Featuring articles from a new publication by the BYU School of Family Life and Deseret Book
from the editors


Family life holds the promise for our greatest happiness in this life and the next. While family life includes much joy, it also involves discovering, solving, and working through the problems of everyday living. Many families face daunting challenges arising from divorce, single parenting, mental illness, long-term health problems and physical disabilities, death, marital and parent-child conflict, wayward children, and children with special needs—to name a few.

In support of all those who are working to strengthen families, the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University has recently published Helping and Healing Our Families: Principles and Practices Inspired by “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (edited by Craig H. Hart, Lloyd D. Newell, Elaine Walton, and David C. Dollahite. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005). The purpose of this volume is to provide hope, principles, practices, and eternal perspectives in addressing the many issues affecting families today.

Helping and Healing Our Families is based upon prophetic principles of marriage and family life, particularly doctrines taught in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” At the creation of the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University, President Boyd K. Packer of the LDS Quorum of the Twelve Apostles delivered a charge that BYU faculty produce textbooks on the family that would be worthy of a great university. He admonished faculty to fill these books with moral and spiritual truths in full harmony with the restored gospel. These books were to help students and others be good spouses and parents. The concerted efforts of 125 authors, including faculty across many disciplines at Brigham Young University and individuals with professional and personal experience in topics related to family life, culminate in an offering that responds to this apostolic charge. In addition, publication of this book coincides with the tenth anniversary of “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” which President Gordon B. Hinckley introduced in a general Relief Society Meeting in September 1995 (see inside back cover for a copy of the Proclamation).

In 2000, Strengthening Our Families: An In-Depth Look at the Proclamation on the Family was published, edited by David C. Dollahite from the School of Family Life at BYU. This seminal volume demonstrated that proclamation principles are well supported by conceptual and empirical scholarship. A primary objective of this new companion volume, Helping and Healing Our Families, is to provide concrete ideas and real-world examples to assist couples and families.

This issue of Marriage & Families draws from Helping and Healing Our Families, as it presents three feature articles and two essays representative of the content of the book. Future issues will feature selected articles as well. Although it would be impossible to capture the depth and breadth of the book—which deals with topics ranging from finding balance in family life to intimacy in marriage to dealing with addictions and other destructive influences—our hope is to provide our readers with a sampling of the book’s content (the book is available through LDS-oriented and other bookstores throughout the United States and online at www.deseretbook.com). All royalties will go to support teaching, research, and outreach in the BYU School of Family Life.

As the insights, experiences, and testimonies of Latter-day Saints are shared in Helping and Healing Our Families, we hope readers will be reminded of God’s love for each individual, and of His great plan of happiness for marriages and families. We hope you will gain inspiration for your own circumstances as the principles of successful family life are explicated. President Ezra Taft Benson explained how principles might be translated into action:

Usually the Lord gives us the overall objectives to be accomplished and some guidelines to follow, but he expects us to work out most of the details and methods. The methods and procedures are usually developed through study and prayer and by living so that we can obtain and follow the promptings of the Spirit.

It is our sincere desire that the principles and practices found in Marriage & Families and in Helping and Healing Our Families will help families move closer to the ideals set forth in the family proclamation and, in the process, find greater happiness and joy in family life.

NOTES
CONTENTS

2
REARING RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS
By David B. and Linda W. Magleby

8
PARENTING THAT STRENGTHENS EACH FAMILY MEMBER
By Chris L. Porter and Nancy B. Rollins

16
BREAKING THE CHAIN OF NEGATIVE FAMILY INFLUENCES
By Roberta L. I. Magarrell and Dean E. Barley

24
LAUGHTER–THE PERFECT FAMILY MEDICINE
By Gary K. Palmer

28
TEACHING CHILDREN TO SACRIFICE: MIRRORS TO WINDOWS
By Duane E. Hiatt
Parents have a sacred duty to teach their children . . . to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live.1

— The Family: A Proclamation to the World

Parents play a powerful role in orienting their children to government and establishing patterns of civic engagement. In this article we explore what scholars know about the role families and parents play in fostering active citizenship and also review what has been said on the topic in scripture and by Church leaders.

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Importance of Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Many people take their citizenship for granted. Citizenship is defined as the legal status of a citizen with its attendant rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Among the rights of citizenship may be freedoms to vote, of religion and speech, of peaceful assembly, to petition for a redress of grievances, and to travel throughout a country. The responsibilities of citizenship include obeying and sustaining the laws of the country in which we live, participating in the political process, and serving in the community.

For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, our responsibility as citizens is found in the twelfth article of faith: “We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in

By David B. and Linda W. Magleby
This article is taken from Helping and Healing Our Families, published by the BYU School of Family Life and Deseret Book
obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.” Elder James E. Talmage commented on this teaching: “Among other virtues the Church in its teachings should impress the duty of a law-abiding course; and the people should show forth the effect of such precepts in their probity as citizens of the nation and in the community of which they are part.”

