

How Can We Help Our Children Experience the Happiness That Comes from Obedience?

Gayle M. Clegg

*This address was given at the
BYU Families Under Fire Conference, October 3-4, 2005.*

© 2005 by Brigham Young University,
Division of Continuing Education
All rights reserved.

For further information write:

Conferences & Workshops
136 Harman Continuing Education Building
Provo, Utah 84602
(801) 422-3559

E-mail: conferences@byu.edu

Home page: <http://familiesunderfire.byu.edu>

One day our son's second-grade teacher called me during the lunch hour to describe here disturbing day with our oldest child, Dan. It was rather difficult for me to listen o her long list of infractions. To be honest, I wanted to enlighten her about our son's endearing qualities, but I refrained. Later in the day when Dan came through the front door, I greeted him as usual, "How was your day?" Sensing my intense concern, he said, "not so good." I asked why, and he responded, "Mommy, my body is in my desk, but my spirit is at recess."

Dan was trying to follow school rules. He didn't have a disobedient nature. He was having trouble connecting his active physical needs with the established rules of the classroom.

How can we help our "Dannies" on their journey to becoming obedient? We want to find ways that will enable our children to respond to the things their spirits naturally know are right. We wanted our children to enjoy the Lord's promised blessing from obedience to God's commandments.

We know some wonderful things from the scriptures about obedience. "When we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated" (D&C 130:21). We also know the Lord is "bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise" (D&C 82:10). Through our agency, we all have been given the power to choose. All of the Lord's prophets, from Adam to President Hinckley, have called upon us to obey Him. The scriptures indicate that obedience prompted by

love can bring great happiness. That is the only kind of obedience God values; not the obedience of a servant, but that of a loving child.

How can we help our children experience the happiness that comes from obedience? Young children are naturally humble, submissive, and loving. According, that is where we begin the journey. It's about love.

It's about love

“Master, which is the great commandment . . . ? Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law . . .” (Matthew 22: 36-40).

Should we hang all our efforts in helping our children choose to be obedient on these two commandments? They are simple to remember. There are only two, not a long list of do's and don'ts. How important are these two commandments? So important that the Savior taught them at the Last Supper to His chosen and beloved disciples. “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (John 13:34). Jesus taught this commandment to His disciples after first washing their feet, a task usually performed by a servant. He lovingly set the example for His disciples to follow. He didn't teach them just once, but several times on that important night.

We read in 1John, “We love him, because he first loved u” (1John 4:19). Our children learn to love as they are loved. They learn to love Heavenly Father as they are bound together in family love.

Sister Julie Beck, first counselor in the Young Women general presidency, said that for as long as she could remember, her family sang the same hymn, “Love at Home,” for every family home evening. It was her father's wish that the family learn lesson one before they moved on to another lesson.

Living the gospel needs to look like a happy thing to do. All of us have listened to a speaker or two who focused on how hard it is to live the commandments. As Sister Sheri Dew once said, “By the end of (a particular) meeting, I felt depressed. The speaker made the living gospel seem like a sentence to life on the rock pile. As I thought later about why that message was so unsettling to me, I realized that it was because he had put the emphasis in exactly the wrong place—a common mistake, by the way. It's not living the gospel that's hard. It's life that's hard. It's picking up those when covenants have been compromised or values violated that's hard.”

The gospel is the good news. Shouldn't we be focusing on the doctrine of joy wrapped up in the gospel of Jesus Christ as we teach and mentor our children about obedience and the promised blessings? If you don't feel home is a happy place to be, how can your children feel home is the place they want to be? Happiness lies in relationships with

others, starting with parents who have a relationship with God, parents who love the Lord and know they are spirit sons and daughters of God. Our children need to see themselves in the same way, as choice sons and daughters of heavenly and earthly parents who are tied to them in bonds of love.

In teaching children to love God and keep His commandments, it needs to look like righteousness is more enjoyable than rebellion. Our youngest daughter, Emily, in her beginning teens began feeling burdened by keeping the commandments. She felt in bondage. As she searched for answers, she began looking around at those who seemed happy. It became obvious that the happiest people were the ones having fun living the gospel. She wanted to be in happy company, so she made some changes in her friendships.

As she came to understand over the following years, living the gospel frees us and give us tools to cope with mistakes, heartaches, and disappointments that every one of us can expect to experience here in mortality. Lehi taught God's plan of happiness to his son, Jacob. Eternal laws have both punishment and opportunities for happiness attached to them. From the very beginning in the premortal councils our purpose in coming to earth has been that we might be happy (see 2 Nephi 2:10, 25.)

