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Forging Family Bonds Through Storytelling

By David C. Dollahite, Ph.D.

Storytelling is a very important and a very neglected part of family life. Storytelling is a vital part of family life that we should be more actively involved with, but we tend to be overwhelmed with other, more passive, forms of entertainment, such as television, the Internet, video games, and radio. There are many ways to weave storytelling in your own family, especially as parents tell stories to children and older children tell stories to younger children.

The Old Testament speaks of "Elijah the prophet," and Malachi writes that "he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:5-6). There are, no doubt, many layers of meaning to this scripture, but I believe it says, in part, something profoundly important about turning the hearts of family members to one another—about the importance of children knowing their fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers, and as many other generations as they can know.

I have both thought about and studied what causes the hearts within a family to turn toward each other, and I've come to the conclusion that one of the most powerful forces is the telling of stories within our families. And I believe that developing a tradition of storytelling as an intentional part of a family's daily, weekly, and monthly family activities will help touch and turn parents' hearts to their children and the children's hearts toward the parents.

What is family storytelling?

Family storytelling is as simple as family members telling stories to one another. There are many narratives from myths, tall tales, or other literature. Most people know and tell these existing stories, or they may read them in books. Sharing these stories is fine, but it is also beneficial to tell your children stories that mean something to you personally. Children love to hear their parents tell stories about themselves, especially about when they were young since this helps children feel closer to their bigger, older parent.

Family storytelling also grows out of the growing worldwide interest in genealogy and family history. Some people do not realize that an important part of genealogy is sharing and preserving the memories of family members who are living, as well as the histories of our ancestors. In every extended family, there seems to be at least one person who is concerned with genealogical work, while the rest of the family members usually go about doing their own thing. We need, instead, to have each living family member share their stories with other living family members. That is one of the keys to ensuring that a family isn't just a bunch of people living in the same house, sharing the same
food, and having conversations mainly about mundane things. If you keep a personal history already, then you have a wealth of information that you can impart to your children.

There is an old Hasidic Jewish saying that states, “Give people a fact, and you enlighten their minds; tell them a story, and you touch their souls.” To have an enlightened mind is a good thing, but it is also good to have an enlightened soul. “Turning hearts” through storytelling creates a sense of oneness and connection between family members and generations that is quite different than parents and children who simply feel they are related by blood and the fact that they live under the same roof. Instead, they become connected by a love that grows out of knowing and understanding each other and feeling committed to each other.

Why is storytelling important?
Most people feel quite close to their mothers. On the other hand, many people have a bit of ambivalence toward their fathers and may not feel as close to them. This may be because the father is away a lot or he works long hours. It may also be that he just doesn’t share much of himself, because many men do not verbalize their feelings or connect emotionally to their kids as much as their kids would like them to. When I ask students to share a story showing the connection they feel with their mothers, it is sometimes difficult for them to identify a particular experience because the connection is often ongoing and seamless. When I ask students to share the same kind of story about their fathers, most can identify a story about a time when they felt especially connected to their fathers. Often, the story centers around an illness or accident the student or their father has had.

When I was teaching at the University of North Carolina, I asked students to tell me a story of when they felt close to their fathers. A young woman in my class named Megan remembered that experience as a time when her father went the extra mile and sacrificed and in some ways put his life at risk to do something he knew was important to her.

Each year for her birthday, Megan’s father came to her grammar school for lunch. He would bring Megan and her friends ice cream sandwiches, and they would put candles in them and then sing “Happy Birthday.” He did this in grades 1 through 5 and this became a very important tradition for Megan. When Megan was in the sixth grade, she was especially looking forward to her father coming, assuming it would be the last time he did this. Just a couple of days before her birthday, Megan
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—Hasidic Jewish Proverb

came home from school and found a note on the refrigerator. It was from her mother, who explained that her father had had another heart attack, that he was going to be okay, but that he was going to have to be in the hospital for several days. Megan, of course, was grateful her father was alive, but she also realized he wouldn’t be there for her birthday. When she woke up on the morning of her birthday with her father still in the hospital she did not want to get out of bed, let alone go to school. But her mother told her she needed to go, so she did, but she spent the entire morning dreading lunchtime. When the lunch bell finally rang, Megan stayed behind in her classroom while everyone else ran off to lunch. Eventually, she made it down the hall to the lunchroom, and there, sitting in a wheelchair with an I.V. in his arm, was her father. She ran over to him, saying, “Daddy, what are you doing here? You’re not supposed to be here!” Grinning, Megan’s father said, “It’s your birthday, isn’t it? I wouldn’t be anywhere in the world but here with you.”

I’d like you to think for a moment about your reactions to the first part of this article—before I shared the story about Megan and her father. Then compare that to your reaction to this story. If you are like most people, your reaction to the story was quite different than your reaction to the “ideas” I had been sharing about storytelling. You probably perked up just a little when I indicated I was going to share a story, and you probably paid a little more attention to what was being said. Megan’s illustration of family closeness put some flesh on what was initially just me giving you my opinion. It probably prompted you to use more than just your intellect to understand; you used your emotions as well.

The story also may have been motivating. Someone hearing this story might think “Hmmm, I could do something like that for my kids,” or “I can see why developing a pattern like that could be really important to my kids.” Especially men who did not have a strong father figure in their lives may feel some extra motivation to be a good father, and they may also come away from it with a concrete idea they could use in their own lives. A story sinks in, and we remember it. I have told this story about the young woman and her father many times to many groups of people, and I can’t help but feel emotional whenever I tell it and I know that others are also experiencing strong emotion for various reasons. Stories can have the effect of helping us remember an idea, a feeling, or a principle far better than if it is simply presented as an abstract concept.

