

# *Parenting Children and Teens in Positive Ways that Matter*

Craig H. Hart

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Craig H. Hart is a Professor and Chair  
Marriage, Family, and Human Development  
School of Family Life, Brigham Young University

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For further information write:

BYU Family Expo,  
136 Harman Continuing Education Building,  
Provo, Utah 84602.  
(801) 422-3559  
E-mail: [conferences@byu.edu](mailto:conferences@byu.edu)  
Home page: <http://familyexpo.byu.edu>

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I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about positive parenting. This is somewhat of a stretch for me, since Kerstine and I recently concluded that we did our best parenting before we ever had children. So, despite questioning my own qualifications for addressing this topic, I hope that what I have to say will strengthen my own parenting skills as well as those of future parents, current parents, and grandparents who are here today. I pray that the Spirit will touch our hearts and help us find solutions to some of the challenges that each of us faces in our child-rearing responsibilities, so that we may become more capable of rearing our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. In the course of my remarks, I will be drawing from the Proclamation on the Family, prophetic counsel on parenting, and supportive scientific research on parenting styles.

Recently, President Hinckley said, “Of all the joys of life, none other equals that of happy

parenthood. Of all the responsibilities with which we struggle, none other is so serious. To rear children in an atmosphere of love, security, and faith is the most rewarding of all challenges. The good result from such efforts becomes life's most satisfying compensation."

Indeed, there are joys in parenthood. Who can question the fulfillment that comes from watching our own children take their first steps, help another child in need, perform well in a play or sports event, deliver an inspiring family home evening lesson, or enjoy having a delightful conversation with us over an ice cream cone? Yet, as President Hinckley noted, we also struggle with our parenting responsibilities. Elder Bruce R. Hafen of the First Quorum of the Seventy recently said it well. "The Lord put Adam and Eve on the earth as full grown people. Why couldn't he have done that with this boy of ours?" His wife wisely replied, "God gave us that child to make Christians out of us" (World Congress of Families II, 1999, see [www.worldcongress.org](http://www.worldcongress.org)).

The Proclamation on the Family gives deep insight into parenting. It summarizes revealed knowledge about the divine nature of children who come into our homes in ways that give us eternal perspective on our responsibilities:

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. . . .

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 Family: A Proclamation to the World" *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102, ¶¶ 2–3).

Children come into the world with different spiritual gifts (D&C 46) as well as with varying biological constraints and capacities. Spiritual identity and gifts were cultivated in the premortal realm (D&C 46; Abraham 3) and interact with genetic individuality in ways that influence how children respond to their earthly environments. Thus, different children reared in the same home will likely display different interests, personalities, and behavior because of unique biological blueprints provided by parents, coupled with spiritual predispositions, talents, and desires. These characteristics are further refined by environmental factors in and out of the home and by the ways that children respond to them. In order to succeed in adapting to the individual nature of each child, Brigham Young encouraged parents to "study their [children's] dispositions and their temperaments, and deal with them accordingly."

Some children may be more difficult or easy to rear due, in part, to inherent personality characteristics that stem from spiritual predispositions. As President Brigham Young also noted: "Some spirits are more noble than others; some are capable of receiving more than others. There is the same variety in the spirit world that you behold here, yet they are of the same parentage, of one Father, one God."

God referred to Cain, for example, as “the father of his lies . . . for thou wast also [a liar] before the world” (Moses 5:24). Alternatively, there were many “noble and great ones” who “were good” from before the world (Abraham 3:22–23). Nephi was likely one of those valiant ones who exercised his agency in responsible ways. He had “great desires to know of the mysteries of God . . . [and] did not rebel” (1 Nephi 2:16) against his father, as his brethren Laman and Lemuel did. Yet all three brothers were “born of goodly parents” (1 Nephi 1:1).

Other children may be more easy or difficult to rear due, in part, to biological or genetic predispositions that science has identified as being associated with sociability, academic achievement, shyness, aggression, impulsiveness, thrill seeking, emotionality, and even depression and other mood or behavioral challenges. Elder Neal A. Maxwell stated, “Of course our genes, circumstances, and environments matter very much, and they shape us significantly.” Whatever the nature and disposition of a given child, the Proclamation teaches the principle that parents should “rear their children in love and righteousness” (§ 6). How this is done in practice for each child may vary according to his or her individual nature. As we have noted in our family, parenting practices that work for one child do not always work for another.

Isn't it interesting that brothers and sisters born into the same family are so uniquely different from one another? Social science studies have shown that children in the same family can have just as different personalities as those born in different families. Beyond personality characteristics, however, brothers and sisters are more likely to share the same moral and religious values, as compared to children raised in different homes. This attests to the importance of parents teaching children moral and spiritual truths by word and by example.

To help children become masters of themselves and to exercise their agency in accordance with correct principles, the Proclamation enjoins parents to “*teach* [their children] to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God and to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live” (§ 6, emphasis added). This can be done in a variety of ways through family home evenings, individual instruction, family prayer, and family scripture study. Teaching these principles can also be accomplished, in part, by parents setting a righteous example. President David O. McKay noted accordingly: “Children are more influenced by the sermons you act than by the sermons you preach.” Acting the sermons requires self-discipline on the part of parents, and most fall short from time to time. As President Brigham Young observed, “I have seen more parents who were unable to control themselves than I ever saw who were unable to control their children.”

Parents can also play a supportive role by helping children overcome weaknesses and build upon natural strengths in ways that enhance “individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose” (§ 2). It is my opinion that children are oftentimes sent to specific homes because of parents whom the Lord feels would be the best match for enhancing positive child characteristics and providing growth in areas where spiritual and genetic attributes may be less than complete.

In accordance with teaching by word and by example, what are some specific ways that parents can rear their children in love and righteousness to accomplish these ends? I have come to the

conclusion that because of the uniqueness of each child, there are no recipe books. President James E. Faust reinforced my views recently when he said, “Child rearing is so individualistic. Every child is different and unique. What works with one may not work with another. I do not know who is wise enough to say what discipline is too harsh or what is too lenient except the parents of the children themselves, who love them most. It is a matter of prayerful discernment for the parents. Certainly the overarching and undergirding principle is that the discipline of children must be motivated more by love than by punishment.”

However, prophets and other Church leaders of this dispensation have given wonderful counsel based on eternal principles that can be of great value to us in our individual circumstances. I have noted that their counsel revolves around three major themes. These are (1) unrighteous dominion, (2) indulgence/permissiveness, and (3) rearing children in love and righteousness.

## Unrighteous Dominion

As noted in D&C 121, unrighteous dominion centers around coercion, dominion, and compulsion “upon the souls of the children of men.” Parenting that derides, demeans, or diminishes children and teens by continually putting them in their place, putting them down, mocking them, or holding power over them via punitive or psychologically controlling means is called coercive parenting. It takes place in homes where there is a climate of hostility manifest by frequent spanking, yelling, criticizing, and forcing. Social science research has demonstrated that a pervasive climate of coercion and hostility is likely to increase antisocial, anxious, withdrawn, and delinquent behaviors in children and adolescents both within and outside of the home.

Psychologically controlling behaviors may include communicating disinterest in what a child is saying, invalidating or discounting a child’s feelings, attacking a child in a condescending or patronizing way, and using guilt induction, love withdrawal, or erratic emotional behavior as means of control and manipulation. Love withdrawal (e.g., angrily refusing to talk to or look at a child after he or she misbehaves), in particular, runs contrary to ways that God deals with His disobedient children. For example, in Isaiah chapter 5:25, the Lord assures: “[My] hand is stretched out still” (Isaiah 5:25).

