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Helping Children Put On *the Whole Armor of God.*

A Proactive Approach to Parenting Teenagers

MANY of us have adverse reactions to just hearing the word “teenager” and dread the day that our children cross that threshold and become what is often perceived as an uncontrollable force. This stereotype of teenage storm and stress dates back to the early 1900s when the term “adolescence” was first used by G. Stanley Hall, and it continued to dominate into the late 1950s (Arnett, 2012). Despite historical and current public opinion, research in the field of adolescence (which includes children and teens ages 10–18) does not consider this time to be a universal period of storm and stress. Indeed, fully 80% of adolescents mention thinking highly of their parents, and 60% report wanting to be like their parents when they grow up (Larson & Richards, 1994). Although many of us fall prey to stereotypes of adolescent angst, perhaps when we think of this age period we should also think of the many youth that the Lord called at a young age to do miraculous things. David, Nephi, Mormon, and Joseph Smith were all young, yet all were capable of amazing feats, and all were instruments in the hands of the Lord.

So how do we help our children transition from the awkward, sometimes rebellious teens into the strong men and women of faith that we desire them



It is essential that we help our children put on the whole armor of God so they will be able to face the temptations of the adversary with the proper protection. © Don Christensen, courtesy of Church History Museum.

to be? In 1 Nephi 2:16, Nephi refers to himself as “exceedingly young” and “large in stature.” In 1 Nephi 4:31, he refers to himself as “a man large in stature.” What happened between those two chapters to transform him from exceedingly young to a man? In 1 Nephi 3:7, Nephi responds to the call of the Lord to “go and do” what he is asked. He is obedient to the Lord’s command, and this action secures his transformation to manhood. In order to help our children make this same transition from being exceedingly young to being men and women in the gospel, it is essential that we help them to put on the whole armor of God so they will be able to face the temptations of the adversary with the proper protection. Putting on the armor of God includes

girding one's loins with truth, donning the breastplate of righteousness, shoeing one's feet with the gospel of peace, and arming oneself with the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (see Ephesians 6:14–17). If we desire our children to be prepared for battle and poised for triumph, we need to help them understand what they will encounter in the world today. We need to help them develop truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and the influence of the Spirit in their own lives and arm them with these weapons to fight the battles that will keep them on the strait and narrow path. One key way we can do this is through proactive parenting.

Proactive Parenting

Perhaps some of you reading this do not have teenagers yet, so you might think it best to put this counsel aside for a few years and come back to it once you are in the thick of things. However, those with young children are often the best audience to address, since raising healthy teenagers requires a proactive approach of starting when children are young and building relationships of openness and communication over time. In this chapter I will focus on what I call *proactive parenting*, which is a parent's active attempt to socialize a child's values and behaviors *before misbehavior or transgression has occurred* (Padilla-Walker & Thompson, 2005). The vast majority of research on parenting focuses on *reactive parenting*, or parental discipline. This is what parents do *after* a child has done something wrong or transgressed and is typified by giving time-outs, spanking, and familiarizing children with consequences. When comparing reactive and proactive parenting, it is suggested that proactive parenting is often a more effective way to communicate parental messages than is reactive parenting. Indeed, proactive parenting, in one form or another, has been linked to less media use (Nathanson, 1999), higher levels of academic achievement (Seyfried & Chung, 2002), later age of sexual debut (Dittus, Miller, Kotchick, & Forehand, 2004), and lower levels of drug use and delinquency (Fletcher, Steinberg, & Williams-Wheeler, 2004). The effectiveness of proactive parenting is due in part to the lack of

strong emotions, on the part of both the parent and the child, that are often present with reactive parenting. Few of us internalize messages when we are being yelled at or scolded, and proactive parenting allows for discussion and teaching in a safe environment without anger or sadness. Think of the last time you yelled at your child or were yelled at by someone. All you likely remember is that you did not like how you felt, which supports research suggesting that the socialization message is often lost in reactive parenting situations (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Indeed, proactive parenting may help to decrease the need for extensive reactive parenting by anticipating challenges the child might face and communicating values and parental expectations to the child before misbehavior occurs.