Being a good citizen means learning to love and serve others, first in families, then in our communities, our countries, and the world. Because of the restored gospel, we understand that being a good citizen means “that when [we] are in the service of [our] fellow beings [we] are only in the service of [our] God” (Mosiah 2:17). Members of the Church are encouraged to participate as active members of the community by prayerfully studying the issues and exercising their privilege to vote. A First Presidency letter stated:

*We urge Church members to register to vote, to study the issues and candidates carefully and prayerfully, and then vote for those they believe will most nearly carry out their ideas of good government. . . . While affirming its constitutional right of expression on political and social issues, the Church reaffirms its long-standing policy of neutrality regarding political parties, political platforms, and candidates for political office.*

Social scientists describe the sense of social engagement and confidence in dealing with others in public activities as *social capital*. Political scientist Robert Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” Measures of social capital include political, civic, and religious participation, connections in the workplace, informal social connections, altruism, volunteering, philanthropy, reciprocity, honesty, and trust. Putnam, among others, has documented that over time we have seen diminishing social capital. People are less involved in community groups and have not developed the communication and cooperation skills necessary for civic engagement. The concept of social capital is useful because it conveys the sense that individuals can acquire social capital out of their experiences and education. Among the most important transmitters of social capital is the family.

Research has demonstrated that Latter-day Saints are not only more likely to volunteer within their church but are also more likely to have “given a speech or presentation” and to have taken “part in making decisions” in the church. These same data also show that the more involved Latter-day Saints are in their church, the more likely they are to be involved in politics. Latter-day Saints who are religiously active are more engaged in politics than religiously active Catholics or Southern Baptists. Obversely, Latter-day Saints with the lowest level of religious participation have a slightly lower rate of political participation than Southern Baptists and Catholics who have the same level of religious involvement. The more social capital people have, the more effective citizens they are.

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How Children Learn about Citizenship and Civic Responsibility

The most powerful influence on how children view citizenship and civic engagement is their families. In his classic study, *Political Socialization*, Kenneth P. Langton observed that “within the family the individual learns his first set of social roles. . . . how he should relate to other people.” Children learn from their parents’ knowledge about citizenship and government. The orientation of the parents towards political participation “is shared by the children in many cases.”

The role of parents in raising children is clearly stated in scripture: “But ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another” (Mosiah 4:15). “And they shall also teach their children to pray, and to walk uprightly before the Lord” (D&C 68:28). Modern prophets and apostles have also emphasized the central teaching role of parents. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” states, “Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God and to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live.”

Marriage & Families
Elder M. Russell Ballard said, “Sooner, perhaps, than we realize, the fate of nations will be in the hands of today’s children.”

The family is the first community in which children learn to love and serve one another. In the family, children can learn about the blessings of belonging, of being loved, protected, and nurtured. They can learn to contribute to the family by their attitudes, their work, and their obedience. They can learn to be grateful for the contributions of others. With these family-centered principles as a foundation, children are prepared to love and serve in the community. President James E. Faust said, “Among the other values children should be taught are respect for others, beginning with the child’s own parents and family; respect for the symbols of faith and patriotic beliefs of others; respect for law and order; respect for the property of others; respect for authority.”

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Challenges in Rearing Responsible Citizens

There are challenges to rearing responsible citizens. One of the most formidable challenges is cynicism, a scorn for the motives or virtue of others. In the government setting, cynics believe that politicians are only interested in themselves and are not sincere. They believe that their votes cannot make a difference and that public officials don’t care what “people like us” think. Cynicism is corrosive of citizenship and civic involvement because it fosters the myths that people don’t matter, votes don’t count, and the government doesn’t listen to citizens. Statements such as “My vote doesn’t make a difference,” or “Politics is a lose-lose situation,” or “Voting is just choosing the lesser of the two evils,” when uttered in the presence of children, help to make them cynical. Children are also exposed to cynicism in the community and in the media.

A challenge related to cynicism is distrust. The view that “all politicians are corrupt” is an example of expressing distrust. Consider the impact of such a statement on a child who might later consider running for community office. Most politicians are not corrupt. They mirror the broader culture and are no more or less corrupt than business leaders, sports heroes, or others. And yet we do not express the view that all sports heroes cheat or take drugs. This increasing sense of distrust is one of the main causes of the decrease in social capital discussed above.

A common obstacle that parents can help their children overcome is a lack of self-confidence in dealing with government, bureaucracy, and complexity when facing community problems. The obverse of low self-confidence in dealing with these challenges is what social scientists call efficacy. Efficacy is the belief that one’s actions within the political community can produce

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Talk about the news, especially examples of people who sacrifice to be able to live in a democracy.

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Photo Credit: Comstock, Inc.
desired results. Families that foster civic engagement have children with more efficacy. Rather than perpetuate the attitude that people cannot influence their surroundings, demonstrate the opposite to your children through your actions. Identify a local problem and then set about to solve it.

Another important lesson to teach children about government and civic engagement is that people do not always get their way. A remarkable feature of a constitutional democracy is the peaceful transfer of power from one party or candidate to another. In many a young democracy, the incumbent candidate behind in public opinion will either rig the election or disregard the election and hold power through force. The norm of accepting the outcome of free and fair elections is a mark of a mature democracy and responsible citizens. This attitude can be fostered in families by discussing that reasonable people can disagree on many topics and that government and politics often reflect these differences.

A useful additional step in this discussion of winners and losers in democratic decision making is to encourage children to consider why some people might not see things the same way they do. What about this individual or group influences how they think and what they support? Questions like this help foster the kind of tolerance we need to retain freedom and democracy. Note that this question and discussion does not diminish the view of the parent or child, but seeks to understand how reasonable people can disagree on a topic or policy.

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Opportunities to Teach Children about Citizenship and Civic Responsibility

The opportunities to teach our children about citizenship and civic responsibility are plentiful and include formal teaching moments like family home evening or talks we give on these topics, and informal settings like holiday celebrations, conversations, and personal examples of civic engagement. Below are some possible teaching opportunities:

1. Show respect for the law by obeying traffic and other laws. We can teach children that obedience is the best choice, whether anyone else is there to see us wait for the red light to change or not. Our own integrity requires that we obey the laws. We can also show respect for the law by the way we talk about and address police officers or other officers of the law.

2. Vote. If you are blessed to live in a democracy, take the time to vote. Include your children in discussions about upcoming elections and take them with you to the polls when you vote. Explain the process, the election volunteers, the secret ballot, and so forth. Seeing how seriously you take voting will instill respect for the voting franchise.

3. Election campaigns provide opportunities to discuss elections and voting. You might watch a candidates’ debate as a family and then discuss the process, the issues, and the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate. The purpose of the discussion is broader than just to see who the better candidate is. The discussion should foster...
gratitude that we have a process with choices, people who are willing to run, and that we have a voice in important issues to be decided. Perhaps take the discussion one step farther by considering the opportunity to run for office or become more involved in school and community efforts.

4. Talk about the news, especially examples of people who sacrifice to be able to live in a democracy. The news of nations frequently includes stories of people working to achieve freedom or to free themselves from a dictator. Use these current events as a contrast to the freedom your family experiences. Talk about why people yearn for freedom and are willing to sacrifice a great deal for it.

5. Provide community service as a family. While volunteering to pick up litter, help at a homeless shelter, or assist a candidate or party, explain how the service is linked to citizenship. Teach children that each of us has a responsibility to contribute to our society and government.

6. Volunteer in a campaign or attend a political event or rally. Encourage your children to become participants in democracy by meeting local candidates and volunteering to help in a campaign.

7. As you pay your taxes, take the opportunity to explain why we have taxes, that the American Revolutionary War was waged over taxation without representation, and that all governments are dependent on raising revenue through taxes. An important link between taxes and civic responsibility is that we all benefit from such services as national defense, streets, police protection, and public education.

8. Make patriotic holidays teaching moments and integrate patriotic symbols where appropriate. National holidays provide an opportunity to reflect on the rights and privileges you enjoy as well as the responsibilities of citizenship. A family home evening lesson could focus on founders or others who have secured and defended your country.

9. Be positive when talking about elected officials. We can disagree with a policy or position an official takes without belittling motives or intelligence. If you live in a country where many ideas are tolerated, you have reason to celebrate. Better still, if you live in a country where you have the freedom to express your opinions, work to convince others of your ideas. Pray for elected officials, even if they are not from your political party. These officials are in need of our prayers and including them in family prayers is a powerful teaching moment.

10. Consider taking family vacations that provide opportunities to teach children about history or visit a historical site. Visiting Washington, D.C.; the battlefield at Gettysburg; Colonial Williamsburg; or the Statue of Liberty can provide...
unforgettable memories for children. Before these trips, spend time talking about the significance of what you will be seeing. Allow time during and after the visit to answer questions and discuss the experience.

11. When a child makes a poor choice and breaks a law, teach responsibility and accountability. One of the most important things we can teach children is that choices have consequences. We are commanded to teach about repentance (D&C 68:25). When a civil law is broken, repentance includes confession to civil authorities, restitution where possible, and accepting the penalties or punishment that may be imposed.

Family traditions that include these elements reinforce children’s sense of citizenship and encourage civic engagement.