Families and stories are very much intertwined. From birth to death, we are surrounded and nurtured by family members and the stories they tell. Your parents may tell you stories that parallel your own experiences, or your older siblings may have told you stories about when they were your age. The relationships we have with people are largely influenced by our shared experiences, which are most often and most effectively shared through stories. Once a family goes on a vacation or has an experience like a fire in the kitchen, that event becomes part of the family’s canon of stories, and it gets retold again and again. When children beg for a bedtime story, they are not just trying to avoid the inevitable, they are demonstrating, to borrow from the words of Jesus, that they do not live by bread alone. In addition to the food and shelter parents provide, children need the emotional, relational sustenance they get from the stories in the family’s own unique anthology of stories.
Why is storytelling so powerful?
If you're not convinced that stories are powerful, consider how many of us spend the majority of our leisure time. We watch television, where, if we think at all actively, we can figure out how a story likely will end three minutes into the show. Or we skip reading our classroom assignments in favor of reading a novel. Yet because we like and need stories so much, we will continue watching even dumb shows or reading a novel even when we have more important things to do. If even silly or predictable stories keep busy adults glued to them, think how powerful are good stories told by people we love. Think of what we really want to hear when we talk with our friends about their most recent date or adventure—we want to hear "a good story."

Much of storytelling today is a seamless part of day-to-day life, compared to life in the "old days," when people would spend the day working and then gather as a family in the evenings to tell stories. There were even those bards who would travel from village to village telling stories, a tradition that has been replaced in our modern times by much more readily available—and yet far more passive—forms of entertainment. We still have stories, but we are now largely unconnected to them since they are told by professionals we do not know and who do not know or care about us. Thus, we don't talk to each other enough and forge the strong emotional connections that sharing stories and experiences provide.

The stories our children crave are about life as it is lived. They have surprise twists, heroes, and action. Stories capture the essence of life. They often involve a change of heart. They give the best examples we have of how to change and why to change.

If you are at all reluctant about sharing your stories with your children, think about the greatest teachers you know or speakers you have heard. Your joy in their words probably comes, in large part, from their excellent storytelling. You, as a listener, remember stories more than you remember abstract ideas. This phenomenon has been documented. Most people remember a simple story better than they remember a theoretical abstraction of a great philosophy.

What kinds of stories should be told in families?
The stories we tell can be about anything. They can be fairytales, myths, or tall tales. They can be about Cinderella or the Three Bears. These are universal stories, and children love hearing them from their parents, especially if parents make the story their own by using different voices, gestures, motions, acting out the story, or other creative approaches. For example, it is one thing to tell your three-year old the story of Jonah and the Whale and another thing to "swallow" them up in your arms and then "vomit" them out onto the beach at Nineveh (the floor or a couch) at that point in the story. Finding ways to tell familiar stories in new and creative ways is important to help your children have those stories come alive and stay alive to them.

We can also make up stories. Like many, I make up stories and tell my children stories where they are the heroes and heroines. The names in the stories are either the exact names or names similar to theirs and the characters in the stories do brave,
While parents should tell stories about themselves, they can also tell stories about their ancestors. Your children should know about grandma’s experience in immigrating to the United States, and about the character traits of their predecessors.

honest, kind, creative, and fun things. Making up stories where the children are the heroes can not only be very entertaining for them, but they can be inspirational as well. Another thing you can do is a round-robin activity, where one person starts the story and then stops and points to another family member who continues the story. If you have children who can really get involved in this, they can be very creative—and you can have a lot more fun as a family than you can with a story that comes from a store.

Your children want to hear stories about when you were young, about experiences you had in school when you were their age, about how you and your spouse met, and about other significant—or even non-significant—events in your life. While parents should tell stories about themselves, they can also tell stories about their ancestors. Your children should know about grandma’s experience in immigrating to the United States, and about the character traits of their predecessors.

One story I often tell is about my father. He was a police officer for 17 years in our hometown during a time when there were a lot of problems with drugs, riots, and violence. And, somehow, our town was a kind of Mecca for these problems. I knew, as a boy, that he was out dealing with the “bad guys” and putting his life in danger, but one night that reality came home in a very powerful way. I was 12, and my best friend was over, having dinner with my family. Our house was on a busy street, and it was not uncommon to hear a car backfire. And, sure enough, while we were eating we heard what sounded like a car backfiring. But then we heard someone scream, “Help, I’ve been hit! I’ve been hit! Please help me!” Before my friend and I even realized someone had been shot, my father, who wasn’t on duty, ran into his bedroom, grabbed his gun, and ran out the door.

Of course, my friend and I thought this was really cool, so we ran to the front window to watch my dad go after the bad guys. My mom, however, had a different reaction, and she pulled us away from the window, pulled down the shade, locked the front door, and made us go into the back of the house. And then she just sat there and literally shook and shivered until my dad came home. That’s the first time I really realized
If we will tell stories, our love for one another will grow stronger, our family identity will run deeper, and our faith tradition will extend through generations.

that my dad was a hero. But I also realized, for the first time, what my mom had to live with every day, as her husband went off each day and put his life in danger.

My father now lives with us, and my telling this story helps my children appreciate the old guy who sits by them at the dinner table and gives them candy in a very different way than they would without that story. Now they think, "Wow, Papa was a real hero." It is one way I turn the hearts of my children to my father.

We should also tell stories from family's ethnic, national, or cultural background. I often tell my children about their great grandfather Iver from Norway, who had a very exciting life. He escaped death numerous times; in fact, he came into the port of Birmingham about two weeks after the Titanic set sail, and was hired as a merchant marine on the next major ship to set sail from that port.

After he immigrated to the United States, he worked as a logger in Minnesota and lived in a small cabin in the woods. Each day, he would go home for lunch, and one of his coworkers started coming over everyday as well, which disturbed Grandpa Iver because he was, by nature, a private person. He wanted his coworker to stop coming, but he was uncomfortable with confronting the man directly, so he had to use his wits. So the next time this man came over, Grandpa Iver took the plates off the table after they had finished lunch, put them on the floor, and allowed his dog to lick them clean. Grandpa Iver then put the plates back into the cupboard, and the man never came back for lunch. My kids love this story and it helps turn their hearts to their great grandfather who they never knew personally.

We should also share stories that grow out of our religious beliefs and our faith. These stories may come from the Bible or other books we hold sacred, or they may come from our own experiences. If you believe in Jesus Christ, then you should talk about him more often than just during Christmastime. If we want to perpetuate our faith among are children, we need to share these sacred stories so that they will understand why we subscribe to a particular set of religious tenets. Our children deserve to hear
more than once the story of how we came to know, believe in, and accept our most deeply cherished spiritual principles.

Now, a word of caution. Do not tell stories at the expense of other family members. It affects a family member if he or she becomes the brunt of unkind— even if humorous—family stories. As a parent, if you notice that one of your children is the target of hurtful stories, encourage your children to aim the stories in a new direction. You are the only one who can tell embarrassing stories about yourself. No one else should be able to do so, if it causes hurt feelings.

*When is the best time to tell a story?*

When is the best time to tell family stories? Anytime, all the time. Have this be an important activity that they will remember when they are older. Consider these possibilities:

- *At dinnertime:* We have a tradition that when someone comes for dinner, we have to earn our dessert by sometime during the meal each person telling a story. In many families during a meal, one person or two tend to dominate the conversation, so this is a way to get all of the family members and the guests involved in the conversation. My family also likes to talk about dreams during meals. My children frequently ask me to tell them about my dreams because I have all kinds of crazy adventures when I am asleep and I love to ask my kids about their dreams as a window on their inner experience. Find creative ways to prolong meal-time since it is one of the best times to share stories in a relaxed atmosphere.

- *At bedtime:* Kids are very receptive at bedtime. They are relaxed. They have had dinner. They are feeling comfortable and warm. What you tell them will stick with them. Don’t spend this time telling them just about the Three Bears. Tell them the things of your soul and the stories that you most want them to remember and sink into their souls.

- *In the car:* Most families have travel routines or games they play. You can also make stories, especially traveling stories, part of your time in the car. You can even have stories on tape. Nowadays, the television has ended up in many of our cars, and while that can help the time pass on a long trip, we need to do in the car what we do in our homes: as often as possible turn off the TV and tell each other stories.

- *While working:* When you are working together side-by-side it is a great time to talk about when you were young. Telling stories can actually make the task less tedious for all involved. Your family may actually look forward to work if they know they are going to get to hear mom and dad tell good stories.

*Conclusion*

As families, we all have challenges. These challenges are meaningful. Families also have experiences to share and others to overcome. How appropriate that we forge together a reconciliation of our present lives and our past. If we will tell stories, our love for one another will grow stronger, our family identity will run deeper, and our faith tradition will extend through generations. We can only gain from more actively engaging in the storytelling craft. I hope that we will.

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 Brigham Young University is where I met, courted, and married my wife of 28 years, Juanita Ray Hill. One particular memory of that era stands out in my mind. I wanted to present my future wife with an engagement ring in an out-of-the-ordinary location. So while riding the Wilkinson Center elevator I surprised her with her glittering gift, the symbol of my affection. In delight, she threw her arms around me and gave me a very affectionate hug and kiss, right up to and even a little after the elevator doors opened wide at the Sky Room Restaurant. What an exciting moment!

Ever since then Juanita and I have had the tradition of embracing and kissing in elevators. When others ride with us, I just give her a discrete tap on the shoulder and a peck on the cheek. But when we find ourselves alone, we recreate those romantic feelings of young love with very affectionate hugs and kisses. I like elevators! Back then I thought that when we married we would live happily ever after. I thought there were no challenges love would not conquer.

However, over the years we have found our family life is like an elevator with many ups and downs. We have also found that the building in which our elevator of family life resides is still under construction. It is growing taller now because our family joys are higher and more exhilarating than ever. Unfortunately, there also seems to be some minion excavating in the basement because our challenges, heartaches, and trials also seem to be more profound.

Through it all, however, Juanita and I continue our elevator tradition. Our kisses were joyful in the hospital elevator at Tacoma General Hospital as we brought home our first healthy baby daughter, but our embraces were somber and consoling in that very same elevator three years later after Juanita’s first miscarriage. We hugged each other tightly and sobbed when Juanita was diagnosed with Stage 3 breast cancer. Our family life has been a series of ups and downs, but our faith has given appreciation to our happiness and meaning to our suffering, helping us find peace in trying times.

Many of my students have come from great homes and are quite optimistic about family life. In fact, I fear that some students may be overly optimistic about family life, and may be setting themselves up for disillusionment, despair, and even depression.

To add a bit of perspective I ask my students at the beginning of each semester to memorize three sayings that I believe will help them as they seek for family peace in these trying times.

