

The Amazing Formula for Creating Happy Families

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This address was given at the 2001 Family Expo Conference

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JOY: President Gordon B. Hinckley made a statement that expresses our philosophy. He said, “In all of life have much of fun and laughter. Life is to be enjoyed, not just endured” (*Ensign*, May 1996, p. 94). Isn’t that great—the prophet is telling us to laugh and have fun. Life is to be enjoyed, not just endured. Sometimes life can seem so overwhelming that we can barely endure—the thought of *enjoying* seems out of the question. At one point, when we were dealing with some difficult trials in our life, including the serious learning disabilities of our youngest daughter, we realized that if we were going to find some measure of happiness, something needed to change. That’s when we decided to make a conscious decision to laugh more than we cried—to find every opportunity to see the humor and laugh. Our five-year-old daughter gave us that opportunity shortly after we made that decision. I caught her hitting her brother—she was quite normal in that regard—and was reprimanding her. She looked up at me with her big brown eyes and said, “But, Mommy, I can’t help it. I’m brain bandaged.” Now that’s funny! I don’t know how she came up with that phrase but it was classic. I could hardly wait for Gary to come home so I could tell him. I did, and we laughed. And we also realized that she was smarter than we thought. If you look for the humor in life—and it’s there in abundance if we just look for it—then life can be much happier.

Through Gary’s work as a family therapist and our own experiences raising five children, we discovered a concept that opened the door to even greater joy in our family relationships.

GARY: Have you ever felt like you were carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders? I see we have some here who can relate to this. In my therapy work I saw people bearing burdens they didn't need to carry. They were struggling with relationships in their families. They said there were two phrases they often heard: "You're not listening" and "You don't care." They said they were listening and they did care, but it wasn't working. I determined there had to be a better way to communicate—a way that didn't drive people away or overburden the listeners. As I thought about this dilemma, I thought there had to be a way to deal with each other on a different level and came up with the premise: I do not have the power to make anything all better for anyone else—I can offer my help, but I can't make it all better. So that we all understand how this premise fits—how many here have ever taught a child to ride a two-wheel bicycle? What is one of the first things you put on the bicycle? Training wheels. What's the first thing they wanted off the bicycle? Training wheels. Do you remember the day you took the training wheels off? You grabbed hold of the back of the seat of the bicycle and then put the child on the bicycle and said, "Peddle fast." And you went running along and the child said, "Let go." Normally within a few feet the child falls and ends up with a bloody chin or elbows? How many here can make that all better? Okay, mothers, what do you do? You lean down, swoop the child up in your arms, kiss him, and say, "All better." Just ignore the blood dripping.

How many of you would like to be able to make other people's lives all better? Yes, most of us do because we care. The problem is we think because we have the desire that we also have the power, but we don't. We came up with the concept of "validation." One of its definitions is that it is a process of corroborating a truth. We're going to be talking about this process. We have given an additional meaning to the word validation, which is:

Validation means walking beside another person without trying to change his or her direction.

Walking beside another person emotionally without trying to change his or her direction. It's important to get the visualization of where you're walking, which is beside. When you walk behind, your tendency is to push, shove, or steer. In front your tendency is to pull, yank, drag, or some may say lead them. Both of these are in whose direction? Yours! When you validate another person, you walk beside him, not trying to change him into your way of thinking or into doing what you think he should do. You just walk beside him, using the four rules of validation. These four rules are Listen, Listen, Listen, and Understand. Let me define these.

LISTEN by giving your full attention.

First Listen: Listen by giving our full attention—that means eye contact and all. Have you ever been talking with someone who was shuffling papers, working on their computer, or watching

TV while you were trying to talk to them? How did you feel? Like you might as well not be there. If you would like someone to give you their full attention, then you need to do the same for them. Stop what you are doing and give the person your full attention.

Second Listen:

LISTEN to the emotions being expressed.

Listen to the person's emotions. Emotions are very personal and need to be acknowledged and respected. Have you ever had anyone say to you, "You shouldn't feel that way"? We need to allow others to feel what they are feeling. It is through allowing another person to feel what they are feeling that emotions can be dealt with and resolved.