*What about sparing the rod?* Parenting practices that include physical punishment (“the rod”) have been advocated by many on the basis of biblical interpretations. As to whether spanking is appropriate or not, research can be found that supports both sides of the argument. However, President Gordon B. Hinckley, echoing the counsel of many other prophets, said, “I have never accepted the principle of ‘spare the rod and spoil the child.’ . . . Children don’t need beating. They need love and encouragement.” Brigham Young said, “I will say here to parents, that kind words and loving actions towards children, will subdue their uneducated nature a great deal better than the rod, or, in other words, than physical punishment.”

In support of this view, the Hebrew word for *rod* is often translated as the “word of God” in the Old Testament (e.g., Micah 6:9; Isaiah 11:4). It is also interesting to note that the rod is also referred to as “the word of God” in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 15:23–24). Therefore, as with many Old Testament scriptures used to support the view that sparing the rod will spoil the child, a viable alternate translation from the Hebrew for Proverbs 13:24 (“He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes”) is “He who withholds the word of God, hateth his son; he who loveth his son, corrects (or teaches) him early on (when he is young).” Likewise, Proverbs 23:13–14 (“Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell”) could be translated as “Withhold not correction from a child; for if you regulate him with the word of God, he will not die. Regulate him with the word of God, and you will deliver his soul from hell.”

As will be noted in a few moments, there are usually better alternatives to physical punishment. President Hinckley has observed, “I have tremendous respect for fathers and mothers who are

nurturing their children in light and truth, . . . 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.” In the biography of President Hinckley, it states, “Gordon liked to say that his father never laid a hand on him except to bless him, and he intended to follow suit.”

### **Permissiveness/Indulgence**

President Kimball used to often say, “Setting limits to what a child can do means to that child that you love and respect him.” In speaking of the challenges many parents have with their children, President Benson concluded that “permissive parents are part of the problem.” Permissive parents tend to avoid using their authority at all costs, being tolerant of children’s impulses (including aggression), encouraging children to make their own decisions without providing parameters within which they can be made, and refraining from imposing structure on children’s time (i.e., bedtime, mealtime, TV watching). They also keep restrictions, demands for mature behavior, and consequences for misbehavior at a minimum.

Social science research suggests that children raised by permissive parents may have greater difficulty respecting others, coping with frustration, delaying their gratification for a greater goal, and following through with their plans. It has also been associated with more defiance of authority figures, and a higher rate of adolescent promiscuous activity and drug and alcohol use.

Indulging children is another form of permissiveness that requires careful consideration. Elder Joe J. Christensen counseled, “We should avoid spoiling children by giving them too much. In our day, many children grow up with distorted values because we as parents overindulge them. . . . One of the most important things we can teach our children is to deny themselves. Instant gratification generally makes for weak people.”

### **Rearing Children in Love and Righteousness**

Righteous parenting, as noted in D&C 121, emphasizes charity, gentleness, kindness, longsuffering, persuasion, and appropriate discipline in a warm and nurturing relationship. What are some specific ways this can be done? As will be noted, there are three ingredients. These include (1) being connected, (2) providing regulation, and (3) fostering autonomy. Scientific studies have shown that children and adolescents reared by parents who exercise these three ingredients tend to be more open to parental input, are better adjusted to school and society, are more capable of moral reasoning, and are more self-controlled. For the Latter-day Saint, the implication is that such children are more willing to abide by and reap the blessings of spiritual laws as well.

*First*, it is important to be connected with our children. As noted by President Hinckley, one of the major features of good parent-child relationships includes being responsive to and “companionable” with them. President Brigham Young counseled, “Kind looks, kind actions, kind words, and a lovely, holy deportment towards them will bind our children to us with bands that cannot be easily broken; while abuse and unkindness will drive them from us.” Prophetic

statements such as these supported by scientific research suggest that warm and responsive parenting tends to promote lasting bonds with parents and security within children. This, in turn, has been linked to better behavior now and in the future. Warm and responsive child rearing also prevents hostility, resentment, and anger in children, all of which have been admonished in holy writ through the ages: “Provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

Specifically, social science research has documented that children are more likely to be less aggressive and more sociable and empathetic if they have parents (particularly fathers) who are more loving, patient, playful, responsive, and sympathetic to children’s feelings and needs. Similarly, mothers who take the time to engage in mutually enjoyable activities with their children more effectively convey values and rules to them. Children are less likely to push limits and seek attention through misbehavior when they feel that they are of high priority in their parents’ lives.