With young children, proactive parenting is a pretty straightforward process. For example, my day out shopping with my children goes very differently when I am proactive and tell them ahead of time that today we will *not* be purchasing any toys or candy at the store. If I somehow fail to give this important warning, the day usually ends in me dragging screaming children out of the store and leaving an abandoned shopping cart at the checkout counter while I desperately try not to yell at my children in public. With adolescents, however, proactive parenting takes time, and starting sooner rather than later is always better. As children reach adolescence they will be increasingly faced with values that may be contrary to those held by your family. In fact, as the mother of a 12-year-old, 9-year-old, and 1-year-old, I have been surprised that exposure to conflicting values starts much earlier than the adolescent years. Being proactive in the face of these ever-increasing conflicting messages of values (whether they be from peers, teachers, or media) requires that parents clearly communicate their values to their children and, as necessary, provide them with tools to combat these potentially conflicting messages.

At face value, this argument is intuitive. Why wait until your child is sexually active, getting into physical fights with others, or involved in drugs to talk to him or her about these behaviors? While the need for a proactive approach is logical, research shows that many parents wait until their children are sexually active before talking to them about sexuality or until their

teens are in serious trouble before trying to address their problematic behavior (see Eisenberg, Sieving, Bearinger, Swain, & Resnick, 2006). Although some teens may still manage to avoid trouble on their own, for others this is simply too late, and this delay can have serious consequences. Indeed, teens note that when they have questions about topics such as sexuality, the most common sources they turn to in an attempt to learn more are friends and the media (Steinberg, 2010). As a parent, I know that those sources are not where I want my children to learn about issues that I feel strongly about. Thus it is important that we talk to our children early and frequently so we do not miss the opportunity to teach our children what is important to us and what we hope will also be important to them. While this approach certainly applies to issues that are of great importance to us, such as the law of chastity and the Word of Wisdom, proactive parenting also applies to everyday expectations that we have for our children, including chores, homework, and behavior in public (for example at the grocery store or church). When I think of scriptural examples of good proactive parenting, I think of Lehi and Alma, who both spoke at length to their children not only about their current behaviors but also about what they needed to do for their futures. They gave their children suggestions and counsel regarding how each of them might avoid pitfalls in their futures, and they addressed their children individually and according to their own needs (see 2 Nephi 1; Alma 36–42).

Specific Proactive Parenting Practices

I will now discuss three common proactive parenting practices I have identified in my research (Padilla-Walker & Thompson, 2005; Padilla-Walker, Christensen, & Day, 2011). These practices can also be identified in the teachings of the Savior, who is certainly the best manifestation of exemplary proactive parenting. The first proactive parenting practice is called *cocooning*. This is the most restrictive form of proactive parenting and is typified by parents who try to protect or shelter their children from any source outside the family that poses a potential threat. Examples of cocooning include

forbidding certain television shows or not allowing children to hang out with particular friends. By appropriately cocooning young children, parents teach children *what* is right and wrong. When examining the Savior's teaching of his disciples, we see his cocooning behavior early on in their development as men of God when he encouraged them to avoid or leave behind the things of the world and follow him—"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). It was first necessary that they remove themselves from worldly pursuits before they could embrace the Savior's mission. Thus, the disciples left their nets and their ships, or shielded themselves from worldly pursuits, for the pursuit of heavenly things.

