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Parents should create opportunities in the home to teach the gospel as well as have their children teach the gospel.

“That My Family Should Partake”

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“The most important of the Lord’s work that you will ever do will be the work you do within the walls of your own home.”
—President Harold B. Lee¹

It’s certainly not easy to be a parent and raise children in a toxic, chaotic, wicked, and uncertain environment. The Apostle Paul described the last days as “perilous,” stating that people would become “lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good” (2 Timothy 3:2–3). We have seen many of these trends develop in a short period of time. Modern prophets and apostles have not been silent either in describing the days that the Apostle Paul foresaw. President Boyd K. Packer told the youth of the Church that they were being raised in “enemy territory.”² Our beloved prophet President Thomas S. Monson declared that the moral fabric of our society is disintegrating “before our very eyes.”³ When Elder Neil L. Andersen addressed the youth of the Church in a recent general conference, he admonished them that

in the last days, “all things will be in commotion” (D&C 88:91) and that “the world will not glide calmly toward the Second Coming of the Savior.”⁴ Elder Russell M. Nelson recently asked, “Why do we need resilient faith? Because difficult days lie ahead. Rarely in the future will it be easy or popular to be a faithful Latter-day Saint. Each of us will be tested.”⁵

Indeed, difficult days do lie ahead. How can we prepare our children to be fortified and protected from Satan’s fiery darts, tactics, and temptations? How do we safeguard our children? Specifically, what can religious educators do within the walls of our own homes to strengthen our children and help them become more deeply converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ? How can we help them gain testimonies so that “when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon [them]” (Helaman 5:12), they will still remain steadfast and immovable? As religious educators, are there specific practices we can engage in that will help our children become true disciples of the Savior?

Driven to Distraction

Most of us live busy lives; in fact, many of us have numerous responsibilities, perhaps—some of us may feel—*too* many. For active and faithful Latter-day Saints, one of Satan’s most potent tools is *distraction*. Although most of us are not likely to apostatize, get into legal trouble, or terribly transgress, each of us can be sidetracked by Satan’s tricky lure of distraction. Consider the father who misses his son’s game because of a publishing deadline, or the mother who doesn’t have time to talk to her teenage daughter about an important issue because the mother is mired down by her calling in the Young Women organization. Church duties and work responsibilities aren’t bad things; however, they can often be the cause of misaligned priorities.

Finding the balance between family, Church duties, and employment is not unique to our day. For example, in a revelation to the First Presidency of the Church in 1833, the Lord declared, “I have commanded you to bring up your children in light and truth” (D&C 93:40). In this same section of the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams, and the first bishop, Newel K. Whitney, were called to repentance for not teaching their children the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lord declared, “You have not taught your children light and truth, according to

the commandments; and that wicked one hath power, as yet, over you, and this is the cause of your affliction” (D&C 93:42).

This rebuke suggests that no matter how busy we are building the kingdom of God, and regardless of how significant we believe our Church and professional responsibilities may be, our most substantial duty is to spend time with our families, build relationships with them, and teach them the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our mission as religious educators is to “invite all to come unto Christ” (D&C 20:59). That duty should begin at home with our families, then expand outward after that—not the other way around. No matter how successful we are in our careers or even in Church callings, if we fail to teach the restored gospel to our children, and if our children fail to understand the sacred doctrines of the Restoration, then none of our professional titles, awards, or accolades will matter much.

Have we given ample time to our children when they have asked gospel questions? After all, we often spend hours trying to find answers to our students’ questions; do we give our own children the same attention? Think of the time and preparation you may spend on a lesson just to make it fun and interesting. Do we spend a fraction of that time trying to make gospel lessons exciting in our own homes? As it turns out, too many of us are preparing a banquet for our students while leaving crumbs for our own children.