Third Listen:

LISTEN to the needs that are
being expressed.

Listen to the needs. They are simply expressing their needs and don't need solutions offered. Too often when someone is expressing his needs and you think you have the essence of the problem, you go inside and start thinking of a solution to his problem. As soon as you do that you stop listening. The most important need for that moment is to have you just listen without trying to solve.

Fourth, now comes the toughest one of all. Understand:

UNDERSTAND from the other
person's perspective.

Understand from the other person's perspective, not yours. We need to do our best to understand from the other person's point of view. Let me demonstrate one of the things that often happens at the beginning of a conversation: [turns to Joy] "Honey, I have really had a bad day today. It's just been terrible." [JOY replies]: "Gary, you don't know what terrible is! Let me tell you what happened to me." What just happened to my conversation?

Shows all four rules.

Have you ever had that happen to you? How did you feel? Notice I didn't ask how many had done this. Keep the focus with the other person and just try your best to understand what he's going through. You do this by Listening by giving your full attention; Listening to the emotions being expressed; Listening to the needs being expressed; and Doing the best you can to understand from the other person's point of view.

JOY: Here's an experience that illustrates how this works. Our son had recently returned from his mission and was living at home while he attended college. He needed a part-time job to pay for his miscellaneous expenses—dating, pizza, and such. After much looking he finally found one delivering pizza for a pizza restaurant. His boss was great and really worked well with his schedule. This experience happened after he had that job about two months. During that two-month period he met this lovely young woman, Amy, and he was falling in love with Amy. One

Saturday morning he came into the kitchen and said to me, “I am so happy. Finally, I have a day off. I don’t have to go to work any time today or tonight. I’ve got an all day and evening date with Amy.”

Amy is the second child in a family of ten children, so she has lots of younger brothers and sisters. Paul is our youngest and he had no younger siblings. He loves kids. He said, “I’m going to Amy’s house this morning and we’re going to have fun with the kids—wash cars, have water fights and just play around with them. Then in the afternoon Amy and I are going off on our date. So I’ll see you later tonight.” And off he went—one very happy guy. He hadn’t been gone long when the phone rang. It was his boss. “Is Paul there?” “No.” “Do you know where he is?” “Yes.” “Will you please call him and tell him two people have called in sick today and we’ve just got to have his help. Will you please have him call me?” “Okay. I will have him call you.”

I got Paul on the phone and told him the news. With great disgust he said, “I hate it when you speak for me!” I replied, “All I said was that you would call him.” “You never should have told him I would call him because I’m not going to.” Now it was my turn to be disgusted—don’t they reach some measure of maturity by the time they come home from a mission? I said, “I can’t believe you’re talking like this. Your boss has bent over backwards for you and you can’t help him out when he needs you? And after all your father and I have taught you about responsibility!” He said, “I said I’m not calling him!” And I said, “Fine! Make a liar out of your mother!” Then I said goodbye and hung up. I was so disgusted with his irresponsible attitude.

As soon as I hung up I thought, *Why did I do that?* I knew better. After all, I knew all about validation. Why hadn’t I validated his feelings? I decided I had to do it over. I had to do it the right way. I believe in doing it over when you make a mistake. Isn’t that the good thing about mortality, you get to do it over, trying to get it right, until the day you die. So I picked up the phone and called him back and said, “Hello, Paul. This is Mother.” And he said, “Yeah, what do you want?!” Well, when I heard that tone, all those feelings returned. I thought, *Get a grip, woman.* I took a deep breath and said, “I just called back to apologize.” Then I validated his feelings by saying, “I’ve been thinking, son, if it were my day off and I had all the wonderful plans you have, I wouldn’t want to go to work either.” Wouldn’t you feel that way, too? Validation is just being honest. Then I said, “I just pass the information on to you to do with it what you think is best for you.

He said, “Thanks, Mom.” Then there was a pause, and I have learned it’s smart to keep quiet during the pauses. He said, “I think I’ll call him.” Ten minutes later he was home putting on his pizza suit, and off he went to work.

