

Parenting



Losing Sight of the Purpose of Parenting

By [Wallace Goddard](#) · May 24, 2015

Part 10 of Bringing Up Our Children in Light and Truth

Often we do the wrong things in parenting because we have lost sight of our real objectives. We may react to children's "misbehavior" in order to:

1. Stop the noise and confusion.
2. Teach them a lesson.
3. Make them suffer for misdeeds.
4. Express our tiredness and frustration.

The objectives listed above don't have an honored place as parenting objectives. There is a higher purpose for parental guidance than administering justice. The ultimate purpose of good guidance is to teach children to use their agency well. This is a vital—and challenging—objective; it will not be accomplished without wise and consistent effort.

But our correction is not always wise or consistent. We sometimes react to our children's behavior only when our mood makes it annoying to us. Therefore, they never know when inappropriate behavior will be laughed at,

ignored, scolded, or punished. The very same behavior can elicit vastly different responses based on our current state of irritation. This does not teach children to respect laws or lawgivers.

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We have a higher objective than obedience alone. We don't merely want our children to follow our rules, though we are generally glad when they do. We want them to internalize standards so that when we are not around to govern them, their inner sense of right and wrong still is. We want them to develop inner standards of goodness. We want something far more than compliance—we want moral development. This requires a very different kind of parenting from “natural man” parenting.

Three Kinds of Control

Research has shown that parents' attempts to control children can generally be divided into three categories.

Control by Power

The first type of control is power assertion or coercion. We can use force—including spanking, threats, rewards, and punishment—to control our children. This technique gets compliance as long as we have more power than our children and are present to exercise that power. But this technique does not effectively teach children an inner set of values, i.e., moral internalization or conscience.

As you might expect, the use of power results in undesirable outcomes. Children of parents who regularly use power assertion are more likely to be either passive or rebellious. Neither of those outcomes is desirable. We don't want children who surrender their agency to powerful others, and we don't want children who senselessly fight against authority. Yet those are the likely outcomes of using power to control children. When we live by the sword, we die by the sword. Parental use of power also results in lower social competence and poorer moral development in children.

One very popular form of coercion involves shaming and scolding children. Some parents might suppose that scolding and shaming are acceptable ways of helping children understand when they are behaving irresponsibly. Or sometimes we may lose our temper and seize scolding as an expression of our frustration. Or we may think of this as the quickest way of letting our children know they are out of line. But let's consider scolding from our children's perspective. “Scolding and punishment frighten children. Their natural tendency when scared is to cling to their mother [or father], but she [or he] is the one doing the scolding, and in doing so she is pushing the child away from her. This causes additional anxiety, and the child is frustrated—unable to act on his or her natural impulses. The people who are supposed to shield the child from anxiety and comfort the child are instead the source of an anxiety from which the child can find no shelter. This means that repeated and/or severe scolding may damage the child's fundamental trust.”

One of the unintended effects of scolding and other forms of punishment and coercion is that children feel lost. In a confusing and hostile world, they have no advocate or friend. It is no wonder that coercion is not generally effective as a control technique. Coercion does not respect children.

Control by Love Withdrawal

The second kind of control technique is called love withdrawal. This involves any action by parents that suggests that they won't sustain relationships with children who act in certain ways. Heaping guilt on children can be one form of love withdrawal. Timeouts can also be experienced as love withdrawal if they communicate to children that their parents don't want anything to do with them based on their behavior.

Research shows that love withdrawal is not consistently constructive or destructive. It can cause children to feel guilty and insecure. It does not reliably get compliance, and it does not encourage moral development. But the larger concern for Latter-day Saints is that love withdrawal focuses on emotional manipulation and does not teach children better ways to use their agency. Instead it teaches them to feel unsafe and unsure in their own lives and families.

Control by Induction

There is a third kind of control that is far more effective than power assertion or love withdrawal at helping children learn to use their agency wisely. Scholars sometimes call it induction, which is defined as actions by the parents that attempt to influence and persuade children to do what is right. It involves helping children understand the effect of their behavior on others and themselves. It provides explanations and reasons.

Parents who use induction are far more likely to have children who are socially competent, independent, able to control their impulses, and responsible. Perhaps most importantly, such children have better moral internalization—they do what is right because it is right. They do not require guards and enforcers.

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God's Kind of Control

The first time I studied the scholarly definition of induction, I was amazed by how similar it is to what God has recommended as the process for influencing other people. I will use His words and add a little commentary in brackets to connect His words to research and experience.

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood [or parenthood; in other words, we must not use power to remove agency and coerce compliance], only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; By kindness, and pure knowledge [Wow! That is pure induction!] which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile— [Hmm. We are better off when we use respectful methods. Our souls are enlarged, and we are spared the pains of hypocrisy.]

Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost [not when irritated and tired—only when directed by God's holy messenger]; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy;

That he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death. [YIKES! The child must know the power of our commitment to them!] (Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–44; emphasis added)

Notice that God recommends patient persuasion, humble kindness, authentic love, and heavenly knowledge. This is a tall order for humans! It seems God wants to stretch us earthly parents to be more like Him.

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For lessons on parenting from the Perfect Parent, let's consider how God treated His slow-to-learn son, Elijah. God gave Elijah the power to do a mighty miracle on Mt. Carmel, and it was witnessed by the assembled house of Israel. But in spite of the miracle, Ahab and Jezebel refused to repent. Rather than push forward in God's service, Elijah collapsed in discouragement. Three times God listened to Elijah's complaint about the children of Israel. Three times God did not lecture His shortsighted son. He invited him to meet Him for a sit-down on Mount Horeb. When Elijah was prepared by the forty-day journey, God taught him a great object lesson with wind, earthquake, and fire. It was because of Father's utter calmness that Elijah was able to feel the contrast between the wild forces

of nature and God's voice when the Spirit spoke. If Father had shouted an impassioned lecture about duty and power, Elijah might not have learned the vital lessons. It would have sounded too much like earthquake, wind, and fire. Instead, God calmly instructed His son when he was ready to learn.

Parenting on Earth

What does godly parenting look like when enacted by imperfect, human parents? Where are we most likely to fail along the way?

We have a smart, energetic grandson whose energy exceeds his impulse control by a sizable margin. Naturally he regularly bumps into life and people. When he, his sister, and I are playing basketball at our house, it is not very long before the boy will collide with his sister as he lunges for the ball. She goes sprawling and scrapes a hand or knee. The scrape combined with the surprise leaves her hurt and sad. If we want to teach the boy to play basketball without tackling his sister, what should we do?

If we favor coercive methods (or we are simply tired and frustrated), we may lecture the boy, punish him, tell him that he is through with basketball for the day, or remove privileges. All of these are likely to make him more resentful of parents rather than more mindful of his sister.

Love withdrawal takes a different approach. It might include one of those "I'm so disappointed in you" lectures. It might insist that he go to his room for an extended period. It might even entail name-calling, suggesting that the son is a disappointment. This would make the boy more lonely rather than more considerate.

What does wise induction recommend? In a perfectly calm and cordial manner, I ask him to sit down nearby and think about what he needs to do differently. He sits. His sister and I play basketball for a couple of minutes. Then I go sit by him. "Can you tell me what went wrong?"

He immediately and naturally blames her: "She got in the way!"

I calmly say, "Why don't you take a couple more minutes to see if you can figure out what you need to do differently?" He does not need to do his sister's repenting. A couple minutes later, I sit by him again. "Can you tell me what you did wrong?" Usually he is ready to repent and says something like "I dove for the ball and ran into sister."

Induction invites children to consider the effect of their behavior on others.
"Yeah. What was that like for sister?"

Induction invites

“She got hurt.”

“You’re right. She got painful scrapes. We try to never hurt each other. What can you do differently?”

“I need to watch for her and not run into her.”

“Would you be willing to do that?”

He sighs. “Yeah.”

“Are you ready to try again?”

We go back to basketball without any insults, threats, or punishments. I know from experience that he will be reckless with his sister again at some point. When that happens we will repeat this procedure as many times as we need to. Children need more than one encounter with reason and compassion to learn those principles. Effective parenting takes time, consistency, and patience. It takes many sessions (more than seventy times seven!) of patient teaching.

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Sometimes we try to show our love for our children by ignoring the rules. Maybe we ignore a reasonable bedtime to win the child’s favor. That’s not the way to teach the law of the harvest. It teaches anarchy. Induction is the key to teaching responsible behavior. But induction does not include lecturing, guilt, isolating, hurting, or punishing. It is lovingly shepherding a child’s mind and heart toward understanding the consequences of his or her acts and the effect on others.

The next article will consider ways to bring the key processes—heartfelt compassion, healthy nurturing, and wise guidance—into beautiful harmony.

Reflection and Application:

Think of a recent disciplinary encounter with a child that didn’t go very well. Can you see how you could have used induction rather than power assertion or love withdrawal? How would you use induction to be effective with your child? What would you do to help your child learn to be considerate of others?

Invitations:

To get 50 practical ways to respond to your children without using anger or power, order [*The Soft Spoken Parent*](#) from Deseret Book.

To order a copy of the book from which this article is taken, go to [Deseret Book](#).