1. **Life is hard, but you can do hard things.** You never know what life will deal you, nor can you even imagine how hard it’s going to be, but it is so worth it.

2. **Make the best of it.** Family life never, ever turns out the way you planned. What I tell my students is that when things don’t go as planned, don’t get frustrated, just make the best of it. Don’t dwell on what’s gone wrong, don’t focus on what you can’t do. Focus on what’s gone right and what you can do.

3. **T.T.T. = Things Take Time.** Family life is a journey of a thousand miles that is made up of single steps. We must learn to have patience.

**T.T.T.**

Put up in a place where it’s easy to see
The cryptic admonishment: T.T.T.
When you feel how depressingly slowly you climb,
It’s well to remember that
Things Take Time.

— Piet Hein (1966)

These three succinct reminders—life is hard but you can do hard things, make the best of it, and T.T.T.—apply very much to understanding my topic, “Family Crucibles: Finding Peace in Trying Times.”

Not surprisingly, in the BYU School of Family Life, we use a family lens to examine relationships, activities, and structures in a way that strengthens families (Carroll, et. al., 2000). While we may not choose them, parents and children can use trials, afflictions, hardships, challenges, problems, sorrow, and grief to strengthen their families. In fact, it is possible to learn from, deal with, and give meaning to the trials of life in such a way that we can maintain hope and not despair in our families. By having a family crucible perspective, we can find peace in trying times. Let’s lay a foundation first for understanding these principles. First of all, what are crucibles?
Dr. Susanne Olson has written, "[Crucibles are] furnace-like vessel[s] that [can] endure intense heat and chemical reactions. [This] result[s] in the refinement and transfiguration of raw materials. Crucibles facilitate a catalytic process that purges away impurities and creates a qualitatively different final product. In industry, crucibles are used to create high-grade steel and alloys of unusual strength that actually differ in quality from the original ingredients themselves" (Olsen, et al., 2000, p. 278). You may have seen movies showing the fiery furnace of a steel mill where you see the glowing molten iron ore bubbling in a large cauldron. This container is a crucible, and it facilitates the creation of a useful product of great strength.

For the purposes of this article, think of a family crucible as the process by which trials, afflictions, hardships, challenges, problems, sorrow, grief, and other adversity all can facilitate positive family growth, rather than negative family outcomes.

Family research shows that family crises tend to bring out the best and the worst in families. They can rip families apart or cause families to reorganize themselves in more positive ways. Consider these possibilities:

- By successfully passing through the heat and pressure of family crucibles, family members may become more humble, more sincere, more united in prayer, more dependent upon God, more faithful, and more sensitive to spiritual promptings.
- They may also become more charitable, more service-oriented, and more compassionate to the needs and suffering of others.
- Family relationships may be strengthened, as the whole family is more motivated to be founded upon enabling principles.
- Ultimately, family crucibles can create unbreakable bonds between the members of the family.

Aren't these wonderful possibilities? Don't they make you want to pray for your own trials? In truth, probably not, because we have all seen that the positive doesn't always come out in trials. Unfortunately, adversity can also severely cripple and even destroy families. It is very hard, extremely hard, to ever recover from some trials, much less use them as a catalyst for family growth. It is hard, but we can do hard things! Barbara Johnson (1990) wrote a book whose title I really like, Pain is Inevitable, but Misery Optional. It is my opinion that though we may not have control over pain, we can often choose not to become miserable.

Almost all families go through several experiences that are so difficult that sufficient heat and pressure are generated to create a family crucible experience. Let me just share a few of them, and as I go through the list, note how many of these you and your family have gone through and how many you are going through right now.

**Family Crucibles Related to Family Formation:**
- inability to find a mate and marry
- broken engagement
- bad start to marriage (horrific honeymoon, disastrous wedding)
- entering a blended family

**Family Crucibles Related to Marriage:**
- disability (chronic illness, accident)
- spouse is of another religion
- husband or wife loses religious faith
- spouse undermines faith or moral development of children
- extreme marital conflict (shouting, throwing things)
- marital abuse (physical, emotional, sexual)
- addiction (alcohol, drugs, pornography)
- infidelity (an affair or emotional triangle)
- depression (one or both spouses)
- husband or wife deserts the family
- suicide
- separation, divorce
- death

**Family Crucibles Related to Procreation, Birth, and Infancy:**
- infertility
- problem pregnancy
- miscarriage, stillborn child
- very premature delivery
- multiple births (twins, triplets, quadruplets)
- S.I.D.S.
- baby with colic
- baby with disabilities (mental, physical, Down syndrome, deformities)

**Family Crucibles Related to the Nurturer Role and Parenting:**
- hyperactive child
- abuse (physical, emotional, sexual)
Family research shows that family crises tend to bring out the best and the worst in families. They can rip families apart or cause families to reorganize themselves in more positive ways.

Family Crucibles Centered in the External Environment:
- natural disaster (earthquake, tidal wave, tornado, hurricane, flood)
- legal problems (family member arrested, sued, etc.)
- extremely demanding civic or church responsibilities
- war, terrorism, civil unrest

This is just the start. The students I teach are often unaware of how many and how common these extreme challenges are. In one illuminating assignment I use, based on an exercise developed by my colleague Randy Day (2003) for his Introduction to Family Process class, I ask my students to look ahead the next 50 years and develop a timeline of all the family events they hope will transpire. Then they are asked to pick three family crucibles at random and then re-chart their life script so that they see how these crucibles will change their life script dramatically. The students are sobered when I tell them that the average family goes through three or more of these extreme family crucibles. I remind them that family life is hard, but they can do hard things. I remind them that if they want to claim the blessing of peace in trying times, they will have to make the best of less than optimal circumstances.
And I remind them that on the path to family joy, many things just take time. They must develop the virtue of patience, if they want to claim this joy.