How does living the first two commandments look to children? They could see parents lovingly connecting with their children by spending playful time with them, showing affection, praising what they do well, reading to them, and assuring them of the relationship already established during moments of correction. Teaching may be done in ways other than talking, as simple as a hazard being removed from a one-year-old without a word. It might look like a parent gently leading a child by the hand while singing, "I am happy when I'm helping" and emptying the dishwasher, making a bed, or taping together a brother's page of homework torn in anger.

And older child may see a mother and a father making room on the end of the bed for a late night visit. In our family, some of our best discussions have been made at the end of our bed. Those conversations didn't start with a gospel principle in mind. If my memory serves me right, my part and that of my husband was listening as the child poured out their heart and eventually came to a conclusion often wiser than either of us would have dared suggest at the outset. Every child needs to feel he can come to his parents and be listened to or he won't come at all. You find gentleness, kindness, long-suffering, charity, reproving. . . when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing an increase of love afterwards (see D&C 121:41, 45.)

One of our granddaughters, at the age of 15 months, giggled as she would hit her mother on the head. She didn't do it out of a mean heart. She could see a reaction of distress on her mom's face and probably enjoyed the power of her actions. Her mother taught her how to touch softly instead of hitting and gave her hugs and kisses. After many times of redirecting Ella, Ella learned to self-correct a hit with a softer touch and a hug, most of time. She always loved the rewarding return hugs.

Establishing order with a minimum of rules will make it easier to maintain consistency and will definitely be more peaceful. Choose your battles and remember all the commandments hang on just two commandments.

A good friend of mine was struggling with one of her children who was being influenced by negative friends. She found herself resenting his defiant attitude which was causing friction with the entire family. One day while she was working on the family albums she ran across a favorite snapshot of her son when he was several years younger. His infectious grin brought back memories of the day the photo was taken. She posted that picture in her kitchen and over the next several months she and her family began to focus on that image of their son and brother. A remarkable transformation began to occur. The defiant boy again became the lovable boy in the picture.

Love is a gift given by the Spirit. “. . . Pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love” (Moroni 7:48). How our children need to know that we love God with all our heart. The purest and best motivation of obedience to godly law is love. “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

It's about example

Never doubt that your children are watching you. I needed to have posted on my fridge in my early parenting years a sentence from a conference talk given by Elder Holland in April of 2003. “Live the gospel as conspicuously as you can” (*Ensign*, May 2003).

I remember so well the day I walked into my daughter's bedroom while she was playing house with her dolls. I heard this little four-year-old say exactly the same words I had used the day before when I had a belligerent conversation with one of the older children. Families are the first school, the first church, the first everything for children. And children will act in all those areas the way they see their parents act.

If a child is in a resentful mood, it is better to wait for or create a new situation in which the child is in a receptive frame of mind before correcting. Not scolding or correcting in the emotionally charged moment will communicate and teach respect and understand. In other words, when you can't teach something by precept, you can teach it by example. Example teaching is infinitely more powerful and lasting than precept teaching. As children watch their parents living the commandments, they will see, feel, and know the importance of the doing the same. They will experience the blessing that come from keeping the commandments in a faithful family, a family built on the principles from “The Family, a Proclamation to the World.”

Elder Eyring taught in this most recent conference, “What we will need in our day of testing is a spiritual preparation. It is to have developed faith in Jesus Christ so powerful that we can pass the test of life upon which everything for us in eternity depends.” In order for us to set the example for our children it will take unshakable faith in the Lord

Jesus Christ to make the choices that will lead the way to eternal life. Parents need to continually strengthen their faith to obey God. We can do that by deciding now to be more quick to obey and more determined to obey God. We can do that by deciding now to be more quick to obey and more determined to obey and more determined to endure. Learning to start early and to be steady in reading the Book of Mormon as we have been asked by President Hinckley, perhaps ahead of the schedule, will not only help our own spiritual preparation, but set an invaluable example for our children.

Broth Monson taught in conference yesterday morning that Joseph Smith led by example, and taught by love. The testimony of the prophet Joseph continues to change lives. Our example in practicing obedience in daily scripture study, prayer, paying a full tithe, and escaping sin will bless our posterity. We can decide now to do quickly whatever God asks of us. And we can decide to be steady in the small tests of obedience with build the faith to carry us through the great test, which will surely come.

