The Apostle Paul taught that we are each the “offspring of God” (Acts 17:29). We were, in fact, born as spirit children of heavenly parents in our pre-earth life. As such, we have, as the Apostle Peter proclaimed, “divine power given unto us” that we might be “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:3-4). That divine power includes access to spiritual gifts given to each of us to help us develop our divine natures more fully and return to Heavenly Father (see D&C 46:11-26). As every parent knows, our children come to us with differing inclinations, capacities, abilities, and traits; but they are all children of God and as such have “something of divinity” within each of them and the capacity to develop spiritual gifts.

Brigham Young, speaking on the topic of individual differences, stated that “there is the same variety [of individuals] in the spirit world that you behold here, yet [we] are of the same parentage, of one Father, one God.” More recently, Elder Dallin H. Oaks stated that “in ways that have not been revealed, our actions in the spirit world influence us in mortality.” While each of us brings individual qualities to this earth, we share a common divine heritage, and, to some degree, a common pattern of growth and development. Understanding this, we can find ways to appropriately strengthen each family member. This chapter will address four primary ways to strengthen each family member: (1) understand children’s development, (2) understand and support children’s individual talents and intelligences, (3) understand and support each child’s temperament, and (4) adapt parenting to the individual and changing needs of our children.
Understanding Children’s Development
Understanding normal developmental processes in children is an important part of learning to strengthen each family member. Many resources are available on what to expect of children’s physical, social, emotional, moral, language, and intellectual development. While much of this information can be helpful, some may conflict with gospel principles. We have been counseled to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). Such learning increases our understanding of human development. Parents may obtain a wealth of information from Church web sites, including www.mormon.org, the new Home and Family section at www.lds.org, and from Church publications, such as A Parent’s Guide. These sites provide information in general terms about what to expect of children’s and teens’ abilities, needs, and behaviors at different stages. Studying material on human development can help parents recognize normal development and when development departs from a normal path. Information about typical developmental processes can guide parents in judging what might be appropriate expectations for their children of different ages.

A good understanding of children’s changing abilities can help parents tailor strategies for guidance that support each child’s talents and abilities. Child psychologist Jean Piaget researched the way children’s thinking about the world changes during the course of childhood and adolescence. He found, for instance, that young children often make faulty assumptions about the way the world works, given their limited capacity to think beyond themselves (e.g., “The moon is following me while I am traveling in a car”). He also showed that children at a young age have a strong need to test things out in order to better understand the way the world operates. Such needs often lead to behaviors parents perceive as mischievous, such as pulling out pots and pans to test the various sounds or dumping out a cup of milk to observe the way liquid flows. A creatively inclined child may draw on walls or make creative “messes.” All of these behaviors are commonly motivated by children’s need to explore and may reflect their own predispositions.

Understanding these motivations, parents can choose an appropriate response, such as kindly giving the child a towel to clean up spilled milk or providing a wooden spoon to help the child discover new ways to bang on pots and pans, or placing butcher paper outside for painting murals. Fortunately for parents, these behaviors change as children mature and start to work things out in their minds. When parents recognize a change, they can adjust their responses to align with the child’s new level of understanding.

In addition to studying scholarly knowledge of children’s development, we should counsel with a loving Heavenly Father regarding the needs and abilities of each family member. President Hinckley reminded us that we should “never forget that these little ones are the sons and daughters of God and that [ours] is a custodial relationship to them, that He was a parent before [we] were parents and that He has not relinquished His parental rights or interest in these His little ones.” Our Heavenly Father stands ready to assist us in our parenting endeavors. We should turn to Him often in prayer to seek His will in guiding children’s growth.

Understanding Differences in Children’s Talents and Intelligence
Another key for parents desiring to strengthen their children lies in understanding the qualities of children’s various talents and intelligences. While many parents think of intelligence as a description of their child’s ability to do well in school (being “smart”), some scholars have offered more comprehensive descriptions. For example, Robert Sternberg suggested that intelligence can be described in three ways: analytical intelligence (the kind most often assessed in school tests), creative intelligence (having insight, creative answers, and observations), and practical intelligence (having good social skills and common sense). Children with each of these types of intelligence can be successful and can contribute to their families and communities. Parents can learn to notice and value these differing gifts of intelligence in their children.
Scholar Howard Gardner went beyond Sternberg by proposing eight different types of intelligence or “frames of mind.” These include verbal (use of language), mathematical (use of mathematical and logical concepts), spatial (the ability to understand spaces, as an architect or artist does), bodily-kinesthetic (being physically skilled, as in dance or athletics), musical (skill and ability in musical endeavors), interpersonal (understanding others), intrapersonal (understanding oneself), and naturalist (understanding nature). Only a few of Gardner’s types of intelligence are typically assessed or valued in today’s school systems. But attentive family members can notice and encourage talents in each of these areas. Many parents become discouraged if their child’s grades in math, language arts, or science are not high, and feel that the child is not “smart” or talented. However, learning about the many other types of intelligence can help parents to focus on their child’s other gifts and talents. Elder Marvin J. Ashton listed “less-conspicuous gifts: the gift of asking; the gift of listening; the gift of hearing and using a still, small voice; the gift of being able to weep; the gift of avoiding contention; the gift of being agreeable; the gift of avoiding vain repetition; the gift of seeking that which is righteous; the gift of not passing judgment; . . . the gift of caring for others; the gift of being able to ponder,” and many others. Indeed, psychologist Robert Emmons suggests another type of intelligence: spiritual intelligence, the ability to be sensitive to spiritual realities and influences.