I would ask you to consider how many of these trials you have gone through. Perhaps three? At least five? More than 10? Family life is hard, isn’t it? But guess what? We can do hard things. Certainly pain in family life is inevitable, but I want to make the point that misery is indeed optional, and, in fact, we can make choices that will also lead us to family joy.

I am by nature a very optimistic person. On the other hand, my wife Juanita is a realistic person. This difference could be a trial, could trigger constant and unbearable frustration, and could ultimately lead to the destruction of our marriage! However, we have chosen to frame this difference as a strength in our marriage, and I choose to appreciate that Juanita has the characteristics to temper me. I keep her from sinking into pessimism, and she keeps me from floating away into the clouds.

Juanita likes lists and specific suggestions, so when I asked her for suggestions for this article, I was not surprised when she said I should create a practical list of principles and practices to help families deal with trials. I have done so. To create this list I asked my colleagues from the School of Family Life to offer suggestions, I talked with family members and friends, I asked students in my classes, and I studied both academic research and religious writings. With that preparation, I dedicate the following 10 principles to my eternally realistic companion, Juanita.

1. Be Prepared. In good times practice principles of family preparedness, which include spiritual, physical, social, and emotional development; education and literacy; employment; financial and resource management; food storage; and emergency preparedness. Then, when the trials come, you will have more family resources to deal with them.

2. Involve Family Members (when appropriate). Communicate clear and accurate information with an understanding of the ability of each family member to cope. Keep everyone informed as developments arise and conditions change which involve the present crisis. Talk together openly and frequently. Communicate one-on-one. Go for walks and just listen. Ask for ideas for better dealing with the situation and coping as a family. Express and share feelings. Exhibit empathy for family members. Be sensitive to the capacity of each family member to deal with strong feelings. Cry together. Encourage family members to write about their experiences in a journal. Share your desire to accept the will of God.

When my wife Juanita was diagnosed with breast cancer the first time, we struggled with how, when, and how much to tell the children. We finally decided that the crisis was so big we needed everyone in the family to be part of the team to deal with it. We first sat the older children on the couch and sensitively but directly told them the facts, the size of the tumor, the prognosis, the treatment and its side effects, etc. We spent almost an hour explaining the situation and answering every question honestly. There were a
lot of tears. The hardest question was whether or not Mom would get over the cancer. We told them we honestly didn't know what would happen, but we had a strong conviction that we could be an eternal family in the presence of God.

We then told the younger children in a shorter, more concise manner, more in harmony with their developmental stages. When we told our four-year old Seth that Mommy was very sick, he just laughed. With a chuckle he said, "Mommy's don't get sick." That's what we wished too. That's what we wished with all our hearts. Then we prayed together the most sincere prayer in the history of our family, amidst a lot of sobbing and sniffing. We felt a deep sense of peace and comfort wash over us in this trying time.

After the prayer Seth pointed his finger at us and admonished, "No more crying!" His action released the tension and we all laughed and laughed, until we cried some more. This was just the beginning of our trial, but by sharing openly with family members we set the stage for family growth and a reservoir of strength to deal with the extreme difficulties that lay ahead.

3. SEEK OUTSIDE RESOURCES AND SUPPORT. Look to extended family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, church leaders, support groups, professional counselors, scriptures, books, the Internet, and other resources. They can all help in different ways. However, be selective in the resources you use. Find a family that has successfully dealt with the trial you are experiencing. Visit with them and learn from their example. Use them as mentors.

4. DEVELOP A LONG-TERM, GROWTH-ORIENTED PERSPECTIVE. See the trial as an opportunity for the family to grow and develop. Look for the positive aspects of the stressful events. Be mindful of what your family needs to learn from this adversity. Note and share even seemingly insignificant steps of learning and progress. Celebrate small victories with family members. Find the meaning in your trials. Count your blessings with your family. Be grateful for all that does go right. Remember T.T.T. (Things Take Time).

5. TAKE POSITIVE ACTION, DO WHAT YOU CAN. When family adversity strikes, it tends to envelop us completely. Sometimes we feel a sense of helplessness. A key to finding peace in trying times is to go out and take positive action. Don't dwell on what you can't do, but move forward in what you can do.

Emily Pearl Kingsley (1987) gave birth to and raised a child with a serious disability. This child took much of her time and emotional energy. She tells the following story about her experience and I believe it captures very well the point of focusing on what you can do, and not dwelling on what you can't do.

Welcome to Holland

When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip - to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans. The Coliseum. Michelangelo's David. The gondolas in Venice. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting. After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, "Welcome to Holland."

"Holland??" you say. "What do you mean Holland?? I signed up for Italy! I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy." But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay. The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place, full of pestilence, famine, and disease. It's just a different place. So you must go out and buy new guide books. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met. It's just a different place. It's slower paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around..., and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills..., and Holland has tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts.

But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy...and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned." And the pain of that will never, ever, ever go away..., because the loss of that dream is a very, very significant loss. But...if you spend your life mourning
the fact that you didn’t get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things... about Holland.

