

Educating Children: A Parental Opportunity and Obligation

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Why we should desire to be anxiously engaged in the education of our children.

There is good reason to teach that the home can be a center for success. Concerned people now recognize it is the family unit that initiates and sustains learning, teaching, following and leading. Succeeding waves of research findings, as well as enduring common sense, confirm the vital role parents play in the social, moral, academic, and spiritual education of their children. Education is the heart of our human commonwealth; the family is the initial source of that education. Historically, nearly all elements of education seem to have their origin in family needs and interests.

Everyone by nature is a learner, teacher, follower, and leader. We are all equal in the sense that we possess and have access to these universal endowments—for good or ill. The challenge is to invest our time, energy, and legitimate possessions in that which will bring enduring success and happiness. The family provides the earliest and greatest opportunities to serve; it is also the primary repository of our most cherished blessings. The family is a divinely ordained and potentially eternal institution.¹ *Education is the intended extension of creation; education begins where creation ends.* It is central to the human cycle; an essential function that preserves humankind and sustains the quality of life from generation to generation.

The birth of a child is a compelling experience. Each new life illuminates previously hidden invitations and expectations. Feelings deeper and larger than language are often felt when a baby is born. Emotions swell in the face of this common but miraculous event. Perhaps, because each new birth announces: *school is now in session.* Infancy triggers anticipation. After months of incubation, action is now required. (a) Growth and development is a shared concern. (b) Each child initiates its own education and sense of welfare. (c) How to impact in a positive way his or her choices lurks on the horizon. Succeeding weeks and months deliver ever expanding options.

Seeking greater understanding, those who study families and children have created monumental piles of evidence. Despite ominous trends that threaten families and children, a world-wide interest is manifest in their defense. The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory is one example. A summary of their work reports: “*students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to (1) earn higher grades and test scores, (2) be promoted, pass their classes and earn credits, (3) attend school regularly, (4) have better social skills, show improved behavior and adapt well to school, and (5) graduate and go on to post-secondary education.*”² Another example is the Harvard Family Research Project. This agency announced in 2007 that “*the academic encouragement parents provide is more powerful than the support provided by friends.*”³ Collectively, these and numerous other studies

¹ *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, 1995)

² *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, by Ann T. Henderson and Nancy Berla (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education, 1994).

³ Parental Rights.org *How Parents Strengthen a Child's Education*. See also *After School Programs in the 21st Century*, number 10 Executive Summary, Harvard Family Research Project. February, 2008.

are now referred to as “waves” of evidence.⁴ Concerned mothers and fathers can and do make a positive difference. Our opportunity is to embrace the cause and consider the evidence.

Careful research can be helpful, but it is well to recognize the Lord has defined the parental role from Adam and Eve’s day. The guidelines are clear and forthright. As a covenant people, we are to help our children establish a moral foundation on which to base their lives. It is our privilege to introduce our children to faith, repentance, and baptism, and see that they have the opportunity to receive the Holy Ghost. We are also to teach them to pray and to walk uprightly before the Lord. To be most effective, the Lord admonishes parents to set a proper example by: (a) observing the Sabbath day, (b) faithfully accepting and magnifying their callings, and (c) laboring diligently to meet general parental responsibilities.⁵ This counsel is basic and adds integrity.

During the innocence of early years children are essentially dependent on the values of their parents and other significant adults. It is the prime time to help children lay a foundation which will support both temporal and spiritual learning. We have been given the safest pattern to honor *personal agency*—which ultimately trumps all else. This power is evident as each child develops. Revelation prescribes a way for us to do the best we can in a very challenging responsibility. It also offers divine assistance in confronting the problems we face, as President John Taylor counseled.⁶ A helpful way to proceed is to establish a framework, a blueprint that helps organize our efforts.

A Framework: True Doctrine, Correct Principles, Safe Practices

Parent directed education begins with acquiring and utilizing personal skills that enable people to provide food, clothing, shelter, and safety for their children. This responsibility expands to nurturing each child’s capacity for growth, activity, language, awareness, and fulfilling relationships. Children do not come with a personalized handbook, but each culture seems to develop something to fill the void. These often contradictory social traditions can be helpful or harmful. This means parents are gatekeepers. They need to decide what is good and bad, better and best. Such personal decisions are influenced by our own experiences, personalities, impressions and skills. Much of our response as parents is derived from the circumstances under which we live and how we were reared. The general tendency is to nurture and educate our children like we were reared. Often, this leaves room for improvement.

When we have the desire and make the effort, the bad can be replaced with good and perhaps what is better with what is best. The Savior has promised, if we seek, knock, and ask for help—from trustworthy others and from our Heavenly Father—he will answer. The key is an open mind and an open heart, to be a willing learner and teacher.⁷

Striving to recognize true doctrine, correct principles, and safe practices is the first step. We are promised progress will follow. ***True doctrines*** are few in number and readily available. An example of a true doctrine is: Each person is a spirit child of a Heavenly Father who loves us

⁴ *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, by Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp (Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002).