Reducing sibling rivalry
Parents should help each child understand and appreciate his own gifts and should avoid making inappropriate comparisons between children (e.g., “Why can’t you be more responsible with your school work like your sister?”). Such practices encourage sibling rivalry, which leads to disharmony and conflict in the home. Instead, learn to celebrate the unique qualities and abilities
that each child possesses and find ways to appropriately strengthen those abilities. This may be accomplished by consciously giving focused attention, accompanied by prayers for discernment, to help parents more easily recognize each child’s God-given gifts and intelligences and avoid favoritism. Priesthood blessings can help reveal to parents, as well as children, a child’s individual spiritual preparations and abilities.

If each child’s gifts and talents are valued in the family, there is more likely to be little occasion for sibling rivalry engendered by the inevitable differences. Jealousy or rivalry usually stem from a child’s fear of losing a parent’s affection or recognition and from wanting to be equally recognized. These feelings may stem from legitimate unmet needs. In speaking of a scriptural example of sibling jealousy, the return of the prodigal son, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland noted that “the father in this story does not . . . compare [his children] with each other. His gestures of compassion toward one do not require a withdrawal or denial of love for the other. He is divinely generous to both of these sons.” Parents may prevent jealousy and rivalry by helping to foster feelings of self-worth in each child. They can be sure to emphasize each child’s individual positive contributions to the family and wider community. A child’s self-worth, according to educator Lillian Katz, “is most likely to be fostered when children have challenging opportunities to build self-confidence and esteem through effort, persistence, and the gradual accrual of skills, knowledge, and appropriate behavior.”

Safeguarding childhood and finding balance.

While helping to build self-confidence and individual gifts and talents, parents should at the same time work to safeguard the family from being overrun by these efforts. We should learn to appreciate and support one another’s talents without allowing those talents to take over the family. All too often parents feel an urge to push their children harder at increasingly younger ages to develop their abilities. In our rush to offer our children a “better life,” we often forget that at the core of our energies and efforts is a child. David Elkind argued in his book, *The Hurried Child,* that “the concept of childhood . . . is threatened with extinction in the society we have created. Today’s child has become the unwilling, unintended victim of overwhelming stress—the stress borne of rapid, bewildering social change and constantly rising expectations.” He admonished parents to avoid pushing children so hard that they are deprived of an essential need, namely, their childhood.

Families today often feel consumed by the sheer number of their activities. Children experience life that is fast-paced and highly structured, going from school to soccer games to dance lessons to piano practice, and then home to tackle chores and homework and myriad other activities that leave little time for childhood. Childhood should be a time for self-paced discovery, being with friends, learning to negotiate social relationships, and exploring the world through the process of fantasy and physical play.

Children, just like adults, need down time; time to relax and unwind. Parents should take care to safeguard the home and to avoid the temptation of “doing it all.” Instead, find ways to shield children as best you can from unrealistic and heavy demands. Remember the counsel of Elder Richard G. Scott, who said that “Satan has a powerful tool to use against good people. It is distraction. He would have good people fill life with ‘good things’ so there is no room for the essential ones.” Be sure not to neglect the essential need to
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strengthen the home with faith. Do not allow one child’s talents to overtake parents’ essential responsibilities to all family members.

Understanding Differences in Temperament

Almost a century ahead of modern child development research, President Brigham Young offered this insight to parents: “Bring up your children in the love and fear of the Lord; study their dispositions and their temperaments, and deal with them accordingly.”19 Scholars today recognize that each child is born into this world with an individual temperament.20 Temperament is thought to be a set of traits that are observable early in life and remain fairly stable across situations and time. While there is still some disagreement about the specific dimensions of temperament, most scholars agree that children vary in terms of their activity level (how much a child moves about), emotionality (how the child typically responds emotionally to moment-to-moment events), adaptability (how flexible the child is to changes in routines), sociability (how outgoing or shy the child is), and self-regulation (how well the child is able to calm down or stay in control of his or her emotions and behaviors).21

Each child, even those in the same family, commonly differs along these dimensions of temperament. One child may be more irritable and become easily upset, another may be more active and have a greater need to constantly move about, and still another may be more shy or withdrawn and have difficulty adjusting to new people and experiences. A combination of these various traits may make some children more challenging to parents. However, studying and then recognizing your child’s disposition, as President Young counseled, can go a long way in determining the best way to approach each child and to structure guidance that fits each child’s disposition. Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess, scholars of child temperament, refer to this idea as developing “goodness-of-fit.” A good fit is achieved when a child’s temperament meshes well with parents’ demands and expectations and the structure of the home environment.