While undergoing cancer treatment, there were lots of things Juanita couldn’t do. She had always been a very active woman, with a full calendar. Now it wasn’t safe for her to be in public, she couldn’t go to church, she couldn’t go shopping, she couldn’t go to the dentist. She could have wallowed in self-pity, but she didn’t. When I’d come home from work she’d comment, “Isn’t it great that I now have the time to get the family photo albums up to date? And aren’t we blessed that I have the time to read Seth stories for hours every day?”

Concentrate on what you can do, not what you can’t do.

6. Find comfort in everyday family life. In the midst of family trials we may become so disoriented that we stop doing the everyday things that have fortified our families in the past. We must make the effort to continue everyday life. It is comforting to join together for family dinner each evening and then do the dishes together. Plant and care for a garden. Weeding the garden together can be therapeutic and provide the context for needed family communication. Continue to engage in wholesome family recreation. Go camping together. Play games together. Go to an amusement park or a movie together. These activities can provide your family space away from the trial in which you may gain some perspective. Go on fun vacations. Continue to celebrate birthdays and holidays. Doing the day-to-day things brings comfort and patience as you endure the affliction.

7. Seek out soul-soothing environments. Go for a family hike along a mountain stream in a forest filled with songbirds. Play soothing music in your home. Read poetry and uplifting literature. Use uplifting media.


9. Trust in a Higher Power. Research demonstrates the importance of faith in dealing with stress. My religious tradition has taught me to pray often, and look to God in my every thought. I believe that as you become reconciled to God, you grow to become more like Him and your capacities multiply. You are developing faith, humility, purity, charity, and compassion through this trial.

During Juanita’s cancer treatment, I took the opportunity to pray more frequently with my children and plead with God in behalf of their mother. Often times I would kneel with a child and each of us would offer a prayer. We often shared tears together. Seth would pray sincerely, “Please bless that my Mommy will get better.” I felt strongly that the Lord was listening to this son’s prayers.

10. Endure to the end. Become more charitable, more service-oriented, and more compassionate to the needs and suffering of others. Be patient. Jettison all bitterness. Be thankful for what you have learned through this trial. Life is hard, but your family can do hard things. Rejoice when the trial has passed.

Remember: “Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional.” – Barbara Johnson

I hope these ten suggestions are helpful to you in making sense of, and dealing with family crucibles. It is my sincere belief that though we cannot control what circumstances may befall ourselves or our families, we can control our response to those circumstances. Remember that life is hard, but we can do hard things. It may be true that pain is inevitable, but misery is certainly optional.

In this article, I have used personal examples of how our family has dealt with adversity, especially Juanita’s cancer. The good news is that after nine-months of treatment and major surgery, Juanita went into remission. The bad news is that after a year and a half the cancer relapsed and her prognosis is not positive. Yet this crucible has indeed changed our family in many positive ways. We are much more sincere in our prayers. We have a much greater recognition of how fragile life is. We are so very, very grateful for the blessing of health. We appreciate every day of life we have together. We have learned to not put things off, but to do them while we have the chance. We all recognize what is most important. We are much
closer to God. These are all wonderful blessings for which we are grateful.

Though family life is like an elevator with many ups and downs, you can find peace in trying times if you remember three things. Family life is hard, but with the help of God, you can do hard things. When things don't go as planned, make the best of it. And remember that often the changes most important in family life take a long time, so we must be patient and remind ourselves of T.T.T.-things take time.

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References
Some of my ideas come from two chapters in the book, Strengthening our Families: An In-Depth Look at the Proclamation on the Family (Carroll, Robinson, Marshall, Callister, Olsen, Dyches, & Mandleco, 2002; Pehrson, Thursby, & Olson, 2002). This book was produced by the School of Family Life and edited by David Dollahite. It contains input from more than 100 family scholars.

Remember that life is hard, but we can do hard things. It may be true that pain is inevitable, but misery is certainly optional.
WHAT CHILDREN NEED FROM PARENTS

Part 2

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 issues of parenting, families, discipline, and schooling with Professor Hart, from which the following observations are drawn. (Part 1 was featured in the Spring 2004 issue of Marriage & Families and is available online at www.marriageandfamilies.byu.edu.)

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-acceptable 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.

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 strivings 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.
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 divided 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.

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12. 10 Desert News Semi-Weekly, July 12, 1870, 2.
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Marriage & Families
Strengthening Marriages & Families

Through Wholesome Recreation

by Mark Widmer

When I think about family recreation, one of the first things that comes to my mind is my vacations with my own family. Our experiences are always the same. We have four kids, and my eight-year-old asks for fourteen hours “Are we there yet?” while the other kids have “seat wars” over who is too close to whom. They also fight over the hand-held video game. We only have one, and even my daughter who is too young to play anything yet wants her turn just to hold it. And at some point, our daughter will get carsick, and the van will overheat, and I will try to fix it by turning on the heat in the 90-degree weather. As you can see from my experiences, and probably from you own as well, family recreation is often mixed in with battles of preparation and execution.
Trying to manage children during family outings can be a real challenge. But what often happens is that we as parents have good experiences, and, although we may not know it, our children are probably having great experiences. Here is an example. Charles Francis Adams was a grandson of the second president of the United States, a successful lawyer, and ambassador to Great Britain. Although he had little free time, one day he took his son fishing. In his diary, he wrote “Went fishing with my son today. A day wasted.” On that same day, his son wrote “Went fishing with my father today, the most wonderful day of my life.”

We need to think about the opportunities we have to affect the lives of our children. We do not always realize how much they want to be with us.