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Conclusion

Over the course of human history it is a relatively rare occurrence for people to live in freedom and govern themselves. Countries sometimes experiment with democracy, but it rarely lasts more than a couple of generations before a depression, war, or dictator replaces it with authoritarian rule. Historically people have tended to live more under totalitarian rule, monarchy, or in anarchy than to have governed themselves. To experience freedom and be able to retain it is remarkable and worth preserving. For that to happen, parents and other role models need to transmit the values and attitudes that foster active citizenship and civic engagement.

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Additional Reading

Sue Bergin (1988, September), Making a difference in your community, Ensign, 18(9), 12-15.

NOTES

We express appreciation to Dustin N. Slade and Chad Pugh for their assistance in preparing this chapter.

2 James E. Talmage (1965), Articles of Faith, 46th ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), 413.
5 Putnam (2000), 27.
6 D. E. Campbell and J. Q. Monson (2002, October 4), Dry kindling: A political profile of American Mormons; paper presented at the Conference on Religion and American Political Behavior, Southern Methodist University; available at http://www.nd.edu/~dcampbe4/dry%20kindling.pdf, 18-19. Campbell and Monson find that Mormons are more likely to volunteer within their church—60 percent report doing so over the past twelve months compared to 36 percent of Southern Baptists and 27 percent of Catholics. Fifty-five percent of Mormons “report having given a speech or presentation at church within the previous six months,” while 14 percent of Southern Baptists and 4 percent of Catholics report the same. Mormons are also more likely to be trained in decision making, with 48 percent reporting attending a meeting where they had a role in the decision making process within the last six months, compared to 28 percent of Southern Baptists and 8 percent of Catholics.
7 Campbell and Monson (2002), 21.
8 Campbell and Monson (2002), 22.
15 James E. Faust (1990, November), The greatest challenge in the world—good parenting, Ensign, 20(11), 34.
16 Langton (1969), 144, 155.
Parenting that Strengthens Each Family Member

By Chris L. Porter and Nancy B. Rollins

I have tremendous respect for fathers and mothers who are nurturing their children in light and truth, who have prayer in their homes, who spare the rod and govern with love, who look upon their little ones as their most valued assets to be protected, trained, and blessed.

— President Gordon B. Hinckley

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. Instead, the breakneck speed of school and family life is leaving children and parents feeling stressed, burned-out, and disconnected.

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
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.”22 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. 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.” 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.*

—Mom

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.

**Additional Reading**


**NOTES**

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acts [of others] may cause pain, anguish, even physical harm, but they cannot destroy your eternal possibilities in this brief but crucial life on earth. . . . Your attitude can control the change for good in your life. It allows you to have the help the Lord intends you to receive. No one can take away your ultimate opportunities when you understand and live eternal law.

—Elder Richard G. Scott

What a blessing it is to be raised in a strong, healthy family where the marital relationship is one of complete fidelity and mutual support, where parents provide for their children’s physical and spiritual needs, and where the children are taught to love and serve each other, to keep the commandments, and to be law-abiding citizens. However, many are not blessed with such a home and may struggle with the cumulative effects of negative family influences, including addictions, abuse, violence, mental illness, unstable relationships with caregivers, enmeshment or estrangement, poverty, and crime. There also may be more subtle negative influences such as materialism, competitiveness, apostasy, or psychological control.

Fortunately, the transmission of negative family patterns from one generation to the next does not always occur. Not everyone who has been abused becomes an abusive parent, nor does everyone with divorced parents have a marriage that ends in divorce. Many who come from stressful, destructive, or dysfunctional homes are able to end the chain of detrimental family influences in their own lives and in the lives of their children. For example, in the scriptures we read of how Abraham chose a path different from that of his father (see Abraham 1:4-5). People who overcome negative family influences can be called “transitional persons,” meaning that they make positive transitions in their own lives and in their family lines. Converts to the Church often choose to leave behind unwanted family traditions and patterns and become transitional characters for the generations that follow. How does this occur? What enables one to rise above potentially destructive family experiences?

Regardless of the particular negative patterns one is working to overcome, the majority of transitional people do the following as an ongoing process throughout the various stages of their lives:

• question their circumstances;
• become aware of changes that need to be made;
• desire to make things different;
• arrive at an enlightened understanding that allows for new possibilities for themselves and their families;
• devise specific strategies and action plans;
• believe that their own efforts can make a difference;
• act on their plans;

• receive help and learn from others;
• have spiritual experiences that move them forward in the desired direction;
• learn to forgive;
• express a sense of mission that motivates them to help others; and
• learn from any backsliding or relapses.