A second approach to proactive parenting is called *prearming*, and involves a parent's active attempts to teach values by providing some strategy, or "advance arming," to help teens when they are faced with conflicting messages of values. This strategy is common among parents who feel their values are threatened by society and may include talking and discussing specific situations adolescents might encounter. However, prearming is varied and can also be characterized by seemingly benign value-laden comments we make as parents, such as commenting on how someone wears his hair or how immodestly someone is dressed. For example, the other day my daughter saw a picture of one of her favorite cartoon characters who happened to be very skinny and a bit immodestly dressed, and she commented, "Wow, Mom! That girl needs some clothes and a sandwich!" And last year when my family was visiting Las Vegas, my son was saying goodbye to all of the sights of Vegas as we passed them. He said, "Good-bye, M&M World! Good-bye, Belagio Buffet!" And as we drove by a billboard, he ended with, "Good-bye, inappropriately dressed ladies!" My children's comments sounded familiar—clearly my husband and I had been using prearming to communicate values about modesty and body image without even knowing it! By using prearming, we teach our children *why* something is wrong. This is an absolutely essential step, as pointed out by President Dieter F. Uchtdorf: "The 'why' of obedience sanctifies our actions, transforming the mundane into the majestic. It magnifies our small acts of obedience into holy acts of consecration" (Uchtdorf, 2011). As we examine

the Savior's interactions with his disciples, his use of prearming is extensive, in that he uses discussion and teaches by example time and time again. In both the Bible and the Book of Mormon he directs parables and teachings directly to his disciples in an attempt to prepare them for what they will face once he is no longer with them, and they must make decisions and choose their actions without his physical presence (see 3 Nephi 15).

The final proactive strategy is called *deference*, which is characterized by parents who allow their children to make their own decisions. This is often an attempt to show trust in their children, and it is usually used when adolescents are older, after many years of using strategies like prearming and cocooning. For example, this might be represented by parents allowing their child to choose his or her own media or allowing their child to hang out with a friend they may not yet know. By using this strategy, parents allow children to use their agency to practice *choosing* between right and wrong. This approach is indicative of Joseph Smith's oft-cited quote, "We teach them correct principles and allow them to govern themselves" (Clark, 1965–1975). At first glance this approach might not seem proactive, but it by no means suggests that parents are no longer involved or aware of what their children are doing. Indeed, most parents who effectively use deference are ready at a moment's notice to step in and redirect their children should parents see them consistently choosing incorrectly, but allowing this agency is key to development and harmony in the parent-child relationship during the teen years. If parents always make decisions about media and friends for their children, it will eventually feel controlling to teenagers (Nathanson, 1999, 2002), and more importantly, they will not have a chance to practice making correct decisions without parental supervision, which may lead to struggles once teens leave home (Steinberg, 2010). The Savior used deference in a more absolute sense when he finally left the presence of his disciples and allowed them to use what they had learned to preach the gospel and lead the Church. He was still with them and was ready to help when they needed it, but he largely allowed them to apply what they had learned and to use their agency, thus showing his trust in them.

As you might expect, parents use these three strategies (cocooning, prearming, and deference) to varying degrees as their children age and become more mature and responsible. Indeed, in a recent study we found that over a period of three years (when children were ages 12 to 14), parents' rates of prearming and cocooning both decreased over time, and rates of deference increased (Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Fraser, Dyer, & Yorgason, 2012). Prearming is the most commonly used proactive parenting strategy at every age, but by age 14 deference is nearly as common as prearming. In addition, parents usually do not use only one proactive approach to parenting, but more often combine several and are quite flexible in their use. My colleagues and I have found several patterns of proactive parenting, the most common of which include what we call *reasoned cocooning* and *reasoned deference*. Reasoned cocooning is when parents combine cocooning and prearming by sheltering or protecting their adolescents from outside influences, while also taking time to talk with their children about these decisions. Reasoned deference is when parents combine deference and prearming and allow their adolescents to make their own decisions while parents talk to them extensively about those decisions. Thus research suggests there are three main approaches to proactive parenting, which can be used alone or in combination. An effective parent is a flexible parent, so it is common for parents to use a combination of proactive approaches depending on the individual child and the situation being faced.

Finding the Most Effective Proactive Approach for Your Child

The next logical question to pose, and perhaps the most important, is which of these strategies is most effective at promoting positive teen outcomes? The answer to this difficult question depends on many factors, but those most relevant include (a) the source of the influence (for example, media versus peers) and (b) a host of characteristics of the child (such as temperament, gender, and age).

