

TEACHING CHILDREN TO

Sacrifice:

Mirrors to Windows

by Duane E. Hiatt

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Nothing in the universe is cuter than a baby. Self-absorbed, uninhibited, spontaneous, babies sit in the center of their own universe surrounded by mirrors that reflect their cuteness. They are irresistible to watch. Now let me tell you what is not fun to watch—a fifteen-year-old with the same outlook and attitude. Helping children turn those mirrors of self-importance, self-concern, and plain selfishness into windows to look out on and respond to the needs of others—this is a big part of parenting. So how do we do it? I asked our children.

“We just knew that Saturday was for working together at home; then we could play.”

“We did it because our older brothers and sisters did. We followed the tradition.”

“Fasting was really hard for me when I was little. But I knew that even though Dad was on tour with his music and comedy group, he would be fasting after his show and would be really hungry and thirsty.”

“We love to be together, and that sometimes takes sacrificing.”

“We never even thought of leaving a Church meeting without helping to put the chairs away.”

From these responses and other comments, I gleaned the following principles:

Enjoy our successes. Along the way we get tantalizing glimpses of the people our children will one day be. An esteemed member of the Church and community told me once, “I was feeling down one gray winter morning, but then I drove past your place. I saw in the snow four little dwarfs with a bucket of water in each hand, joking with each other as they climbed up the trail behind your house to your goat barn. I said, ‘With children like that, the world has a future.’”

People often told us, “I love to see your children in church sitting quietly with a younger brother or sister on their laps.”

My friend Louise Baird calls such moments “parental payoffs.” We all get some, not nearly enough to satisfy our appetite, but sufficient to strengthen us as we push, drag, cajole, and encourage our children up the trail toward adulthood.

Cheer for our children. Honest compliments are easier to come up with when the children’s sacrifices fill real needs and not parental make-work projects.

We often told our boys, “Thanks for bringing us this delicious milk. If it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t have it.” The gratitude was particularly true for the members of our family who had



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allergic reactions to cows' milk but did better on our goats' milk.

We formalized our pouring on the praise with a weekly meeting we named "Brag Time." We still hold it, now including the grandchildren. Brag Time is a family gathering that is dedicated to cheering for ourselves and for each other. It sounds like this:

"I said an article of faith in Primary."

"Yea!"

"Desiree didn't want to go to seminary, but I invited her and she came."

"Yea!"

"I helped clean the patio."

"Yea!"

"Tom helped me learn to tie my shoes!"

"Yea!"

There is only one rule to Brag Time. When someone brags, the rest of us applaud and cheer. No sarcastic comments, no put-downs are allowed in Brag Time. When someone has a brag in which he or she reached out and sacrificed to help someone else, it is time for an extra burst of applause.

"Bend the twig" (see *Proverbs 22:6*). Probably the earliest interchange our children remember with me happened every night after prayer and before the piggyback ride to their bedrooms. I asked them two questions: "What was your happiest thing today? What did you do to build the Lord's kingdom today?"

"Our Scout troop did stealth cleaning of the widows' yards."

"I let John wear my new shirt."

They each knew this report was due every day—from their earliest lisps until their high school graduation. By then we hoped the tree was inclined. The answers included much repetition, but more than rarely some sincere thinking. Sometimes we struck gold when the happiest thing and the building the kingdom activity were the same.

Build togetherness. Teaching sharing and sacrifice is probably easier if your family is blessed with limited means. But with a little ingenuity even the financially blessed need not be sacrificially impoverished. I know a well-to-do family who takes "service vacations." They hit the road in their motor home, and their only destination is to find people along the way whom they can help and serve. Their children love it.

But as a father it always strengthened my case when I could say such things as, "I had planned to get each of you a Ferrari on your sixteenth birthday so we wouldn't all be sharing the family van, but it looks like that won't quite fit into this month's budget."

With fifteen children in our family, there were a number of things that didn't quite fit into "this month's budget," but I am now told by our grown children that none of those things really mattered. What mattered to them, and still does, was to be together. What might seem to some people a sacrifice of privacy was and is to them a blessing of companionship. They still sacrifice to bring their families from all parts of the country for our annual family conference.

Build traditions. This closeness led to other kinds of what might be called sacrifices. Walking through the backyard once, I picked up this snatch of conversation. Danny's friend Cliff said, "Hey Danny, let's go over to my house and play."

Danny replied, "Great. Hey Bobby, let's go play at Cliff's place."

Cliff, "Not Bobby, just you and me."

A brief puzzled pause from Danny and then, "See you later, Cliff. Have fun."

Perhaps Danny sacrificed a good time with a friend by including his younger brother, but it never occurred to him to do otherwise. That's just the way the Hiatt children did things. Invite one; expect some portion of the multitude to tag along. It was their tradition. I admit we planted the seed and nourished it.

Give for the fun of it. This led to such traditions as "no paybacks." When you do something for your brother or sister, if he or she pays you back, verily, you have your reward (see Matthew 6:1-4); if not, you get paid with blessings in heaven and warm feelings here.

Work together. We, like many families, feel that chores and housework should not be paid for. They are work that we all do because we all live in the house and eat the food. When they were small, our children accepted this and even enjoyed working around the house, sometimes for as long as four minutes. After that, it was other rewards like being with Mommy and Daddy; having Dad regale them with one of his signature stand-up comedy, storytelling routines; and knowing that after we all did the work, we would do something even more fun.

Our first six children were boys, and they were getting muscles while the later ones were getting permanent teeth. They needed more challenging and manly work to do. At least their parents thought so. We purchased, over what seemed interminable years, five acres of land on which we could grow animal feed, fruit trees, gardens, and a world-class crop of weeds.

"Dad, I want to get a paper route," Dan said a few weeks before his twelfth birthday. Thus began another tradition, hand-me-down paper routes. A quarter of a century later, Maren, our youngest, entered high school, and following the tradition

declared emeritus status. We also did summer and after-school work. Good training, we thought, but what do we do with the money? My observation is that too much "walking around" money can be detrimental to young people. If they get into big-time recreation habits, costly clothes, car payments, and expensive vacations early, they may have a hard time scaling back later as missionaries, college students, or newlyweds. For these reasons and more—including the opportunity to learn to sacrifice—we decided to pool our resources every month, then determine what each person needed, and provide that. Generally the system worked well for us.

Did our efforts always work? Does the sun shine every day we plan a picnic? Does the stock market always go up right after we invest? This is a real world. We have a drawer full of plans that "coulda, shoulda, woulda" worked but didn't. Others didn't work at first, but later bore fruit. Some we thought withered, but found they grew as the children matured. Now we are seeing them blossoming in the hearts of our grandchildren. Traditions by definition take time to take hold. But gradually, with gentle loving reinforcement from us as parents, they can strengthen from silken threads to iron rods.

Selfless sacrifice for the good of others because of our love for the Lord—this qualifies us for the kingdom. Helping our children transform their mirrors of self-absorption into windows of empathy with a view into heaven—this may be the most treasured inheritance we can give them. 

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NOTES

¹ Alexander Pope (1731-35), *Moral Essays*, 1.149; quoted in *The International Thesaurus of Quotations* (1970), R. T. Tripp, comp. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell), 646. "'Tis education forms the common mind,/Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined."