

Families are Forever and so is Parenthood

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*Names have been changed

Some fathers and mothers feel their parental charge ends when their children are “grown up.” Nudging sons and daughters out the door when they turn 18 may seem to be the “easy” solution, but when parents establish a self-imposed time limit to their parental duties, they often unwittingly push these responsibilities onto the shoulders of other people. Bishops’ offices, for instance, are frequently visited by adult children in need of parental guidance.

Although we may not realize it when our children are young, they may need some degree of parental direction until the day we die. The extent and the timing of our involvement in our adult children’s lives may vary with each child or each situation, but if we come unto Christ and rely on the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we can have divine assistance in making these often difficult decisions.

Within this context, the following four principles may be helpful to parents who are struggling in their relationships with their adult children. Although each family situation may be different, these principles may help parents determine how involved to be in their adult children’s lives, how to deal with issues of agency and accountability, and how to maintain their own spiritual and emotional well-being in the face of stressful circumstances.

Principle One: Parents never outlive their responsibility to their children.

Our leaders have been forthright about this. One statement representative of many will suffice here. President Ezra Taft Benson (1899-1994) said: “Fathers [and certainly mothers too], yours is an eternal calling from which you are never released . . . [A] father’s calling is eternal, and its importance transcends time. It is a calling for both time and eternity.”

While parental responsibility never ceases, it does change. After the birth of a child, parents provide for the baby’s every need. As the child grows, the amount of parental involvement decreases. Over time, the degree of involvement becomes harder for parents to determine. By the time children have reached adulthood, the complexity of determining the time, extent, and direction of parental involvement in children’s lives sometimes cause parents to give up. As a result, they either assume a very passive role or stop those relationships altogether. When this happens, everybody loses. Parents feel alienated from their children’s lives and activities, and the children lose opportunities to draw on the wisdom their parents have accumulated through years of experience.

Parents generally spend more years with their offspring as adults than as young children or adolescents. They will be involved not only with their adult children but also with those who come into the family as their children marry and have children of their own. This expanded circle includes sons- and daughters-in-law, grandchildren, and perhaps even step-grandchildren. Each of these relationships creates additional challenges.

A number of years ago, Raymond Hanson (Garth’s father and Steve’s grandfather) stood before family members who were gathered at a reunion. He was in his 90s at the time and had outlived three wives. His posterity then numbered over 200, most of whom were present. While physically feeble, Raymond spoke clearly and with power. He expressed his love for all of his family, including the “in-laws” and the “steps.” He bore a strong testimony of the gospel and invited those who were having spiritual challenges to change their lives so that the family could be together eternally. It was an emotionally charged moment for all who were there, as we watched the

patriarch of our family magnify his role as a parent right up to the end of his life. We believe this is the way it ought to be.

Principle Two: Parents and adult children have the ability and the right to make choices independent of each other's decisions and actions.

Several years ago Bob* was talking to his stake president following an interview the leader had recently had with Bob's 21-year-old son, who had just returned from a mission. The stake president was glowing in the compliments about the son and concluded by saying to Bob, "You must be a marvelous father to have raised a son like that."

Bob's first impulse was to accept the compliment as well deserved. After all, he and his wife, Janice,* had always spent lots of time with their children, had tried to do everything the Lord expected of them, and had encouraged their son to go on a mission. But then the face of his daughter Enid* flashed into his mind. She was ending her second marriage; had challenges with dishonesty, promiscuity, and drugs; and had never been able to hold a job for longer than a few weeks. She had been raised in the same home and had been treated, as far as Bob knew, the same as his other children.

Bob didn't take the compliment. Instead, his response surprised his stake president: "If you give me credit for what my son is doing, you have to give me the blame for what my daughter has done. I don't think I deserve either."

To what extent, if any, are parents responsible for their children's behavior? That's not an easy question to answer. Why are we the way we are? How much do our genes influence our behavior? What role does the home environment play?

As Latter-day Saints, our gospel perspective requires that we add two additional considerations when we seek to determine ultimate responsibility for actions and choices: the eternal nature of heavenly Father's children and their God-given moral agency. To understand these truths is to know that our personalities and dispositions may be affected by our family environment but not ultimately determined by it. Parents who have more than one child know intuitively that each child is unique and came into the world that way. The restored gospel explains why. It teaches that children come from a premortal existence with individual traits, personalities, and other characteristics.

Recognizing the right to make choices independent of each other's decisions and actions is critical in maintaining a viable relationship between parents and adult children. Please consider the following:

- Children's actions do not necessarily make a statement about how they were raised.
- Parents can influence but cannot ultimately control what their children do.
- Neither children nor parents can ultimately take from the other the right to choose.

Principle Three: Sometimes positive change cannot occur until parents allow their children to experience the consequences of bad decisions.

Lance,* a young adult living at home, was doing just about everything wrong. He lied, stole, cheated, and used drugs and alcohol. He was unchaste and seemed completely indifferent to how his actions affected his parents and other family members. His mother and father had tried everything they could think of to help him. For several years they had been patient and forgiving. They convinced him to see a professional counselor, but after a session or two he refused to go back. He never did agree to see his bishop. Finally, Lance was arrested.

The phone rang at Lance's home, and his mother answered. "Hi Mom, this is Lance. I'm in jail, and they won't let me out until you come and get me. Please hurry!"

Lance's mother was shocked, even panicked, but didn't say anything. Lance pleaded again, "Mom, please hurry! This is not a nice place!"

She didn't say anything for a long time, then quietly asked, "Lance, are you guilty of the charges?"

"Well, Mom, I really wasn't as involved as the police say I was."

"Lance, are you guilty?"

"Well, Mom, I guess I am."

Then, with all the courage she could muster, she replied, "I'm sorry that you are. I guess you will have to work through this by yourself. Call me when you get it all worked out." She hung up the phone and fell apart.

Two very long days passed. Finally, Lance called, and his parents went to the police station to pick him up. A few more days passed, and the phone rang again. Lance's mother answered, and this time it was an attorney.

"Hello. I am Mark Johnson.* I helped Lance with his legal problems while he was in custody. I just wanted to speak with you to see how you wanted to work out my compensation for helping Lance get out of jail."

At first Lance's mother was troubled. Finances were tight, and she was surprised at the call. She paused a minute, then said, "Mr. Johnson, I appreciate what you did to help Lance, but you are talking to the wrong person. I did not hire you. You did not help me. You helped Lance. If you want compensation for your efforts, I think you ought to talk to Lance."

Some time later, Lance came to his parents asking for a "donation" to pay his legal bill, but the donation did not come. Lance had to go back to the attorney and work out a pay-back plan. After many months of payments, Lance paid Mr. Johnson in full. Lance eventually returned to activity in the Church and is doing very well as a student at a major university. He is paying for much of his education himself, and his relationship with his parents couldn't be better. He will tell you today that the actions of his very brave and very frightened mother helped him turn his life around.

Obviously, not all stories have such a happy ending. However, many stories do, if parents wait long enough and if they are trying to do the right thing.

Parents are accountable to teach their children to take responsibility for their actions. This is almost always a very hard thing to do and often may involve what seems to be a temporary abandonment. In a very real sense, parents can interfere with their children's progress if they try to protect them from the consequences of their actions.

Our prototype here is Heavenly Father and His response to Adam and Eve after they had partaken of the forbidden fruit. He cast them out of the Garden of Eden, and to help them learn, He cursed the ground for *their sake* (see Genesis 3:17). While He promises that His grace will be sufficient for us, grace will not replace our experiencing consequences that are necessary to teach us something we need to know.

Principle Four: Choosing to be happy brings peace and increases parents' ability to deal effectively with their adult children.

The Lord's plan for us has been designated a "plan of happiness" (see Alma 42:16). If we are not generally happy and are not suffering from a clinical illness, perhaps the solution is to let the Lord's plan work more fully in our lives. Even those suffering from clinical depression can still be blessed by obedience to the plan. Happiness can come through drawing near to the Lord and needn't be dependent on our external circumstances.

Tom and Dayna* had been fretting for many months over the behavior of their oldest daughter, Julie,* who was in her late teens. While they still allowed her to live in their home, she was nearly impossible to live with. She was verbally abusive to them and to her younger siblings. She obeyed house rules just enough to keep from being asked to leave, and Tom and Dayna suspected she was involved in immoral behavior and drug use.

Their worries about Julie consumed them. Usually they were depressed, and they seldom laughed. Their involvement with their other children became perfunctory at best. It was as though a dark cloud had settled upon their home.

Finally, they saw what was happening and talked about it. They could see that they were not allowing the light of the gospel to lift them or their children. They discussed how their personal examples should demonstrate the results of living gospel principles so their children could see firsthand that happiness comes from following Jesus Christ. They vowed they would change and pleaded in their personal prayers for the strength to be happy.

They did change. It did not happen overnight, and there were still periods of despondency, but by working to be happy, they began to see many things they should be happy about. Gradually the tension in the home subsided. While Julie did not noticeably change her behavior, the other children and Tom and Dayna became more comfortable around each other, and the joking and laughter that had been absent for so long began to return.

Julie ultimately moved out, got married, and lived a life quite different from the other family members' lives. Her lifestyle was not gospel centered, but she loved to come home because of the love and happiness that existed there. After a number of years, she began to go to church again, and her husband asked to take the missionary lessons. He said he wanted to have in his home what he felt in Tom and Dayna's home.

How are children to know that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings happiness if their parents are not happy as they try to live it? How can they know that peace comes from righteousness, regardless of one's external circumstances, if parents are not at peace in the midst of their own stresses?

It is easy to say we should all be happy, but how do we do it? Can we just say, "From now on I am going to be happy?" Not quite - but almost. Happiness is a frame of mind, a perspective, a desire. To want to be happy is mandatory before one can ever be happy or at peace. Here are some ideas to help you increase your happiness:

- Dictate your own happiness. Don't let a problem child dictate it for you. Try not to let circumstances overwhelm you emotionally, financially, spiritually, or physically. Pray for the influence of the Holy Ghost.
- Realize that time is on your side. Most challenges with adult children are not resolved quickly, but time often works in favor of ultimate resolution.
- Take a break from your challenges. Don't cancel your weekly spouse dates. If you have put off a vacation until things get better, go now so things *can* get better.
- Lose yourself in service to others. Often, acts of service relieve the burdens of those who are serving.
- Take time to "be still." It is usually in spiritual solitude that we are able to hear the quiet whisperings of the Holy Ghost (see Psalm 45:10).

Happiness is a decision. If we truly want it, we will do what is necessary to obtain it.

The Proper Focus

As Latter-day Saints, we should realize the importance of our lifelong responsibility and find appropriate ways to be involved in the lives of our adult children. When we focus our lives on Jesus Christ and seek to offer our "whole souls" to Him (see Omni 1:26), our ability to love our children with His pure love is enhanced. This, in turn, increases our sensitivity to the promptings of the Holy Ghost as we make decisions. If we are prayerful and try to do our best, the Lord will help us, and we can feel good about our efforts, regardless of the choices our children may make.