Defining recreation
There are numerous ways to use recreation to make your family life happier. When people engage in leisure, we do it for the joy of activity. We genuinely want to do it. For example, if you run for some other reason than fun, then running, for you, is not leisure. Recreation has been defined as a leisure time we use to restore, refresh, and regain control in our lives. It provides opportunities for accomplishment and fosters feelings of self-worth, enjoyment, and pleasure. It is also socially constructed and morally acceptable.

In light of this definition of leisure, combining “family” and “recreation” can seem contradictory to some. How many of us, as parents, always feel like our family recreation is a freely chosen, positive experience? Family recreation is sometimes viewed as a burden by parents who feel it is something we have to do. Family recreation takes some effort on our part, and I want to give you some perspectives for engaging in effective recreation with your own families.

Aristotelian leisure
The first perspective comes from Aristotle, the great philosopher who lived over two thousand years ago. According to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, the good life is characterized by the habit of virtuous action. Contemporary happiness, by contrast, is viewed by many as a transient state of well being. We say to ourselves, how many of these activities can we string together? The more of these activities we string together, we think, the happier we will be.

This logic, however, is problematic. If we go back to the times when family recreation generally was found in the form of work and many modern conveniences were not available, you would think those people would have been sad. However, psychologists agree that depression is at epidemic proportions today. It is much more common than it was years ago. Part of the problem is rising expectations. We are told that we have to meet a higher standard of materialism. The question is, what would really make us happy? What is
the “good life?” Aristotle wrote that the good life consists of leisure that is
• Intellectually stimulating,
• Creative,
• Moral, and
• Conducive to good human relationships.

Learning during leisure time is important. My family likes to go biking with some friends. Families. Movies do not promote interaction in my family in the same way books do, as is evidenced by the fact that I am always telling my kids to be quiet when they ask me a question while I am watching television or a movie. (I suspect I am not alone in that.)

In the past, psychology has focused on how to take people Recreation as a family is a great way to do this. Recreation also gives us the opportunity to model these virtues. Much of what is on television does not cultivate these signature strengths. When we do watch television, we need to find the programs that teach virtues.

A friend of mine took his family to Haiti to volunteer in some orphanages there. This man’s 15-year-old son was having some regular teenaged-problems that were causing some discord in the home. When the family first arrived, the son had little involvement with the orphans. By the end of the trip, however, this young man had developed a deep compassion for other people. The values that he used to have for his own possessions and friends changed. He got along better with his parents and siblings. I am not saying that we all need to go to Haiti, but we do need to consider spending time doing things that promote signature strengths.

Contrast this experience with what happened at one of my 8-year-old son’s soccer games. There was a parent who disagreed with the referee’s call and so he started yelling. Another parent walked up to him and tried to calm him to no avail. This loud parent was doing his son a disservice by not modeling signature strengths.

A survey done in 1985 reported that playing with children

During these outings, we try to teach our children things like changing bike tires and constructing jumps, which are valuable skills. As we learn about these activities, the bike riding becomes a richer experience for us. Creative activity is pretty diverse. It may involve art or drawing, learning to play the piano, as well as many other activities such as finding a creative way to fix a tire. Moral behavior involves living virtuously, and good human relationships are built through doing activities that meet the other criteria, especially as we add creative and intellectual elements.

Reading is one of the best things we can do with our who feel bad and make them feel better. Recently, however, attention has turned to studying happy people and why they are that way. Researchers have found parallels with what Aristotle proposed many years ago. Aristotle taught that this notion of virtue—not seeking pleasure, but doing good—is what will help you be happy.

Signature Strengths
We need to focus on things that are bigger than ourselves. We need to focus on kindness, generosity, temperance, self-control, humility, modesty, gratitude, beauty, hope, and optimism. Each of us needs to develop these signature strengths.
was one of the most pleasurable activities we participate in, but that we actually spend most of our time watching television, an item much farther down on the list of things that bring us pleasure. I find that when I get home from work, I want to watch television because it is easy. My kids will come and try to get me to play with them. When I get up and go with them to play, both they and I have a better experience. More recent research suggests that we spend one-third of our time with the media—time that could be better spent actively involved with our families.

Optimizing skill and challenge
A scientist discovered that people across cultures find pleasure in similar experiences. In the experiences we engage in where we have high levels of skills and low levels of challenge, we are bored. When we have low levels of skills and high levels of challenge, the result is frustration. We have the best experiences when we have high levels of skills and high levels of challenges. This optimal blend of skill and challenge is more frequently achieved while at work instead of during our leisure time because our leisure activities are less structured.

Looking at the characteristics of pleasurable experiences can give us further insight into why we seem to have more pleasure at work.
- Challenge
- Merging of action with environment
- Clear goals and feedback
- Concentration on the task at hand
- Sense of control
- Loss of self-consciousness
- Transformation of time

We need to do things that are not easy for us, and when we do, we need to become involved in our environment. Activities also need to have goals attached and as we strive for the goals, we need to be told how we are progressing. The reason television is pleasurable is because it is organized for us, but that is also the problem with it—we don’t have to concentrate on our own. As we participate in productive activities, we have a sense of control, which promotes well being. We also stop thinking about what we are doing, and then the time seems to fly by. When we are bored, it seems to take forever for time to go by.

It is a dilemma to match skills with challenges in families because the children, when younger, are at so many different levels. Finding the right activities will require parents to be creative, such as having the older children teach the younger children. In my family, we play chess. Our four-year-old daughter wants to play, and so I tell her how to move the pieces and she will do this with me for an hour. Another thing you can do is break up the family into groups according to ability level. There is nothing wrong with doing this.