*Second*, it is important to provide regulatory practices that help children learn how to control their own behavior from within. How to do this in noncoercive ways is one of the most challenging parts of parenting. Parents who set limits are clear and firm about rules and expectations. Unlike coercive parents who administer harsh, arbitrary punishments, parents who regulate in loving ways explain reasons for setting rules and administer corrective measures promptly when children do not abide by them. Correction is motivated by a sincere interest in teaching children correct principles rather than merely to control, exercise dominion, or vent anger. Research has shown that when firm habits of good behavior are established early in life through parental regulatory practices that include limit setting, a judicious use of punishment, positive reinforcement, and reasoning, parents are better able to relax control as their children grow older. Doing this in practice is like riding a horse. Much of the time, parents are going along for the ride. When necessary, knowing how and when to tighten or loosen the reins, however, requires considerable creativity, effort, and inspiration.

In line with President Kimball’s counsel to set limits, it is important to accompany them with preestablished consequences for when rules are violated. Just as the rod is used to gently nudge sheep away from dangerous places, setting limits around potentially harmful influences (e.g., inappropriate media and early dating before age 16 and group dating thereafter) helps children feel more safe and secure. As the scripture reassures, “Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4).

Parents who exercise righteous dominion take responsibility for setting the appropriate number of rules for regulating children’s behavior that can be realistically remembered and enforced. Some children may require more and varying types of rules and punishment than others, depending on their individual natures. When rules are violated, children know what to expect as parents hopefully follow through in a calm and clear-headed manner. As noted earlier, there are usually better alternatives than physical punishment. Examples could include temporarily suspending teen driving privileges for traffic violations, calmly showing up at a son or daughter’s teen party when they don’t come home on time, enforcing time-out when a child is

angry and hurting others and then discussing alternative methods for dealing with anger, or letting the stove timer determine whether chores are completed in a reasonable time frame so that certain privileges can be earned. Being consistent in administering corrective discipline provides opportunities for children to experience the negative consequences of poor choices. It also allows subsequent opportunities for children to “rehearse” better behavior by arming them with new information about how to handle the situation more appropriately in the future. An excellent article on establishing consequences can be found in the April 2000 issue of the *Ensign*.

Before administering corrective measures, it is important to try to understand the underlying causes of misbehavior and dealing with them first. Challenging behaviors can often be associated with an unfulfilled need (e.g., being tired or hungry), a stage of growth (e.g., teething or natural striving for autonomy during the wonderful twos and threes and again during the teenage years), something going awry in the present environment (e.g., friends being mean; fear of the dark at bedtime), a child just simply not knowing any better (e.g., animals get hurt when mistreated), or a biologically based mood, thought, or behavioral or learning disorder that might require professional help. For example, punishment may be ineffective for an out-of-control child who is acting out due to lack of sleep. Adequate rest will likely be a better solution. When less capable of understanding the reasons behind rules and related consequences for misbehavior, young children sometimes respond better to simply being redirected to more acceptable behaviors (e.g., being shown how to gently pet a cat rather than strangle it). Planning ahead can also eliminate problems before they occur (e.g., putting safety latches on cupboards for curious toddlers, providing a watch with a beeper alarm so children won't forget to come home in the midst of play with friends).

When consequences need to be enforced, the scriptures teach the principle of “showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reprov'd” (D&C 121:43). When a child has been corrected in a calm, controlled manner, that same Spirit which prompted it can create a sense of compassion, charity, and forgiveness towards the child. With regard to child rearing, President Hinckley counseled, “Reproving betimes with sharpness [When? While angry or in a fit of temper? No—] when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love.” For example, physical affection, such as hugging a young child or holding them lovingly, helps to calm the quivering lip and restore a sense of inner security. Saying something like “maybe you can sit here on my lap for a while until you feel like playing with your sister again” will help assure a sense of acceptance and security.