I learned two very important things that day. First, when you have information to pass on to someone, just pass on the information, not what they should do about their information. That’s their responsibility.

Leave the responsibility where it belongs.

Leave the responsibility where it belongs. When we jump in and tell another person what they should do, we assume their responsibility. We need to leave the responsibility where it belongs—with the person with the problem. Everyone is born into this world with agency—the right to choose. When we tell someone what to do, it is perceived as trying to take that right away, and they aren't going to let that happen, even if it means making a wrong choice. Many times we force our children into making decisions they ordinarily wouldn't make had we not jumped in so quickly, telling them what to do.

Another thing I learned that day was that Paul knew more about his life than I knew about his life. Now that isn't that a new thought. Thinking we know more about a person's life and what they should do seems a little arrogant. We need to trust people and respect them enough to give them a chance to come up with their own solutions. We will be amazed at how smart our children, and others, become when we give them the chance to consider their options without putting them in a defensive position by telling them right off what to do about their problem.

GARY: Helaman understood this principle well and used it with his 2,000 stripling warriors. They were faced with an important decision. The Lamanite army had stopped pursuing them, and Helaman suspected they might have turned on their battle-worn brethren, the army of Antipus, who may be in desperate need of help. Helaman presented the problem to his young warriors. Instead of telling them what to do, he said, “What say ye, my sons, will ye go against them in battle?” (Alma 56:44). He left the responsibility with them. He didn't preach them any sermons at that point. He simply asked them what they wanted to do, leaving the responsibility with them and in so doing he gave them the opportunity to preach the sermon to him. They said,

... behold, our God is with us, and he will not suffer that we should fall; then let us go forth; we would not slay our brethren if they would let us alone; therefore let us go, lest they should overpower the army of Antipus (Alma 56:46).

They made the decision. What trust and respect they must have felt from Helaman! Then they assured him that “they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them.” I wonder what would have happened if Helaman would have jumped in and told them what to do: “We've got to go defend our brethren! You can do it and God will help you—didn't your mothers teach you that?” When we allow our children to preach the sermon to us, then it is cemented into their minds and hearts.

JOY: And how is it that Helaman's warriors knew what to do? They had been taught by their mothers. We must teach our children so that when the moment of decision comes, they will have the knowledge within themselves.

That's why we have family home evening. We must take advantage of opportunities to teach “out of the heat of the moment.” Not when the moment of decision is upon them. Not hammering them over the head with our family values and sermons when the “heat” is on. Rather, teach

them in a spirit of love at the right time—around the dinner table, in the car as you drive along, at night when you tuck them into bed.

GARY: I want you to imagine that your son comes to you and says, “Dad, I’m so mad at Johnnie that I want to go over to his house and smash his nose all over his face!” What is your immediate reaction? There are a great number of fears that all of the sudden start to run through your mind. “Where has my son learned such violent behavior? I didn’t teach him to act that way. What if he gets injured? What if he really injures Johnnie? Will he get arrested? Will we get sued? Will he or his family retaliate? How will we look as parents to the neighbors?” Some would say, “You can’t do that.” To that he might say, “Oh, yes I can. Just watch me.” His manhood has just been challenged and he would have to prove he is a man. Next you might say, “You shouldn’t do that because in our family we don’t settle problems with violence.” To which he might say, “You just don’t understand,” and turn around and leave.

Maybe the first thing to ask is, “What happened?” And you might be surprised to hear something like, “Dad, you wouldn’t believe what he said about you! I’m not having anybody say thing like that about you.” You could say, “I’m sorry to hear about that. How did you feel?” Let him express what is on his mind without diverting to trying to find out what was said. Now let me pause here and ask, How many here have ever wanted to punch somebody in the nose?

Remember we are talking about walking beside another person. You might say, “You know son, I’ve felt like doing that also.” He might say, “You? My dad?” “Yes, me your dad.” Did you do it?” “No, I didn’t, but I wanted to.” Now comes the first validating question: “What do you think you are going to do?” He might say, “I know what I want to do. But I am confused about what to do. Dad, what should I do?” Some think this is the teaching moment. It is not because it is in the heat of the moment and he is not ready to learn anything at this point. Also, notice what he just tried to do with the question, What should I do? He just attempted to give you the responsibility. Remember, leave the responsibility where it belongs.