Elder Tad R. Callister recently taught, “We might all ask ourselves: do our children receive our best spiritual, intellectual, and creative efforts, or do they receive our leftover time and talents, after we have given our all to our Church calling or professional pursuits? In the life to come, I do not know if titles such as bishop or Relief Society president will survive, but I do know that the titles of husband and wife, father and mother, will continue and be revered, worlds without end.”⁶

Our service in religious education should be family friendly. We should be able to transfer the experiences in our classrooms to lessons in our families without much difficulty. Remember Lehi’s encounter with the tree of life? As soon as he partook of the fruit, his deepest desire was that his “family should partake of it also” (1 Nephi 8:12). Lehi’s desire wasn’t to share his initial joy with neighbors or friends, or even fellow Saints. Foremost on his mind was his family; his desires were riveted on sharing his gospel knowledge with those he loved the most.

When we have spiritual experiences or gain scriptural insights, is our primary desire to share these with our families? Or are such experiences reserved

for our students or our colleagues in an in-service meeting? According to Lehi, the guiding principle in our ministry as religious educators should be to share our love for the gospel, our spiritual experiences, and our “aha” moments with our families. Perhaps our spouses, children, and grandchildren should benefit more from our knowledge and testimony than anyone else.

The source of our greatest joy may not be our classroom, but our kitchen or family room; our greatest peace may not come from writing a world-class journal article or book, but from helping a son or daughter write a report for history class. We can achieve the greatest happiness when we are focused on our most important students—*our own children*.

For example, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland enjoyed a successful career as a religious educator and university president. Like we are in our own lives, he was busy with family, work, and Church responsibilities. Even so, Elder Holland was able to keep the proper balance and focus in his life. His wife and children were the beneficiaries of his commitment to put his family before Church and work. For example, his son Matt once commented that his fondest memories growing up occurred at the family dinner table. “Every night was a kind of family home evening filled with laughter, compliments, encouragement, interesting conversation, testimony, teaching, and expressions of love. You always knew Dad was happiest when he was at home *with his family*.”⁷ Undoubtedly, Elder Holland understood what mattered most in his life, and his family greatly benefitted from his choices.

Teaching the Gospel: Our Most Sacred Parental Duty

Our children and grandchildren are barraged with an all-out media blitz that promotes premarital sex, sexual perversions, foul language, drug and alcohol abuse, disrespect, selfishness, and narcissism. Elder Marion G. Romney once declared:

Satan, our enemy, is making an all-out assault upon righteousness. His well-marshaled forces are legion. Our children and youth are the targets of his main thrust. They are everywhere subjected to wicked and vicious propaganda. Every place they turn, they are buffeted with evil, cunningly devised to deceive and to destroy every sacred thing and every righteous principle. . . . If our children are to be sufficiently strengthened to stand against this satanic onslaught, they must be taught and trained in the home, as the Lord has directed.⁸

If there ever has been a time when our children needed to be protected against the wickedness of the world by the word of God, it is now. This battle

with the adversary is so dangerous that parents cannot wait, or even hope that someone else will pick up the slack and teach their children the gospel of Jesus Christ. President Russell M. Nelson spoke of how modern medicine allows us to inoculate individuals against diseases that were once unpreventable and possibly deadly. He explained that the word “inoculate” is derived from two Latin words. The prefix “in” means “within,” while “oculus” means “an eye.” Therefore, to inoculate is literally “to put an eye within” in order to protect an individual from harm or sickness. President Nelson continued:

An affliction like polio can cripple or destroy the body. An affliction like sin can cripple or destroy the spirit. The ravages of polio can now be prevented by immunization, but the ravages of sin require other means of prevention. Doctors cannot immunize against iniquity. Spiritual protection comes only from the Lord—and in His own way. Jesus chooses not to inoculate, but to indoctrinate.

His method employs no vaccine; it utilizes the teaching of divine doctrine—a governing “eye within”—to protect the eternal spirits of His children.⁹

Indeed, because of the ravaging spiritual diseases that plague our schools, neighborhoods, and communities, our children need to be defended with the doctrines of the gospel. That protection must be provided by loving and in-tune parents, which is done by teaching and indoctrinating children.