Adapting Parenting

Because of the innate quality of temperament, some characteristics in children may be difficult to change or may never change. Instead of trying to force their child to change, parents may need to change their own expectations and demands. This idea was reinforced by Elder James E. Faust: “Child rearing is so individualistic. Every child is different and unique. What works with one may not work with another. . . . It is a matter of prayerful discernment for the parents.”23 This approach to child rearing necessitates careful attention to children’s qualities and recognizing and learning over time what works best for each child.

Elder Faust further explained that our parenting actions should be governed by the “overarching and undergirding” principle of love.24 Love serves as the foundation upon which a parent learns to adapt to each child, especially as the child grows, changes, and matures toward adulthood. Sara Ruddick noted that “attentive love” is foundational to a parent’s ability to serve the needs of children in appropriate ways. Citing the work of Iris Murdoch, Ruddick wrote:

Attention to real children, children seen by the “patient eye of love, . . . teaches us how real things [real children] can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self.” . . . The love of children is not only the most intense of attachments, but it is also a detachment, a giving up, a letting grow. . . . [it is seeing] the child’s reality with the patient, loving eye of attention.25
As parents, it is important to invest the time to really come to know our children. It is also important that parents allow themselves to experience the joy that comes with parenting and to convey that joy to their children. Too often we see children only through our adult eyes, forgetting that our children and teens often see and experience their immediate world differently. Parents can spend quantity and quality one-on-one time with each child and learn about his or her hopes, fears, desires, qualities, and abilities. At the same time, we should be willing to allow our children to come to know us on these same terms in this process. Doing so can bring greater insight and greater wisdom in determining how best to approach each of our children and care for their varying needs.

Conclusion
In this article we have briefly touched on the proclamation concept that “each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.” Understanding our divine nature should strengthen our commitment to each family member. At the same time, while each of us shares a common divine lineage, we come with great variety in our individual characteristics, talents, and intelligence. Understanding these individual features helps us approach each of our children with a “loving eye of attention.” In doing so, we can tailor our attempts at guidance to suit the needs of each child. Understanding common and individual patterns of human growth can help parents determine how best to “let grow.”

Sister Patricia Holland related an experience that is illustrative. A musician herself, Sister Holland was anxious that her musically talented daughter, Mary, develop to her fullest potential. She noted, “I was convinced that Mary’s talent would not be developed unless I lurked over her at the piano and,

“Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.”
like Simon Legree, insistently supervised her practice.”27 As Mary moved into her teenage years, Sister Holland began to realize that this once useful motherly practice was placing an increasing strain on their relationship. She realized that there needed to be a change. So she “poured out [her] soul in prayer, seeking wisdom that could help [her] keep communication open with [her] daughter.”28 This heartfelt prayer resulted in the spiritual discernment and parental wisdom she needed to respond appropriately to her daughter. Sister Holland then left an apron on Mary’s bed, with the strings cut off, and the following note tucked into a pocket:

Dear Mary,
I’m sorry for the conflict I have caused by acting like a federal marshal at the piano. I must have looked foolish there—just you and me and my six-shooter. Forgive me. You are becoming a young woman in your own right. I have only worried that you would not feel as fully confident and fulfilled as a woman if you left your talent unfinished.
I love you.
Mom29

From this experience, Sister Holland learned to feel confident in her daughter’s personal determination to continue developing her musical skill. She also learned that just as our Father in Heaven had to “let us go” to experience mortality and grow here on earth, each of us as parents must recognize those times when it is best to adapt our parenting and cut restraining apron strings. With these adaptations comes the realization that each child has power to choose his or her own destination. Our responsibility as parents is to strengthen children for their journey and to do our
best, given our own abilities, talents, and characteristics, to set their feet upon the path that will return them to our Father in Heaven and fulfill their divine destinies.

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6 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1985), A Parent's Guide (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints); available at ldscatalog.com., no. 31123000.
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13 D. Zollinger (1975, February), When sibling rivalry strikes: How parents can diminish jealousy between their children, Ensign, 9(2), 53-56.
14 Jeffrey R. Holland (2002, May), The other prodigal, Ensign, 32(5), 63.
15 L. G. Katz (1993, summer), All about me, American Educator, 21.
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