It's about teaching

The Lord has instructed us that parents are to teach their children. "Inasmuch as parents have children in Zion, or in any of her stakes which are organized, that teach them not to understand the doctrine of repentance, faith in Christ the Son of the Living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, when eight years old, the sin be upon the heads of the parents. . . . And they shall also teach their children to pray, and to walk uprightly before the Lord . . . [and to] observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy" (D&C 68:25, 28-29).

Children are capable of understanding the significant things of the kingdom and also capable of making good choices at early ages. They have a natural disposition to keep the commandments, especially when they have been taught and they understand the commandments. Several years ago my husband and I were tending two of our grandsons. We selected a children's movie with excellent ratings, popped popcorn, and sat down for a fun evening. Shortly into the movie a scene of some violence came onto the screen. Before either my husband or I could fast-forward the tape, the oldest boy turned off the movie and asked if we could play a game instead. He knew what the right thing was and did it. The boys had been taught and were sensitive to the Spirit, and they were anxious to do what was right. The boys had been taught to turn their hearts to the Lord and to feel the promptings of the Spirit. If children recognize the Spirit, teaching them to keep the commandments of the Lord will be easier.

I always love to look at how President Hinckley teaches. Think about the way he handles difficult questions. Larry King asked him on television, "What is your role? You're the leader of a major religion. What's your role?" He replied: "My role is to declare doctrine. My role is to stand as an example before the people. My role is to be a voice in

defense of the truth. My role is to lead.” President Hinckley didn’t expect that question, but through his spiritual preparation and the Spirit that profound answer came. We can see that he never offends and yet he never backs down from the truth. His answers are sensitive to his audience, there is always humor, he praises openly and honestly, and his eye contact is direct and compassionate. You know he has prepared carefully before hand about the kinds of questions that could come. He always testifies of the Savior. “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ . . . that our children may know” is evident in all his conversations (see 2 Nephi 25:26).

Some time ago I participated in a training session that hopefully would help me present myself well in an interview. WE were told that in a live interview our body language would represent 75 percent of what the audience would remember and another 20 percent would be the tone of our voice and perhaps only 5 percent of what we actually said would be remembered by the audience. Could this apply to our children as we teach them to keep commandments? We are not always articulate in our teachings, but our children could learn most from our sincere desires to do the right things and most importantly our unconditional love.

We do need to let our children know what we believe and why. “Keep the fire of your testimony of the restored gospel and your witness of our Redeemer burning so brightly that our children can warm their hands by the fire of your faith” (Boyd K. Packer, *Ensign*, May 2003).

God has promised that He will provide a way for His children to obey Him (see 1 Nephi 3:7.) All the Primary children of the Church can sing, “I will go, I will do the things the Lord commands” (“Nephi’s Courage,” *Children’s Songbook*, 120). Sometimes obedience is difficult and will require sacrifices, but it always brings promised blessings. How important for children to be able to experience promised blessings. Here is where testimonies of faith are developed. The seldom-sung fourth verse of “I Am a Child of God” (*Children’s Songbook*, 2) says:

“I am a child of God,
His promises are sure;
Celestial glory shall be mine
If I can but endure.”

Enduring to the end for children is choosing the right every day.

It’s about the “one”

I was worried about one of our daughters who was dating a fine young man. One late night they had been talking in the driveway for quite some time. My husband and I were debating over who should go out and tell them to come in. I’m sure many of you have been in this kind of conversations. I was elected as my husband pushed me out of bed with compliments about my tactful skills. I went to the kitchen and plotted the best way to do this. I began assembling a midnight snack with drinks, cookies, and chips, placing

them attractively on a tray. I walked to the car and knocked on the window and said I thought they have been out so long they might be hungry. Well, the young man left with a cookie in his pocket a short time later. Thank goodness I used tact as he is now the father of four of our grandchildren.

We teach in love relying on the Spirit to direct us for each of our children's best good. Taking a plate of cookies to one of our children staying out too late would not have worked with one of our other daughters; instead, it might have led to rebellion.

The Nephites in Bountiful, one by one, felt the nail prints in the hands and feet of the Savior and the wound in His side. The Savior blessed the little children one by one (see 3 Nephi 11:15, 17-21). Each of our children comes to us with his own unique personality. How one child learns will be different from the next child. There are no recipes for producing happy and obedient children, but there are principles we can follow. Our children will be attacked from all sides by the adversary to forget their baptismal covenants, to lie a little here and sin a little there. But parents feeling under siege can take great comfort in the spiritual insight of Elisha. The king of Syria desired to prevent Elisha from advising the king of Israel. During the night, the Syrians surround the horses and chariots in the city where Elisha was staying. A young servant exclaimed, "Alas, my master! How shall we do?" Elisha assured him, "Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them."