How about saying, “I’m not sure what you *should* do. What do you think you *can* do?” If he is not sure, then say, “How about taking some time and thinking about it and let’s get together later and talk.” This will catch him by surprise as he normally would get either a lecture or be told what to do. Now you leave him to face the hardest person in the world to face—himself.

As you have set the appointment you must keep it and go to him and ask him what he decided. If he asks, “About what?” Just say, “Sounds like you’ve worked things out. That’s great, son.” Then leave the subject alone because it has been resolved in his mind and is no long a problem.

When we are dealing people who are going through problems there is an important therapeutic process that needs to happen: People need to talk to the depth of that problem they need to. Once they’ve gone to that depth, there is like a little switch that turns and they will turn themselves around and start to come up to face the problem. Karl Rogers, the father of person-centered therapy, calls this switch and change of direction the desire for personal actualization. This means that born in each of us is the desire to go to and perform at a higher level. The scriptures call it the Light of Christ, that which draws us to a greater truth. We are all born with it. The problem is, we don’t seem to trust the process.

However there is another school of thought that tells us how to solve others' problems. It is called PMA, or positive mental attitude. The theory is that all you need to do, when you find someone down, is to give them a positive mental attitude statement and it will turn the other person's life around and all will be well. You don't seem to believe this. Well, neither do I. And yet we still do this to each other.

Let me share with you a card I picked up at a shop. "A positive attitude may not solve all of your problems. . . . However, it will annoy enough people to make it worth your effort."

JOY: Here are two examples of how allowing a person to go to the depth works and when to use a PMA and when not to. Our eight-year-old granddaughter, Stacy, and her parents were staying at our home for a six-week period—they were waiting to move into their new home. One morning our daughter and her husband came to me and said, "We need to run some errands today, and we were going to take Stacy with us, but she's still asleep. It's going to take us nearly the whole day and she's going to be so bored. Is there a chance we could leave her here with you?" I said that would be fine, and they left.

Not long after they had gone, I heard Stacy crying and went to her. She was standing in the room where her parents had been sleeping and said, "Grandma, my mom and dad are gone! Where did they go?" I replied, "Oh, honey, they went to do those errands." Incredulously she said, "You mean they left me?" Now this little girl was very upset, with tears flowing. And who am I? The grandma. What do grandmas do? We make it all better. We so easily get hooked . . . because we care. I said, "Oh, honey, it's okay. We're going to have a really good time today." She answered, "Oh, no we're not!" I realized then that I needed to validate her feelings and let her go to the depth with her problem without changing her direction and trying to cheer her up. So I said, "Stacy, honey, if I were planning on going somewhere and I got left behind, I'd be really disappointed, too." She said, "Would you really, Grandma?" "Yes, I would." Remember, validation is *honesty*. Then she began to cry harder and pour out her heart to me. Do you know what going on errands means to a child? Treats. McDonald's Happy Meals. A time with Mom and Dad. Of course she was disappointed. She had her own plan and now it was ruined. I just let her go as far as she needed with this, validating her with words like "that is disappointing" and "that's hard." Then it happened. The little switch went off in her mind—she had gone as far as she needed to. I could see it in her face. It brightened as she said, "Oh, it's okay, Grandma. Now what shall we do?" I said, "We're going to have so much fun, we're going to do . . ." and I enumerated what we would do. She said, "Oh, goody."

Because she had been allowed to express her feelings to the depth she needed to, she was able to accept it and be excited about what we would do. Do you know how long it took her to reach that depth? One minute! That was it. What usually makes it take so long? It's us. We keep getting in the way and stopping the process. It's amazing how quickly a person can reach the point of turning positive when we stop trying to fix their problem or cheer them up.

This next example was told to me by a single mother of a seventeen-year-old son. She said, "He has hated me. He would come to me and say, 'I hate you for divorcing my dad. I hate you for kicking Dad out of our home!'" She said, "I would always respond with 'but, son, it had to

happen because of . . .” and she would begin to list her reasons. By the way, whose perspective is that? Hers. He would respond with “I hate you for it!” and run out of the house.