This challenging process requires persistence, a willingness to look at oneself and others through God’s eyes, and the ability to ask for and receive help when necessary. Transitional persons may continue in the change process across their life spans. The transitional process as described in the steps just named can be helpful in dealing with difficulties of varying degrees of severity that may be encountered in nuclear and extended family relationships. The following experiences illustrate the process.

Margaret grew up terrified of her father. He would verbally and physically abuse her mother, her older sister, and Margaret. The worst part was not knowing what would trigger his outbursts. Margaret’s parents divorced when she was 7 years old, but her sister, Nell, continued to beat Margaret almost daily and to call her negative names of every kind. Margaret’s mother was working and could not afford child care; she was also chronically exhausted and depressed. By the time Margaret was 9, she had accepted that she
was worthless and deserved the treatment she received, and she felt constant anxiety during court-ordered visits with her father.

At age 14, Margaret grew taller than Nell and the beatings stopped. Their father moved to another state. Margaret began to read the Bible her maternal grandparents had given her. She wanted to please God by being baptized (John 3:1-7; 14:15). She investigated every church, philosophy, and organization she could find. At last, she obtained a copy of the Book of Mormon from the library, read it, and prayed about it. By now she was 17, and with her mother’s permission, she was baptized. A year later she went to BYU and met the young man she would marry. He was kind and soft-spoken, and Margaret began to realize that her sharp words could harm others. She had already resolved never to physically abuse her children, and she added to that a resolve to speak to them without sarcasm, criticism, and other damaging verbal tactics.

Margaret is a transitional person. She began by question-
around which she organized her thoughts and actions. She determined that she would set standards different from those of her parents for acceptable behavior. She would make good choices and exercise self-control, rather than be controlled by her parents’ withdrawal of attention and love.  

Transitional people conclude that they need not remain a victim of circumstances, but can deliberately make a difference in their own lives and the lives of their loved ones. Transitional characters believe in their autonomy and feel empowered to change their own lives in significant ways, even in the face of extreme hardship, and they act on their plans. This action entails choosing a destination and doing what needs to be done to get there. This frequently includes more earnestly turning to the Lord in fervent prayer, seeking to follow spiritual promptings, increasing positive time with family members, learning to substitute healthier alternative behaviors, making new friends, joining a self-help group, or talking with a close friend or relative. As their actions begin to produce desired results, transitional people are encouraged to continue their efforts. To accomplish this, transitional figures may need to overcome their own fears or learn new skills. This often requires turning to others for support and an example.

Barbara’s single mother was heavily into drugs, and she suffered much from neglect during the times when her mother was oblivious to her needs. She stated that her movement forward was gradual in some areas and very fast in others. There were lots of people in the right place at the right time. One of these people was a sister to whom she could talk openly in her later teens about some areas in her life. That sister had a positive outlook on life and was transitioning forward herself. Watching her sister do this helped Barbara to see that she could face difficult issues. Her sister validated her, accepted her, loved her, and did not judge her. Another helpful person was a grandmother who loved her, was very accepting of her, and showed confidence in her. Her Young Women leaders also provided listening ears and good examples.

In spite of a poor parental example, Barbara was able to use the support and examples of other people around her and did not allow herself to become paralyzed by her past. Transitional people are often assisted by helpful people (friends, immediate or extended family members, ecclesiastical leaders, teachers, mentors) who can offer encouragement, support, and a concrete example of new skills helpful in making necessary changes. Transitional characters may also receive help through reading good books and by participating in seminars, workshops, or support groups. Many people who have been through extremely negative family experiences and who continue to struggle with difficulties benefit from professional help. They explore the appropriate use of available resources (such as therapists or medications). In addition to aid from others, transitional people frequently report spiritual experiences that move them forward.

Andrew and Francie had each grown up in wealthy homes where they were provided everything a child and then teen could want. Each received a car for his or her 16th birthday. They met at college (tuition paid by their parents) and their similar backgrounds contributed to their attraction. After their temple wedding, they and their families and friends enjoyed two lavish wedding receptions at their parents’ homes. When they returned from a honeymoon in Hawaii, they lived in the condo that Andrew’s parents had purchased for them to help them get started. Francie and Andrew enjoyed shopping for new furniture and helping the decorator with designs for the condo. Almost before they knew it, they had three children, Andrew had a well-paying job, and they owned a beautiful home.

Andrew and Francie went to see a financial planner after their
third child was born. They came away from their meeting believing that it had been helpful for planning the future, but troubled as they considered whether they were too focused on material pursuits. The couple kept returning to something their oldest child had said when the news of the tragic earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean became known. “Dumb people,” they were surprised to hear their son say. “Why didn’t they just get on the yacht and get away?” Andrew’s yacht, a favorite for family vacations, was at a marina near their home. Francie and Andrew didn’t know whether to be unhappier that their son thought everyone had access to a yacht or that he had referred to the suffering victims of the natural disaster as “dumb” because they didn’t know how to get away—especially when they had no warning.

