, and better moral reasoning.⁶

Now I know you're asking, how can giving children *more* freedom lead them to have better moral reasoning and self-control? This is due to children being given the opportunity to make choices for themselves within a safe environment at home, which allows them to learn the skills and principles necessary to do this on their own when the time comes.

Previously, the *For the Strength of Youth Pamphlet* has listed things like, "Young men and women should ... avoid being extreme or inappropriately casual in clothing, hairstyle, and behavior." These specific do's and don'ts limited our ability to exercise our own agency. The Lord himself said, "it is not meet that I should command in all things" (Doctrine & Covenants 58:26). Now, the *For the Strength of Youth Guide* uses phrases like, "Your body is in the image of God" or "Treat your body—and others' bodies—with respect."⁴ This *principle* based focus helps us, and our youth, to better understand the importance of the commandments, principles, and doctrine behind these guidelines—the why.

As we, as parents and youth leaders, learn to help our youth understand these gospel principles illustrated in the new *For the Strength of Youth Guide*, we are ultimately teaching them the "higher and holier" way of living the gospel that President Nelson has taught us about.⁷ The prophet is raising the bar for all of us to live higher and holier lives through ministering, Come Follow Me family study, and now the new *For the Strength of Youth Guide*.

In addition to living in this higher and holier way, the *For the Strength of Youth Guide* promises specific blessings for abiding by these gospel principles. For example, "You can have the Spirit with you always."⁸ "Your relationship with God and others will deepen"⁹ and "Jesus Christ will change your heart and your life."¹⁰ In sum, our youth are becoming more deeply rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ because they are being given the chance to choose this for themselves. We are giving them the tools, or principles, that will help them create a closer relationship with their Savior and Heavenly Parents. And, instead of our children having to be "commanded in all things," they will be able to be "anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness" (Doctrine and Covenants 58:27). What more could we as parents and leaders want for our youth?

Tips for Teaching Principles

So, what are you going to do the next time you're assigned to teach the law of chastity or word of wisdom lesson? Here are three steps along with a personal example that will help you as you teach, and help the youth internalize the principles you're teaching:

1. Read the pamphlet—but don't just read it. **Study** it. Talk about it. Wrestle with the new ideas it gives you and the ideas that you aren't quite sure about. Studying this guide, "will help [you and your youth] build a solid foundation for making choices to stay on the covenant path."¹¹
2. Once you've studied, **ponder** what you've learned. As I pondered the "Your body is sacred" section, I asked myself this question from the *For the Strength of Youth Guide*, "Am I honoring my body as a sacred gift from God?"⁴ While pondering this idea, I realized that I could do a better job at loving my body and recognizing that it is a beautiful gift God has given me.
3. Study, ponder, and then **act**. I decided to act on the principle that my body is sacred by picking two things every day that I appreciated about my body and writing it in my journal. This third step is critical and can be summed up by saying, "Because of what I know about this principle what am I going to do?" In my case it was, "Because I know that my body is a temple and gift from God, what am I going to do to better appreciate and honor that gift?" Just imagine how different this lesson will feel when compared to our parable of the powdered donut.

In this process of **studying, pondering, and acting**, I saw firsthand this promised blessing from the *For the Strength of Youth Guide*, "Your respect for yourself and others will increase as you honor your body through your behavior, appearance, and dress."⁴ As I focused on what I appreciate about my body, I felt more confident and saw my overall self-esteem improve, which are just a few of the positive outcomes that youth can experience and that research shows is connected to honoring our bodies in this way.¹²

As I began to see my body for the gift and masterpiece that it is, because of the principles taught in the new *For the Strength of Youth Guide*, I realized that I *want* to exercise and eat healthy because I WANT



to take care of my body. I also *want* to stay sexually pure because I know that my body is something sacred and powerful, and I *want* to only share my body with someone who recognizes and honors that.

Internalizing these principles and deepening my reasoning for keeping the commandments, specifically the law of chastity, didn't happen overnight. For you and your youth, it may require talking more regularly about the amazing way their body functions, how part of our natural body functioning includes having sexual and romantic desires, or like the *For the Strength of Youth Guide* says, "physical health and spiritual health are closely connected."⁴ By teaching youth in this way, we teach them the principles to help them make their own smart choices regarding the use of their body and sexual desires.

By showing them how to **study**, **ponder**, and **act** we are teaching them ways to choose for themselves to keep the commandments because they know *why* it is important to do so.

The Benefits of Focusing on Principles

By teaching the principles outlined in the *For the Strength of Youth Guide*, we can help our youth more clearly see why God would give us these commandments. This will in turn instill an inner desire to keep God's commandments because we more fully understand that it is also what is best for us.

As we teach our children these principles, we will inevitably fall short, and they will inevitably make mistakes. The new *For the Strength of Youth Guide* acknowledges this and teaches us that, "Because God loves you, He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, who took upon Himself your sins so you can repent and keep progressing."¹⁰ No matter how far we feel we may have strayed from the place in life that we *should* be, "[we] have not traveled beyond the reach of divine love. It is not possible for [us] to sink lower than the infinite light of Christ's Atonement shines."¹³ That love is unconditional and does not change based on the choices we make or the good and bad things we do.

Parents and youth leaders, as you use the *For the Strength of Youth Guide*, it will help you teach your little kids, teens, and adult children about the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Teach them the eternal truths outlined in this guide about their body, divine destiny, and eternal potential. Teach them that "God so loved the world that He gave His only Begotten Son" (John 3:16) and He gave us commandments to help us learn how to properly use our God-given gifts and abilities so that we can become like Him.

As we all come to more fully understand the magnitude of these truths, we start to more clearly see that Jesus truly is the strength of youth.¹¹ He will help them and teach both you and your children as we all

try to live more like He would live. As you do this, don't forget—Jesus Christ isn't just the strength of youth, He is also the strength of parents.

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