She said, “I tried everything to win him over, and nothing worked.” Then she learned this principle of validation. She said, “I saw what I was doing wrong. So the next time he came to me yelling ‘I hate you for divorcing Dad!’ she said, “I looked at it from his perspective and saw a whole new view.” She said to him, “Oh, son. It must be so hard to have your dad gone from our home.” She didn’t need to defend her position or justify anything, just understand from his perspective. He immediately softened and began to pour out the hurt and sorrow he was feeling. She said she didn’t end it with her point of view or little lectures on why it had to happen. She just listened to him and then told him she loved him. It happened a couple of more times. Then one day he came to her and said, “Mom, how come it had to happen?” Because he had been allowed to express his feelings to the depth he needed to without interruption or preaching, he was able then to consider what she had gone through. She said, “We now have the best relationship we have ever had.”

The apostle Paul understood this concept. He said,

“Weep with them that weep.”
(Romans 12:15)

Isn’t it interesting that he didn’t say, “Cheer up those who weep”? I think he understood that it is through weeping—validating—with those who weep that they then are able to come to a more positive frame of mind within themselves.

GARY: Let me show you how this works with adult children. In order to do this, let’s start with an example of a mother and how she dealt with her seven-year-old daughter.

JOY: The mother called and told me this experience just recently. Her little girl came home from school all upset and crying. “My friends won’t let me play with them anymore. They’ve formed a club now and I’m not in it so they won’t play with me.” The mother said, “I almost said, ‘Don’t play with those girls—they’re not nice. Find new friends,’ or ‘I’m going to call their mothers!’”

Because this mother had learned about validation she bit her tongue and said, “Oh, honey, that would really hurt.” The little girl said, “It does hurt, Mommy.” And she poured her little heart out to her mother. Then, the mother remembered: leave the responsibility where it belongs. The mother said, “What are you going to do?” Her little seven-year-old said, “I know what to do. I’m going to invite them over to my house to play with me, one girl at a time. They will see what a fun friend I can be, and they will want to play with me at school.” She was completely surprised by the wisdom of her answer.

GARY: Too many times we look upon our adult children as though they were still little children and we don't even give them the respect the mother of this seven-year-old did. What do you do when they call you with their problems? Do you heap your advice upon them or whip your checkbook out, ready to bail them out of their problems? One woman shared with us her experience in dealing with her adult children. She said they were continually calling her for help. She said their problems were overwhelming her. No matter how much advice or money she gave, they still seemed to have the same old problems. And they were disrespectful to her. It was killing her emotionally and physically—she became very ill and was getting into a financial bind. Then she learned about validation and empowering them to solve their own problems. If they called saying, “I need help with my car payment this month,” or any other financial need, instead of trying to solve their problems, she would say, “That’s really hard. What do you think you can do?” She was surprised at how many times they came up with good solutions on their own. And the end result is that they are more financially responsible and treat her with great respect and she feeling well again.

While presenting this concept in Montpelier, Idaho, a young couple, whose parents obviously lived in Logan, Utah, exclaimed, “I hope you haven’t been to Logan yet.”

JOY: Does this mean you don’t give money or advice to your children? Of course not. But you give the help very prayerfully, so that you become a blessing, not a hindrance, in their lives. As you leave the responsibility with your children, or anyone, there is one caution: to the person with the problem, do not say, “Hey, that’s your problem, not mine. You fix it.” That’s not kind nor caring. Nor do they need “here’s what you should do.” They need your understanding heart and listening ear, not your solutions or reprimands nor a disinterested attitude.

GARY: To make this a living principle, we want to share with you a few validating phrases and questions. We’ll start with the most sophisticated validating phrase. Are you ready? “Oh.” You have to say it the right way. Let me diagram it. Say it with me. Oh. Now the next most sophisticated validating phrase. “Wow!” Say it. Wow! And the next: “Hmmmmm.” How about a longer one: “Oh, my goodness.” How many of you have used these phrases? Of course you have, everyone has, and you didn’t even know you were validating.