While confrontations and conflicts are inevitable in family life, parents can work diligently to nurture relationships and keep a positive regulatory tone in the home. This can be accomplished, in part, by responding to children's natural desire to please and to be accepted. Frequent, affirming, and sincere statements that identify children's strengths or draw attention to a specific aspect of the child's behavior or performance can be encouraging and promote the child's desire to maintain a high standard of behavior (e.g., “John, the lawn sure looks good since you mowed it—thanks for sweeping the sidewalks as well”; “I'll bet it felt good to get your homework done right after school so you could play with friends”; “Thanks for being quiet while I was on the phone”; or “How about going to that movie you wanted to see when your chores are done?”).

Rewarding good behavior and framing expectations in a positive manner can go far in inviting children to regulate their behavior in desirable ways. I was intrigued to see how many references there were to “Reward” (pp. 430–431 in the Topical Guide of the LDS scriptures) that support this view.

In the regulating role, prophets have also emphasized that reason and persuasion are important when working with children. For example, Joseph F. Smith counseled, “Use no lash and no violence, but . . . approach them with reason, with persuasion and love unfeigned. . . . The man that will be angry at his boy, and try to correct him while he is in anger, is in the greatest fault. . . . You can only correct your children by love, in kindness, by love unfeigned, by persuasion, and reason.”

For example, when regulating behavior with reasoning, parents can say things like, “If you only do what you want to do when playing with Johnny, he probably won’t want to play with you anymore. What things do you think he would like to do when you get together?” This type of reasoning helps keep parental focus more on teaching and preparing children for acceptable ways of behaving rather than on directing and controlling misbehavior. Although not required for every situation, research indicates that consistent efforts to provide simple rationales that are often repeated eventually sink in and can win voluntary obedience even in two- to three-year-old children. Also, wise parents remember that the tone of voice, a loving touch, and the sincere feeling behind the words parents use often communicate much more than the words themselves.

Numerous studies have also documented positive ways that reasoning with children (especially in advance of a problem) can help them willingly regulate their own behavior, resulting in more confident, empathetic, helpful, and happy children. For example, parents who plan ahead and predispose their young children before going into a store that “we are not buying treats to eat right now because we need lots of room in our tummies for healthy foods at dinner” are far more likely to avoid temper tantrums in the checkout line.

For adolescents and older children, however, reasoning can often come across as preachments and may provoke opposition and testiness if not carefully worded. Reflective listening in a consultant role often is more what is needed rather than telling them what to do (share examples). With regard to reasoning, I have been impressed with Father Lehi. He seemed to know when enough reasoning was enough. In 1 Nephi 8:37–38, it reads, “And he did exhort them then with all the feeling of a tender parent, that they would hearken to his words. . . . And after he had preached unto them, and also prophesied unto them of many things, he bade them to keep the commandments of the Lord; and he did cease speaking unto them.”

In emphasizing reasoning, President Hinckley stated, “I was blessed with a good father and a good mother. I can never remember their laying a hand on me or [on] any of their other children. We probably deserved it, but they did not do it. They sat us down and talked with us. That was enough.”

*Third*, in addition to connection and regulation, allowing autonomy and the exercise of agency is important in righteous dominion. Children benefit from making the choices that parents offer them and being allowed to make their own decisions in a variety of domains. By developing decision-making skills and learning how to make choices within limits that are acceptable to parents, children learn and grow. Examples could include allowing a child the option of taking the trash out in the evening or in the morning before school or asking if a child would prefer hot or cold cereal.

Regarding teenagers, Elder Robert D. Hales recently counseled:

Act with faith; don't react with fear. When our teenagers begin testing family values, parents need to go to the Lord for guidance on the specific needs of each family member. This is the time for added love and support and to reinforce your teachings on how to make choices. It is frightening to allow our children to learn from the mistakes they may make, but their willingness to choose the Lord's way and family values is greater when the choice comes from within than when we attempt to force those values upon them. The Lord's way of love and acceptance is better than Satan's way of force and coercion, especially in rearing teenagers.