⁵ D&C 68:25-30; PGP Moses 5:6-15; 6:47-62

⁶ *Journal of Discourses*, John Taylor vol. 10, p. 53.

⁷ 3 Nephi 14:7-8; Alma 29:4; Abraham 1:2. Alma and Abraham each acknowledged and responded to this open invitation from the Savior. Heavenly Father and his Son always want to help us.

and with whom we can communicate. ***Correct principles sustain true doctrines.*** There are many correct principles. An example is: *Obedience* to our Heavenly Father's commands helps us improve and protects us from evil. ***Safe practices support correct principles.*** An example is: Living the Word of Wisdom and the Law of Tithing are practices that protect our health and increase our spiritual knowledge.

This search for true doctrine, correct principles, and safe practices is a lifelong quest. It is a vital part of the experience we came to earth to obtain. Making the effort not only brings joy into our lives it greatly enhances the achievement levels of our children—physically, intellectually, morally and spiritually. Parents are part of the educational curriculum in a child's life. We teach what we are. Consider the following sample educational principles and practices.

Five Principles that Can Help Parents Improve their Children's Education

Conversion to parenthood is essential to effective education of children in the home. Because effective parenting requires so much sacrifice and service, a person has to be converted to this role. Conceiving and giving birth to a child can make a person a physical parent, but this is not the same as dedicating decades of one's life to nurturing and educating a child. Such an investment by a father and mother requires conversion.

Children pass through two major developmental transitions during their formative years—the advent of conscience and the onset of puberty. This principle is sustained by both research and scriptural counsel. It is central to learning and teaching for both adults and children. Because of developmental factors, children respond better to parents who recognize and relate to their respective capacities: (a) birth to ages 7-9 when conscience begins to fully function; (b) a latency period between about eight years and ages 11-14 when (c) puberty changes the way a child feels, thinks, and acts. A useful rule could be: Focus on right actions with young children (birth to puberty); then shift the focus to good thoughts and intentions for adolescents (puberty to adulthood).

The most positive form of discipline for children involves three distinct elements: (a) love them, (b) correct them, and (c) provide a way for them. These factors are apparent in strategies of discipline that honor a person's agency. They are the same factors referred to by the Lord in the *Doctrine and Covenants* 95:1.

What we think with when we think about learning and teaching makes a significant difference to ourselves and to our children. The assumptions we use and the information available to us influence what and how we think about educational matters. They shape the conclusions we draw and the actions we take regarding our children's learning. It is worth the effort for parents to personally evaluate this process.

The basic barriers to improved education at home, in the school, or the community is what we do not understand, not what we do not have. A simple principle often ignored in our society. We should not despair because of what we do not have in the way personal wealth. An abundance of research demonstrates that simply pouring more money into educational efforts does not predict greater success. There are other more vital variables. This is particularly true in the moral and spiritual domains.

Five Practices that Enhance Educational Achievement in a Child's Life.

Teach a child to read and nurture a love of reading. No single factor in contemporary schooling seems to contribute more to a child's success in the classroom than the capacity and willingness to read. This skill training should begin early and be built upon genuine interest and involvement of the parents. Perhaps no single educational gift can be given by a parent than having reading materials in the home, using those materials to teach a child, and listening to the child as he or she acquires that skill. Reading triggers interest in writing and numbers.

Resist and avoid distractions that compromise the integrity of your interest in and efforts to teach your child. Teaching and learning is a relationship. The best teaching requires focus and concentration. Attention must grow into interest and interest into commitment and allegiance. For example, feeding a hungry year-old child takes time and regularity. Multi-tasking is a distraction. Reading, talking on the phone, listening to TV, etc. usually leads to frustration. This can cause other behavior problems, like screaming or crying, which are often attempts by the child to get the parent's attention. Just putting the child in a high chair and placing food on the tray to be consumed, played with, or thrown around the kitchen is also a strategy of neglect. This idea has wide application.

Manage technology; keep it in the bounds that support your primary objectives. Ungoverned or misused technology can be very destructive. Too much, too soon, too often can distort and destroy rather than enhance a child's educational growth and development. Television and other electronic devices are remarkable tools. But they can be addictive and should not become dictators. There are many casualties on the internet highway. Ungoverned and ill-advised technology is counterproductive to wise parenting.

Establish and nurture positive productive relationships. Remember: consumption defines childhood; production should define adulthood. The home is where relationships are created and nurtured that prepares children for productivity in the world. Parents should understand their dominant style of relating with others. Do we dictate, abdicate, negotiate, or educate? Striving to be constructive rather than destructive is most helpful.

Think spiritually first, temporally second; connect the parts to the "big picture." This practice suggests we do first things first—like putting on socks before the shoes. It just works better. As Elder Orson F. Whitney reminds us, "Man, Earth and Time are symbols of God, Heaven and Eternity." They are to lift "our thoughts from man to God, from earth to Heaven, from time to eternity."⁸ There is no greater work than this.

⁸ "Latter-day Saint Ideals and Institutions," *Improvement Era*, August 1927, p. 851.