Elder A. Theodore Tuttle once asked: “How would you pass the test, parents, if your family was isolated from the Church and *you* had to supply all religious training? Have you become so dependent on others that you do little or nothing at home? Tell me, how much of the *gospel* would your children know if all they knew is what they had been taught at home?”¹⁰ Elder Tuttle’s question strikes right at the root of parenthood. How much would our children know if all they had been taught came from us—their parents?

Unfortunately, too many parents today have neglected their prime responsibility and duty, and that is *to teach their children the gospel of Jesus Christ*. Perhaps more so than any previous generation, parents today are busy, and their children are sometimes even busier. This can make finding time for gospel teaching quite challenging. There are very few free nights anymore where parents and their children can sit around the family room conversing, enjoying each other’s company, and learning the gospel together. Nevertheless, we must realign our priorities and make the time to create a spiritual environment in our homes.

Elder Richard G. Scott recently counseled parents, “Don’t yield to Satan’s lie that you don’t have time to study the scriptures. Choose to take time to



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When Lehi partook of the fruit of the tree of life, his deepest desire was that his “family should partake of it also” (1 Nephi 8:12).

study them. Feasting on the word of God each day is more important than sleep, school, work, television shows, video games, or social media. You may need to reorganize your priorities to provide time for the study of the word of God. If so, do it!”¹¹ The challenge to bring our children out of worldliness and into a spiritual culture is more profound now than ever before. Parents, religious educators or not, must find ways to prioritize their lives so that their number one responsibility—teaching the gospel to their children—can be carried out in its full measure.

Elder Henry B. Eyring taught that “a wise parent would never miss a chance to gather children together to learn the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Such moments are so rare in comparison with the efforts of the enemy. For every hour the power of the doctrine is introduced in a child’s life, there may be hundreds of hours of messages and images denying or ignoring the saving truths.”¹² Think of the thousands of messages our children encounter each day. There are anti-family messages in every television commercial; there are sexual and deviant messages in every television program. Movies are filled with violence, sexual promiscuity, and satanic themes. Music consists of messages that can pull our youth away from the standards of the Church. If parents do not teach their

children the gospel, the world will teach them something else. Since our children are constantly being taught and influenced by peers, media, and those who have lower standards, most of what they hear will not be in harmony with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, the majority of the messages they will be exposed to will draw them away from the Church instead of towards it.

Elder Callister recently taught, “As parents, we are to be the prime gospel teachers and examples for our children—not the bishop, the Sunday School, the Young Women or Young Men, but the parents. As their prime gospel teachers, we can teach them the power and reality of the Atonement—of their identity and divine destiny—and in so doing give them a rock foundation upon which to build. When all is said and done, the home is the ideal forum for teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹³

Remember, when Alma the Younger was in the darkest abyss of sin, it wasn’t the words of his neighbor or friend that came to his mind, but the teachings of his father. And when Enos’s soul hungered, it wasn’t the lessons from a relative or religious figure that penetrated his heart; instead, it was the spiritual teachings of his father. And although the stripling warriors did not doubt, it wasn’t even what they learned from Helaman that carried them through—it was the teachings from their mothers that strengthened their faith. Likewise, today’s youth shouldn’t have to rely on the teachings and testimonies of their seminary teachers, priesthood leaders, or Sunday School instructors. Indeed, the lessons from these individuals are wonderful, but they are there to support the teachings and testimonies of parents—not supplant them.

Practical Suggestions

Here are ten suggestions that any religious educator could consider to improve the spiritual environment in his or her home. These ideas may not be earth shattering, but they could make a significant difference in the lives of your spouse and children. Elder M. Russell Ballard taught that “Strong, faithful families have the best opportunity to produce strong, faithful members of the Church.”¹⁴

1. *Have a positive, healthy relationship with your spouse and children.*

Without a strong relationship with each child individually, parents are limited in what they can teach. In fact, if you have a negative relationship with your children, your ability to teach or influence them is just about zero. Children won’t learn anything from someone they don’t like, respect, or admire. If you

want to teach your children anything, the first step is to have a positive and solid relationship with them. A parent's influence and teachings are only as strong as the relationship they have with each child in their family. That is why President Ezra Taft Benson recommended to parents, "Take time to be a real friend to your children. . . . Listen to your children, really listen. Talk with them, laugh and joke with them, sing with them, play with them, cry with them, hug them, honestly praise them. . . . Spend unrushed one-on-one time with each child."¹⁵