Here’s another concept that helps the other person know you are listening. Have you heard of reflective listening? I’m not an advocate of reflective listening. To repeat everything back to a person is like living in an echo chamber. It’s demeaning and stretches the conversation on and on. Instead, consider using their “operative word.” The operative word carried the emotion.

For example, “Today at the office they recognized George and gave him the promotion that I thought I would get it. That was really hard for me.” What is the operative word? Hard. So what could you say to your friend to let him know you are listening? How about: “That would be hard.” The operative word is “hard.” Or if someone said to you, “My daughter called me today and was yelling at me and calling me all sorts of names. It really hurt me.” You could say, “That would hurt.” “Hey, we’re going on a cruise.” What about if someone said to you, “Hey, I got a raise today.” Rejoice with them and validate their feelings of happiness with something like: “Great!” Let’s hear it. Great!

Now to validating questions. There is one question I suggest you stop using: Why. Why not use why? It puts people on the defensive. Instead of communicating and giving information, they have to defend themselves. Besides, there are only four answers to “why”: Anybody know them? I don’t know. Cuz. Why not. And a shrug of the shoulders. So what do you use? How about using what, where, when, how, is, do, can, are, did. What happened? Where did it happen? How do you feel? Is there anything I can do? These questions give the person a chance to share information and feel understood and cared about. Questions are validating when they are used to find out information. There is a common key and it is: Validating phrases and questions do not contain any answers. They allow the other person to supply the information and answers.

Would you like to know how this works in marriage? Let’s do a little scenario here. Husbands, you come home and your wife is looking like this: [all washed out]. At that point what do you say? No, not “what’s for dinner?” “How was your day, dear?” He asks so you think he wants to hear. Then she lets it all out and goes “Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaang.” How would you wives feel if, after you are through sharing your terrible day, he said to you, “Well, dear if you were just a little better organized”?

Okay, wives, how about when your husband comes home after a hard days work, dragging his briefcase six feet behind him, feeling lower than snake hips in a rut. And you ask him, “How was your day, hon?” And he lets it all out and goes “Waaaaang.” Notice the difference? Want to know why the difference? Research shows that generally a man speaks about 12,000 words a day. A woman speaks about 25,000! By the time he gets home, he’s used up 11,999 words, and you wives have just gotten started. On with the story. You have just poured your heart out to your wife. How would you husbands feel if your wife said, “Well, dear, if you’d just gotten up a little earlier”?

What do you need after a bad day? Four things: someone who will listen, listen, listen, and understand, without telling you what you should have done or what you should do next time.

JOY: Validation is a great gift in a marriage relationship. When you validate your mate, you show you care about him or her. You listen without jumping in, telling each other what to do.

An interesting thing happens when you allow your spouse, or anyone, to pour his or her heart out to you without giving advice. It allows the chaos in their minds to be laid out before them, taking on an order. It is then that they can look at their own problem objectively. They will likely be able to come up with their own good solutions as you use the validating phrases and questions. They may say, “I know what I could have done,” or, “The next time that happens, I’m going to. . . .” When people come up with their own solutions, they feel valued and respected. And they are more likely to follow through in positive ways.

If you have an idea that might help, you can share it by saying, “I have a suggestion that might help. I don’t know if it will or not . . . only you will know that, but here’s something you might consider.” Then share your idea, trusting the person to accept it or reject it without any pressure from you either way. But save it until they have exhausted their own ideas.

I believe that Jesus Christ is the greatest validator of all time. He listens to us and understands to the depth than none of us can comprehend. That's what the atonement is all about. He knows what we're going through. He has the power to come down and make everything all better, but it's not the plan. In fact, that would thwart the plan. He allows us to think, ponder, and come up with solutions that will work for us. Oh, he definitely opens little doors along the way as we rely on him, but he allows us to do the learning and growing.

We are of infinite worth to Jesus Christ. He is with us. He walks besides us. He is real. I know He lives and loves us.

GARY: I, too, know He lives. He knows what you are going through, and He is there reaching His hand out to you. All we need to do is take hold. I bear testimony that He loves each one of us. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.