Andrew and Francie decided that their children might benefit from less parental generosity and more opportunities to see how the family’s time and money could benefit others. During a temple session the next day, their covenants seemed more individual and meaningful than ever. They prayed together about what they could do, made plans, and called the family together. They discussed tithes and offerings with the children, went through closets and storage spaces looking for items to donate, talked more about the tsunami during family home evening, and made a large donation to the Red Cross for tsunami relief. They also pledged to serve meals at the local homeless shelter one night a week. They considered ways to involve the children better in daily chores and to help them contribute to their own college savings accounts, and they looked for opportunities to spend more time as a family.

Quite often the result of spiritual experiences is a “transitional leap” commonly evidenced by deeper, more significant changes in behaviors and the way one views the world. These experiences make it easier to let go of the past and to look more to the present and the future. Frequently the transitional person begins to dismiss a false sense of responsibility for family problems or can better see his or her part in the family pattern. A new sense of identity and an increased feeling of self-worth can emerge. Transitional people may feel more at peace with themselves, those around them, and with God. They often conclude that God lives and loves them, which can help them to forgive their offenders, where that is needed.

Doug experienced family violence at the hand of his alcoholic father. Doug said that he loves his dad and knows that his father had many negative family experiences growing up. He stated, “I came to a point where I knew I had to forgive what he did to me if I wanted my sins forgiven. I’m sure it was little bit by little bit. I started to see things differently. During high school and [my] mission, I forgave my dad out of duty, because it was right to do that, and I felt a lot of peace at that. Since, I’ve attended college. I’ve learned a lot more about why he is the way he is and I forgive him more out of . . . many people leaving behind negative family influences feel a sense of mission to help others.
pity. The reason I was able to forgive was because I learned how to pray for understanding of how important someone is to Heavenly Father, including my dad. So, I came to understand that I could love my dad. I could have charity for him. Over time, it was one of the most beautiful miracles I've had in my life. Then finally I was able to love myself, too."

Often transitional people work through a process of forgiving that can allow them to move forward with their lives without harboring resentment. This does not necessarily mean reconciliation with an abuser or harmful family member, but it can mean no longer living as a victim or holding family members to blame for one's own decisions. Often, transitional people are aided in the process of forgiveness by their own religious convictions and through more closely understanding the offender in the context of the offender's own history (empathy). Along with spiritual experiences, many people leaving behind negative family influences feel a sense of mission to help others.

Doug stated: "I started studying the teachings of Christ and for the first time in my life, I decided to try these things and see if they work. I discovered that the teachings of Christ worked. I discovered that there's power in them. Life's not easy. There's still lots of pain in my life, but at least I know what I'm supposed to do. I started focusing more on charity and on the life of Christ and to heal and uplift others, and not to judge. Everyone's walked a different path to get to where they are and I need to be sensitive to that."

This sense of mission is often future-oriented. There is a growing desire to accomplish something for themselves and their posterity. Transitional people often look beyond their own needs: They reach out in love and service to others. They demonstrate a desire to contribute and to share their talents and abilities. This sense of mission to help others can aid the transitional person to stay focused on what is important. It also adds purpose and meaning to past suffering and to present and future action plans. In spite of this, for those seeking to make significant changes, progress is often punctuated with episodic relapses or backsliding.

Carolyn was severely abused sexually and had an extremely traumatic time from early childhood to adulthood. As a youth she set some standards for herself and decided never to have sex before she was married. Then, within two months of making this decision, she was pregnant and having an abortion. After the abortion she saw a counselor and spent two weeks in a hospital. A short time after discharge she helped the counselor to produce a video about her struggles, which was then used to help other struggling young women.

Later she met a young man who valued her for who she was. She stated, "He gave me back my self-respect. He treated me like I was of worth and that there was more to me than just anatomy. I didn't have anyone else like that." They both went away to different colleges. Her behavior slipped and during the Christmas season she went into a state of depression, which included a crisis of faith. She then had an experience "that gave me faith in a higher power, that there was really something there."

She made further progress at college but began drifting. She quit in her junior year to take time to focus on herself and work through some things. She made progress through service to others. She then returned to the university and continued her healing through family-related courses. She gained further education and entered the helping field where she has successfully assisted children of abuse in the healing process.

The entire process for the transitional person is usually not one of consistent progression. Often there are starts and stops with occasional backsliding into prior unwanted patterns. As Elder Richard G. Scott observed: "Changing a profoundly embedded pattern of life can be very difficult. . . . Persistent faith in the Savior and obedience will see you through such hardships to greater blessings. The scriptures illustrate how conviction and faith can overcome traditions in conflict with God's plan,"
The scriptures illustrate how conviction and faith can overcome traditions in conflict with God’s plan, bringing blessings to individuals, and even generations of people.”