Parents who have such a relationship with their children will be able to influence their testimonies and help deepen their conversion. When the relationship between parents and children is strong, children are more apt to embrace the values, beliefs, and teachings of their parents. For example, one man shared the following: "The main reason I love the scriptures is because my dad loved them. Throughout his life, I was continuously impressed with his faithfulness in studying the scriptures. He read them constantly. On many occasions, while reading he would say, 'Son, I didn't know this,' and then proceed to tell me about something 'new' he'd discovered while reading the Book of Mormon for the 'nth' time. Since I love my father, it is only natural that I love the things he loves. I want to be like him."¹⁶

2. Be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and set forth a solid example to your children.

Rather than by opening our scriptures or a Church magazine to teach our children, most of the messages we convey to them will come by way of example. How we live the gospel speaks loudly—even more loudly than what we say. The greatest sermon we can share with our children is how we live our lives—showing them that the gospel does matter, and that it drives our behavior and our choices. Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught, "Parents are the master teachers. They do their most effective teaching by example. The family circle is the ideal place to demonstrate and learn kindness, forgiveness, faith in God, and every other practicing virtue of the gospel."¹⁷ If parents are not living the gospel, or if they follow a "do as I say and not as I do" program in the home, teens will begin to question the teachings of the gospel. They may begin to think, "If this gospel is so great, how come it hasn't done a thing for my parents?" Teenagers can spot a hypocrite a mile away!

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland asked the following questions of parents:

1. What do our children know about the gospel? From us? Personally?

2. Do our children know that we love the scriptures? Do they see us reading them and marking them and clinging to them in daily life?
3. Have our children ever unexpectedly opened a closed door and found us on our knees in prayer? Have they heard us not only pray *with* them but also pray *for* them out of nothing more than sheer parental love?
4. Do our children know we believe in fasting as something more than an obligatory first-Sunday-of-the-month hardship? Do they know that we have fasted for them and for their future on days about which they knew nothing?
5. Do they know we love being in the temple, not least because it provides a bond to them that neither death nor the legions of hell can break?
6. Do they know we love and sustain local and general leaders, imperfect as they are, for their willingness to accept callings they did not seek in order to preserve a standard of righteousness they did not create?
7. Do those children know that we love God with all our heart and that we long to see the face—and fall at the feet—of His Only Begotten Son? I pray that they know this.¹⁸

3. Create on-one-one experiences to teach the gospel to your children.

Most often, the teaching of our children takes place in a "herd" or as a group. However, the most effective experiences with our children and the gospel will often occur in on-one-one settings. Elder Dallin H. Oaks shared the following experience:

A friend took his young family on a series of summer vacation trips, including visits to memorable historic sites. At the end of the summer he asked his teenage son which of these good summer activities he enjoyed most. The father learned from the reply, and so did those he told of it. "The thing I liked best this summer," the boy replied, "was the night you and I laid on the lawn and looked at the stars and talked." Super family activities may be good for children, but they are not always better than one-on-one time with a loving parent.¹⁹

Find ways to spend one-on-one time weekly with each of your children, even if it's for a few minutes. Take them for a walk or a drive in the car. Take them out for breakfast or to lunch. Let them talk to you, without interruption.

Listen to your children in a way that they cannot question your love for them. This investment will yield more dividends than anything you do as a parent.