In general, the research on family recreation shows that it promotes family bonding and child development. There is the downside that family recreation can be a source of stress for caregivers, although play also results in control and intellectual growth. Recreation helps children learn
social and language skills, along with an appreciation for the natural world. One caution: A lot of us might see a talent in our children like dancing and so we will put them in one activity and really push them. There is a downside to that. Children who are pushed to do just one activity are often less playful, less socially flexible, and miss out on important opportunities for growth and development.

Research on pleasurable experiences for teenagers shows that the things teenagers normally spend time doing, such as going to the mall, do not provide them with the high degree of pleasure that things like hobbies, homework, athletics, and other activities will. The productive kids who do these things think that they are not having as much fun, but the research shows the opposite.

Recreation for all age levels
Brigham Young University Professor Dave Dollahite has done research on father's play. His study led him to conclude that recreation with family is associated with pleasure among both parents and children. Play allows the mother or father to communicate at the child’s level. Children like to play because they like to feel loved.

I have done quite a bit of research personally with adolescents. What I have done is looked at virtuous leisure in contrast with bad leisure. We can look at delinquent behavior and connect it too poor leisure, especially in terms of boredom producing delinquency. Bored kids often turn to drugs to deal with not having anything to do. In contrast, kids who have the opportunity to participate in a variety of family activities develop better self-esteem, can decide easier what types of careers they are interested in, and are less likely to participate in delinquent behaviors.

Another experiment I have done involved giving families challenges and checking for problem-solving and communication skills. Four groups went on different survival treks. What we found is that these activities built the skills we were looking for, not just while the families were participating, but also at home afterward.

Conclusion
Activities where we are learning, being creative, and serving other people bring us the most happiness. The research shows that we don't need money to have positive family recreation experiences. Activities that require only skills as resources are just as beneficial. How we choose our activities, however, affects our quality of life and our personal development and the development of our children. None of us wants to waste our time, which should lead us to seek richness and find diversity in our recreation. Think about happiness and "the good life." Help your children and those around you to have positive experiences. If you will follow these principles, you will find joy in your recreational opportunities and happiness in your life.

Mark Widmer is an associate professor of Recreation Management and Youth Leadership at BYU. He came to BYU in 1995 from Kent State University where he coordinated the therapeutic recreation program. Recent research has involved the study of varied levels of challenge on family strength among families with struggling adolescents.
SIBLINGS OF DISABLED CHILDREN MORE SELF-CONTROLLED, COOPERATIVE THAN PEERS, SAYS BYU STUDY

Brothers and sisters of children with disabilities demonstrate greater social skills than siblings of children without disabilities, according to a new study by Brigham Young University researchers.

The news that siblings of children with disabilities are more cooperative and exhibit more self-control than their peers is helping change the perception that families with a child with a disability are seriously disadvantaged, said Barbara Mandleco, associate professor of nursing and lead researcher on the study.

“It’s not all negative. Yes, these families have challenges, but in many respects they are doing really well,” said Mandleco. “That’s the positive message of our work.”

Published in the current issue of the “Journal of Family Nursing,” the study reports the perceptions of 78 sets of parents, half of whom had a child with a cognitive, developmental or compound disability, and the elementary school teachers of their non-disabled siblings. Parents completed questionnaires on family functioning, which asked about marital and family conflict, cohesion and whether or not the family viewed itself as capable and responsible for solving its own problems.

Teachers were asked questions about how these siblings interacted with other children -- did they control their temper in conflict situations; did they invite others to join in activities unprompted; did they get along with people who are different than themselves?

“The teachers provided an objective viewpoint of the child’s everyday behavior,” said Susanne Frost Olsen, a BYU associate professor of marriage, family and human development. “We took the parent data, along with the teacher data and ran statistical analyses to see if there were differences between families who were raising a child with a disability and those who were not.”

The researchers found no significant differences in problem behaviors between the two groups, but discovered an advantage in the social skills of siblings of children with disabilities.

“For families to know that there are positive aspects to having a member with a disability gives them a different perspective,” said researcher Elaine Marshall, who is also dean of BYU’s nursing college. “In that respect, the study’s findings almost become therapeutic.”

Janet A. Deatrick, an associate professor of nursing at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Nursing, said she is excited about the study.

“This is very important work that sheds light on families who have children with a disability,” said Deatrick, who serves as co-director of Penn’s International Center of Research for Women, Children and Families. “The study’s theoretical framework, data analysis and interpretation are sound and enable clinicians and researchers to understand the child as well as the family unit.”

The BYU researchers acknowledge that the study is partially limited because of the sample on which the findings are based -- mostly white, two-parent, middle-class families in Utah. Future research will try to determine why the siblings of children with disabilities may demonstrate greater social skills.

In the meantime, BYU researchers are pleased their findings may offer hope to people in less-than-perfect situations. Tina Taylor Dyches, a BYU professor of counseling psychology and special education, who has worked with the families of children with disabilities, is optimistic.

“It’s a different world today -- these families don’t ignore the negative aspects of raising a child with disabilities, but more and more they are looking for the positives,” said Dyches. “Before, they would ask one another, ‘How bad is it for you?’ Now, it’s, ‘What works for you?’”

Funding for the research was provided by BYU’s Family Studies Center and College of Nursing and the Iota Iota chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International, a professional organization for nurses.  

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"... In an active, surging world, the strength of one individual is of little consequence until it is linked up with others."

—Camilla Eyring Kimball