—Elder Richard G. Scott

In summary, those working to overcome a wide range of negative family influences often do the following: question their circumstances, become aware of changes that need to be made, turn to God in fervent prayer, arrive at an enlightened understanding that allows for new possibilities for themselves and their families, come up with specific strategies and action plans, believe that their own efforts can make a difference, act on their plans, receive help and learn from others, continue to have spiritual experiences that move them forward in the desired direction, learn to forgive, have a sense of mission that motivates them to help others, and learn from any backsliding or relapses. As individuals have the courage to move through the difficult and demanding process of breaking the chain of negative family influences, they can create new patterns that will bless and heal for generations to come.

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3 R. Magarrell (1994), Becoming a Transitional Character, doctoral dissertation, Brigham Young University, 6-12.
5 For more information about parents’ use of control, see B. K. Barber (2002), Intrusive Parenting How Psychological Control Affects Children and Adolescents (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association).
6 Richard G. Scott (1998, May), Removing barriers to happiness, Ensign, 28(5), 86.
One Sunday in a church meeting, my 4-year-old son was making a major disturbance. He had a bad case of the wiggles.

After several minutes of trying to calm him down, I abruptly picked him up, tucked him under my arm like a sack of potatoes, and marched down the aisle to the nearest exit. With his head bobbing, my son looked up at me and said, “Hey Dad, where we goin’?” He had no idea he was in trouble. My anger was defused instantly. Through the years, I have learned that one’s ability to laugh at everyday family calamities keeps life in perspective.

If we learn to laugh and play more with our families, we will not only feel better but so will they. Studies show that humor and laughter help people live longer, happier lives, be more creative and productive, and have more energy with less physical discomfort.1

Laughter reduces stress, fear, intimidation, embarrassment, and anger.2 Laughter has extraordinary healing power.3 When a person laughs, blood pressure decreases, heart rate and respiration increase, the body releases endorphins, and depression declines.4 After the laughter subsides, that good feeling has a lasting effect, even until the next day.5 There aren’t many medicines that will do that. It’s like “a spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down.”6

Children laugh four hundred times a day, while adults laugh fifteen.7 Why the gap? Did we lose something? Have we forgotten the way we used to be? Why is it that children seem to cope with life’s oddities better than adults? Perhaps it’s simply because they laugh. As we grow older, we get way too serious. Watch children play. They don’t need things. Everything is fun to them. They’re spontaneous. It’s only when we become adults that we start to get boring. Humor is the way we see things; it’s the way we think; it’s an attitude, not an event. Perhaps the key lies in becoming more childlike.

When I return home from work each day, I conscientiously think about what I’m going to say the moment I enter the door. I usually shout some outlandish remark to get my family’s attention. A typical loud entrance for me is “Hello, all you lucky people; I’m home!” Visitors to our home may have a few questions, but for the rest of the family, they know that it’s just Dad. I find that it helps set the tone for a fun home and instantly puts everyone at ease. I’m sure that it occasionally embarrasses my children, but the good outweighs the bad. It also helps me to make the change mentally from work to
home. I do not want to come home tired, ornery, or dull. Most of us can make ourselves be our best at work. Doesn’t our family deserve at least that? “A little craziness once in a while perpetuates sanity.”

I think laughter is more important than a family vacation, because it’s always available, it can happen every day, and it’s free. Happy families are those living together every day and making the most of it. Laughter is like getting away without going away. It gives you a break. “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine” (Proverbs 17:22).

Play and laughter are closely related. Does this mean we should play with our kids? Absolutely. Laugh more, play more, swing out of familiar places. Play puts everyone on an equal footing, first by the nature of play itself and second because you can change the rules to fit the situation. Play brings families together. It is a subtle tool for interaction and talk. It builds confidence. Inhibitions are minimized while our real personalities emerge.

Years ago, I saw through my kitchen window a man playing with his children in a park sand pile. He was right down there on his hands and knees in the sand, building a small imaginary town with streets, cars, trucks, trees, houses, stores, and schools with his children. I watched him push a wooden block like a bulldozer, pretending to build a road and including the sound effects. I remember thinking, now there is an example of a great dad who knows how to play with his children. He was seen by every passing car. Was he embarrassed or ruffled? Not at all. Such enthusiasm for play encourages growth in children, relieves stress, and builds friendships among family members. Laughter and play become a calming influence in the home environment.

Laughter also improves communication and builds relationships because everyone laughs in the same language. Your children will remember your humor much longer than they will the things you buy them. Children are more receptive when they are having fun. Laughter helps us remember. Humor creates an unforgettable learning experience because it makes us laugh and feel good. And we remember what we feel.