4. Include gospel discussions at the dinner table.

There is an abundance of research that documents the importance of family meals together. In our “overscheduled” culture, preserving family mealtime is critical to the healthy spiritual, academic, and emotional development of our children. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University recently reported that 75 percent of teens said that it is at dinner time that they talk to their parents about what is going on in their lives; and almost 80 percent of parents agreed that having dinner together with their children helps them know what their children are up to.²⁰ Researchers from Cornell University reported that when children eat regularly with their parents, they eat more healthy foods, have less delinquency, perform better academically, report higher levels of psychological well-being and positive family interactions, and are less likely to be overweight.²¹ The dinner table provides an ideal setting to teach religious principles, share gospel stories, inquire what children are learning in seminary and Sunday School, and to discuss a host of other gospel principles and practices. Asking gospel questions at the dinner table can create positive and healthy conversations that can allow our children to feel the presence of the Holy Ghost. The dinner table is also a wonderful setting to share what you are learning in your studies or what you taught in your classroom that day.

5. Put significant effort into the lessons you teach in your home.

Put the same energy and effort into formal family lessons as you do in preparing lessons for your students. Occasionally create a PowerPoint or a slide show for family home evening. Make a worksheet that corresponds with a conference talk that you will review with your children. Use media from your classes to teach your children. Be as creative in teaching your family as you are in the classroom. When our children were younger, my wife and I would sometimes take them to the seminary or institute classroom where I taught so we could have a “whiz-bang” family home evening lesson. We had access to a whiteboard, markers, videos, DVDs, and of course, each child had a desk to sit at—which they really loved. As children become older and sense the investment their parents have made in teaching them, our hope is that

they will recognize the importance of the doctrines and principles, and their hearts will swell with gratitude.

6. Ask for input from your spouse and children regarding the lessons you are teaching or the papers you are writing.

Asking your children for insight on how to teach a lesson is another way of teaching them the gospel. It also solidifies their relationship with you. Share with them what you plan to do, and have them give you feedback. Ask for their opinions and perspectives on the subject you are focused on. President Henry B. Eyring recently shared the following experience in a general conference:

My father was once asked by a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to write a short paper on science and religion. My father was a famous scientist and a faithful priesthood holder. But I can still remember the moment he handed me the paper he had written and said, “Here, before I send this to the Twelve, I want you to read it. You will know if it is right.” He was 32 years older than me and immeasurably more wise and intelligent. I still am strengthened by that trust from a great father and priesthood man.²²

Think of the trust and the confidence that we can develop in our children as we ask for their insights, observations, and recommendations for what we do in our classrooms. Even if they do not have any suggestions, they will be humbled and grateful that we care about their opinions.

7. Take a child with you as you travel to conferences, workshops, or other work-related trips.

Because of Elder Russell M. Nelson’s busy schedule as both a priesthood leader and surgeon, he had to be creative in carving out time to spend with his family. He discovered that he could take his children with him when he traveled to medical conferences and meetings. “This kept him from getting lonesome for his loved ones, gave him a chance to listen to their problems and hopes, and provided him and family members with an opportunity to talk to each other and share ideas and experiences.”²³ On one of these trips, Elder Nelson was boarding the plane with one of his children when he noticed that Elder Mark E. Petersen was on the same flight. “Russell explained to Elder Petersen that his daughter was accompanying him to a professional meeting, adding apologetically that taking her along might be a bit extravagant. Elder Petersen responded, ‘Extravagant? No Brother Nelson, it’s a wise investment.’”²⁴ For every parent who makes this type of effort, it will always be an investment.

When it has been practical to do so, I have followed this counsel, and my relationship with my children has been strengthened and deepened.

8. *Create special lessons to teach your children.*

Occasionally, when teaching your children, you may need to change the scenery and the regular environment (1) so your children will understand the importance of the topic you want to convey to them, and (2) so they have a better chance of remembering the message of the lesson. Often these lessons are one-on-one, but sometimes they are with the whole group. Either way, making the effort to create a special environment for the discussion can help your child or children realize that you care about the topic and want them to take it seriously. For example, when it was time to teach my son “the facts of life,” we drove our old suburban up a canyon in Cache Valley and found a wonderful secluded spot where we could talk in the midst of magnificent scenery and be free from distractions.