"God will send aid to no one more readily than He will send it to a child and to the parent of a child" (Jeffrey R. Holland, *Ensign*, May 2003). I believe that statement. Heavenly Father loves our children. He wants them to be taught. If our parental skills are still developing, but we have a pure desire to teach our children the commandments and to experience the blessings that follow from obedience, "they that be with us are more than they that be with" Satan and all his imps.

There is not a more beautiful account of the Savior's love for each child in the land Bountiful than when He prayed for them in 3 Nephi. "He knelt upon the earth . . . and behold he prayed unto the Father, and the things which he prayed cannot be written, . . . so great and marvelous [were] the things. . . he [did] speak unto the Father. . . when Jesus had made an end of praying . . . he arose . . . and . . . wept. . . and took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them" (3 Nephi 17: 15-16, 18, 21).

Each of you has probably prayed until your knees were worn for a child to receive the promised blessings of obedience. We read in 2 Nephi that "the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do" (2 Nephi 32:3). AS we have feasted upon the words of Christ we look to these words to tell us what to do. The whisperings of the Holy Ghost might be a still voice, a burning of the bosom, a quite prompting, or even at times a stupor of thought. But as we keep our covenant and carry a prayer continually in our hearts and water our pillows by night, they do come for that one child. How we hope we will be receptive in allowing the Spirit to teach us how to be of help to that child.

Some years ago as I was sending my 35 sixth-grader out the door at the close of a teaching day, I felt a prompting to go immediately home. Normally I took some time to gather papers, straighten the room, and make plans for the next day, but this day I found myself picking up my handbag and walking quickly to the car. As I entered my home I called out to our youngest daughter to see if she was there. No reply. All our children knew to leave a note or call the school or their dad's office if they made after-school plans. There wasn't a note or message.

I looked up the address of one of her classmates, one whom I had never spoken to or thought was a close friend to Emily. I drove directly to that home and knocked on the door. Our daughter opened the door and I asked her to come home. She protested quite vocally in front of the other teenagers, but followed me. It actually felt like she was happy to see me once we got into the car. As we talked she didn't seem to have many excuses or answer for her actions.

Years later when this same daughter was a senior in high school I felt a similar prompting to go to the high school and pick her up after a dance practice. I felt rather happy at the thought of surprising her and getting a snack on the way home over a lively conversation. She loved to share her full life, a treat for me, as she was the youngest and the only child at home these days.

When I pulled up to the curb the school looked empty and I walked into the deserted foyer. The practice had ended early, but Emily had stayed on to finish choreographing the final sequence of the dance. She had missed her ride and was coming into the foyer to call for a ride when I met her. When we got into the car she burst out crying, telling me she had felt very uncomfortable in the nearly empty school. And then she said a surprising thing. "Mom, you always come when I need you." I was astonished, as I had been known as the mom who forgot carpools.

WE started sharing her feelings and went back to the time in seventh grade when I had come to a stranger's house and asked her to come home. She said plans were being made that particular day that would not have been in keeping with the standards of our family. She wasn't sure how or even if she could say no to the group of classmates and had even in her heart said a little prayer asking for help. It wasn't but five minutes later when the doorbell rang and there was mother. She made a decision that day and she would never allow herself to get in that kind of situation again.

Sometimes as parents we won't know exactly how the Spirit works in our lives, but if we are striving to become obedient in the small things and exact as were the stripling warriors of Helaman, we will be blessed, especially as we work to teach His little ones the blessings of obedience. It is a journey for each of us and for each of our children—not learned in a month or a year, but over a lifetime, perhaps into the eternities. It is not learned in the same way for any one of our children. But we have a powerful companion who can help us when we "feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things that ye should do . . . it will show unto you all things that ye should do" (see 2 Nephi 32: 3, 5).

As a mother of five married children and, [grandmother of] 17 grandchildren, I am still in the process of learning about obedience. I know that love is the teacher, as Christ exemplified. Our example teaches more than our words. We will need the Lord's spirit to have love in our hearts as we teach our children, one by one, of the Savior's plan of happiness. The Lord is bound when we do what He says. His promises are sure.

Our Eternal Father lives. He loves us. He loves our children, His children. We can go to Him in prayer anytime, anyplace, and be assured that He will hear, listen, and answer. Jesus is the Christ, who gave His life that we might through His Atonement have eternal life with Him and the Father. The work in which we are engaged in our families is Their work, and we are Their servants. We are answerable to Them. I testify in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.