Early in our marriage, my wife said, “Let’s make our home more fun for our kids than any other place our children could be.” Laughter and play are the best ingredients for that. We cannot duplicate Disneyland, nor should we. A family firmly rooted in love and wholesome recreation is far better than any commercial entertainment. In other words, home should be a fun place to hang out with family and friends.

Laughter builds friendships. Families that laugh together are inseparable. Laughter makes us approachable. It removes barriers. If you want to talk to your children about a serious matter, try a lighter approach. Family meetings and interviews would be far more effective if play, laughter, and refreshments were added.

Humor, used with sensitivity, can unite spouses. While I was serving as a bishop of a singles ward, one engaged couple asked me if they could have their wedding reception at our house. I quickly replied, “Of course you can.” I forgot to tell my wife. When my wife received the wedding invitation a few days before the big event, she happened to notice that the reception location was the same address as our house. When I got
home from work, she asked me if I had forgotten to tell her something important. After considerable thought, I said, “Not that I can think of.” “Are we having a wedding reception at our house?” she asked. I knew I was in trouble. “Oooooh, you mean ‘that’ reception,” I replied. I quickly volunteered to prepare our home for the reception—under her able direction, of course. We laughed together and went to work.

Humor disarms most family tension. Once while talking to my children about some family issues, one of our teenagers crouched over, wrinkled up his nose, and, with a tone of disapproval, blurted out some outlandish comment about what I had said. I found myself taken aback by his behavior when suddenly I crouched over, wrinkled up my nose, and, with a tone of disapproval, blurted out some outlandish reply, perfectly mimicking his behavior. The entire family burst into laughter and the tension vanished.

Of course humor will vary depending on our personalities. While some people seem to have a natural sense of humor, most of us must work to develop it. Some of us will tell jokes, while others will share jokes and one-liners. Still others will use art, humorous clippings, and e-mails. For some of us, smiling will be our humor. Smiling is something we can all do, and smiling leads to laughter. As Sister Marjorie Pay Hinckley said, “The only way to get through life is to laugh your way through it. You either have to laugh or cry. I prefer to laugh. Crying gives me a headache.”

There are some cautions with humor. Family members must be careful not to offend, intimidate, or embarrass. We should laugh with rather than at someone. No one likes to be teased. No one likes to be the brunt of a joke. By learning to laugh at ourselves, we usually become safe from offending. As Sister Hinckley said about her husband, “he didn’t take himself very seriously and was often the first to poke fun at his own quirks.”

Most family calamities, given enough time, provide humor. Like the time I took my misbehaving 2-year-old son, Tyler, home from sacrament meeting. After turning on cartoons for my son, I fell asleep. I didn’t wake up when my 5-year-old showed up to take Tyler back to Primary. Trouble was, Tyler had stripped down to moon boots and training pants and picked up his popgun rifle on the way out the door. Sacrament meeting was not quite over, and the bishop was pouring out his soul to the congregation. It was whisper quiet when Tyler, wearing moon boots and training pants, marched up the aisle with his rifle, took aim, and shot the bishop. It woke up the congregation. Of course, it wasn’t funny then. Time helps humor emerge gradually. The trick is finding the humor in the event now.

So does this mean we go around laughing all the time? Of course not. But we certainly could laugh a lot more.

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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
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?”

What might seem to some people a sacrifice of privacy was and is to them a blessing of companionship.

“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.

Duane E. Hiatt has been a Brigham Young University administrator, a writer of “The Spoken Word” for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, author of the book Overcoming Personal Loss, composer of the Primary song “Follow the Prophet,” member of The Three D’s music and comedy group, and twice a bishop. He and Diane Robertson have 15 children. Following Diane’s death he married Sharon Lee Johnson.

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.”
THE FAMILY

A PROCLAMATION TO THE WORLD

THE FIRST PRESIDENCY AND COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

We, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.

All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.

In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshiped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize his or her divine destiny as an heir of eternal life. The divine plan of happiness enables family relationships to be perpetuated beyond the grave. Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally.

The First Commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and wife. We declare that God’s commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.

We declare the means by which mortal life is created to be divinely appointed. We affirm the sanctity of life and of its importance in God’s eternal plan.

Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. “Children are an heritage of the Lord” (Psalms 127:3). Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God and to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live. Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations.

The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity. Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities. By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners. Disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation. Extended families should lend support when needed.

We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring, or who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God. Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.

We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.

This proclamation was read by President Gordon B. Hinckley as part of his message at the General Relief Society Meeting held September 23, 1995, in Salt Lake City, Utah.

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“Can we make our homes more beautiful? Yes, through addressing ourselves as families to the source of all true beauty.”

—President Gordon B. Hinckley