Years later, after our five oldest children had left the nest, our three youngest daughters remained with us when we accepted my present job at Brigham Young University. Leaving Texas, which was the only place these daughters had ever known, and moving to Utah was a difficult challenge for everyone in the family—especially for our daughter who was just beginning middle school. Shortly after we moved to Provo, I created a PowerPoint lesson, complete with pictures and experiences from the scriptures and modern prophets. The story of Lehi and his family leaving Jerusalem and everything they loved had a whole new meaning to this particular daughter. That special lesson on the back patio of our new home had a significant impact in our children’s lives. We noticed a positive difference in their attitudes in the weeks and months that followed.

9. *Provide opportunities for your children to teach the gospel in your home.*

Do your children know what kind of teacher you are? Have they seen you in front of a classroom? Have they evaluated your teaching and given you some suggestions? Even better, have they been given adequate opportunities in your home to teach the gospel? Have they picked up on some of your teaching nuances? Have you modeled in the home what a powerful teacher does by being prepared, asking questions, demonstrating some creativity, and gaining

a thorough knowledge of the subject? If you haven’t done so, create opportunities in your home for your children to teach the gospel.

Wouldn’t it be sad if a child were raised in the home of a religious educator and never really learned how to be a strong and solid teacher? What if your child entered the mission field without knowing the first thing about teaching? Could he or she teach principles of the gospel and share feelings about gospel topics with the same ease that you do? Granted, not everyone is going to be a great gospel teacher, but our children should come to understand some of the basic principles of teaching the gospel and be given opportunities to apply them.

Therefore, our children not only need to be *taught* the gospel of Jesus Christ, but they need to *teach* the gospel as well. We all understand that teachers often learn much more than their students. The person who prepares a talk for sacrament meeting will benefit much more than those in the congregation. Knowing these principles are true, why don’t we have our children teach the gospel more often than we do?

In Doctrine and Covenants 88:77, the Lord teaches, “I give unto you a commandment that ye shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom.” Perhaps we have believed that this verse only applies to Church classes. However, a broader application is that in a family, everyone should be a teacher—children included! The benefits to this wonderful plan are laid out in the next verse: “Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand” (D&C 88:78). Thus, as our children teach the gospel, the Lord’s grace shall attend them, and they will learn more deeply the doctrines of the kingdom—by teaching them! What a tremendous blessing.

“Real conversion,” wrote Frederick J. Pack, “comes only with personal participation. No one is as fully converted to a thing as the individual who is devoting his time and best efforts to it. Genuine and final conversion comes only through the thrills of knowledge derived from first hand participation.”²⁵ Therefore, if our aim is to have our children deeply converted to the gospel, they should also teach family home evening lessons; they could occasionally direct family scripture study; and they should share gospel messages in family councils and around the dinner table.

10. Share your testimony often.

Another powerful teaching principle is that of bearing testimony. As religious educators, there is not a lesson that we teach that doesn't involve testifying. There are very few professions in the world where you can bear your testimony of gospel truths on a daily basis and not get fired. We have that sacred opportunity and obligation. However, what about at home? Are we as inclined to bear our testimonies to our children? What about our spouses? Why is it that we shy away from that potentially fulfilling prospect? In many cases, hundreds of thousands of students have heard us share our testimony, but perhaps our own children have never had that privilege.

Elder David A. Bednar urged parents to take more time to share testimonies within the walls of your own home. He taught:

We also can become more diligent and concerned at home by bearing testimony to those whom we love about the things we know to be true by the witness of the Holy Ghost. The bearing of testimony need not be lengthy or eloquent. And we do not need to wait until the first Sunday of the month to declare our witness of things that are true. Within the walls of our own homes, we can and should bear pure testimony of the divinity and reality of the Father and the Son, of the great plan of happiness, and of the Restoration. Brethren and sisters, when was the last time you bore testimony to your eternal companion? Parents, when was the last time you declared your witness to your children about the things you know to be true? And children, when was the last time you shared your testimony with your parents and family?²⁶

If we as religious educators will come to focus on our most important students—our own families—our lives and the lives of our children will become fuller and more satisfying. When we find meaning and depth in our home and personal lives, professionally we become more effective, and our message carries more authenticity. If there is peace in our homes, then such peace can be radiated to those we work with and serve professionally. **RE**

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