Finding ways to say yes more often than no to a child or teenager's request lends more credence when a parent has to say no. When children and teens are given latitude for decision making in areas that matter less, they are more likely to feel trusted and empowered to choose rightly and conform to parental expectations and firm rules that matter more.

Because exercising righteous dominion is a flexible approach, it can provide the best fit for children with varying temperamental dispositions. In other words, each child is guided in a balanced style of connection, regulation, and autonomy that best matches his or her unique personality. The necessary balance is different for every child. For example, some teenagers are self-motivated to engage in appropriate activities, do not require curfews, and are home at reasonable hours. Many teens lose control of their lives without restrictions. Yet others rebel when locked into tightly controlled curfews and expectations. Sometimes a middle-of-the-road approach that balances autonomy granting with regulation works best with more spirited teenagers. Teens often become surprisingly responsible when the general expectation is that they inform parents about where they are, who they are with, and when they will be home (within reasonable limits), as well as being allowed to compromise with parents when there is disagreement (see February 2000 *New Era*).

### **When a Child Wanders**

In conclusion, let me share what I think is most important for all of us to remember. The scriptural admonition in Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it," can cut two ways. Good teaching and training can help to set children on a path that leads to an abundant life in both temporal and eternal domains.

Alternatively, children raised in unrighteous ways may not depart from habits and paths that are

harmful to themselves and others unless, at some point, they experience a “mighty change [of] heart” (see Alma 5:12–14). Notwithstanding parental influence for good or ill, the restored gospel teaches that individuals have agency to choose their own destiny (2 Nephi 2:21–30; Mosiah, 2:21; Helaman 14: 30–31; Alma 12: 31; Moses 6:56). Sometimes, despite the best efforts of parents, children exercise their agency in irresponsible ways and wander into forbidden paths (see Luke 15:11–32). However, parents would do well not to berate themselves for what they think could have been. One should also not think there is a foolproof, 100 percent guaranteed method for raising good and faithful children. Just as surely as parents cannot take all the blame for unrighteous and rebellious offspring, parents cannot take all the credit for faithful offspring. All parents fall short of perfection, even when we know better, for energy and patience do not always last to the limits of knowledge. As evidenced by the challenges that Adam and Eve had, as well as Lehi and Sariah, to name but two of many righteous couples, they faced some wayward children. Children’s agency is a God-given gift over which parents have limited control. Even our Heavenly Father, although perfect, was not spared the disaffection of Lucifer and one-third of the spirit host of His sons and daughters (D&C 76:26; Moses 4:1–3; Revelation 12:4, 9).

For children who kept their first, premortal, estate and are sealed to their parents in this life, even if they wander, there is hope for their return when they are ready. Proclamation principles of “faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, [and] compassion” (¶ 7) can go far in extending an invitation for a wayward child to come back to the fold of God. President Howard W. Hunter taught:

A successful parent is one who has loved, one who has sacrificed, and one who has cared for, taught, and ministered to the needs of a child. If you have done all of these and your child is still wayward or troublesome or worldly, it could well be that you are, nevertheless, a successful parent. Perhaps there are children who have come into the world that would challenge any set of parents under any set of circumstances. Likewise, perhaps there are others who would bless the lives of, and be a joy to, almost any father or mother.

My concern today is that there are parents who may be pronouncing harsh judgements upon themselves and may be allowing these feelings to destroy their lives, when in fact they have done their best and should continue in faith.

In light of this counsel, may we as parents not be too hard on ourselves. May we also do all we can to honor the divine and individual nature of children by exercising righteous rather than unrighteous dominion in our parenting efforts, and then leave the rest up to the Lord.

For additional insights into parenting, see C. H. Hart. “Parents Do Matter: Combating the Myth That Parents Don’t Matter.” *Marriage and Families* (August 2000), BYU Family Studies Center.