Source of the Influence

When considering the source of influence, research suggests that parents feel more threatened by the influence of media on their children than they do by the influence of peers (Padilla-Walker & Thompson, 2005). I think many of us remember being forbidden to hang out with certain friends or groups who were involved in particular behaviors, and this is still a relatively easy thing for parents to cocoon. However, research suggests that parents take a number of approaches to proactively parenting their teens and that cocooning or prohibiting involvement with peers is not nearly as effective a strategy as is prearming or guiding one's children regarding the types of friends they should choose *before* the child has gotten into trouble with peers (Mounts, 2002). Parents who are proactive have children with higher quality relationships with peers, as well as higher levels of cooperation, self-control, and social skills (Mounts, 2011). The Church also takes a proactive approach to teaching about peers and friends as exemplified in the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet, which uses extensive prearming by suggesting that youth should choose their friends carefully: "Choose friends who share your values so you can strengthen and encourage each other in living high standards. A true friend will encourage you to be your best self" (p. 12). Indeed, many negative behaviors can be avoided by proactively keeping our children away from individuals who would encourage negative behavior but also by discussing with our children the importance of surrounding oneself with righteous friends.

Although there is a body of research focusing on proactive parenting in response to peers, I would like to focus primarily on the influence of media, as it is much more difficult for parents to regulate. Although some forms of media are not appropriate at any age, research suggests that strict cocooning of media is not very effective, especially as adolescents get older and can view media at a friend's house or on their portable media device (Nathanson, 2002). It seems to be more effective to use prearming strategies, which include talking to adolescents about media that they may encounter and offering them strategies to deal with inappropriate media. Part of the

reason prearming is so important is because despite parents' best efforts, it is nearly inevitable that children will be exposed to inappropriate media content. Indeed, recent reports suggest that nearly 100% of boys and 65% of girls are exposed to online pornography during adolescence, and nearly two-thirds of that exposure is unwanted (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010; Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008).

That being said, over 50% of teens report learning about sexuality on the Internet (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), which raises two important points. First, it is essential that we provide our children with the critical thinking skills or tools to deal with inappropriate media when they come across it. If we merely avoid talking about these issues and just hope our children miraculously avoid exposure, our children will be left defenseless when they come into contact with inappropriate information. Second, and on a related note, it is very important that our children learn about sexuality from parent-child discussions before they are sexually mature and long before they are sexually active. In this venue, hopefully questions can be adequately answered and principals of chastity and sexuality can be taught gradually and in the safety of the family home. Elder M. Russell Ballard 1999 said: "As our children grow, they need information taught by parents more directly and plainly about what is and is not appropriate. Parents need to teach children to avoid any pornographic photographs or stories . . . [and] talk to them plainly about sex and the teaching of the gospel regarding chastity. Let this information come from parents in the home in an appropriate way" (p. 86).

In addition to prearming children against inappropriate media influences, another helpful approach that facilitates proactive parenting is to participate in appropriate media with your children. For example, we have found in our research that playing video games or watching movies with teens, or even texting teens, can help to strengthen family ties (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Stockdale, & Day, 2011). In addition, engaging in media as a family creates opportunities for prearming to occur by providing a platform for parent-child conversation about media content (Padilla-Walker, Coyne, & Fraser, 2012).



One approach to proactive parenting is to participate in appropriate media with children. © Scott Griessel.

Indeed, I remember numerous conversations I had with my parents as a teenager that began as a result of something we watched together on television. In turn, our family has numerous phrases or “mantras” we use to help encourage one another that we took from songs or movies that we watched as a family.

Although watching inappropriate or violent media with teenagers can unintentionally act as an endorsement of negative behavior, watching television shows appropriate for teens or playing appropriate video games rated T and below have been shown to lead to greater levels of parent-child connection. This connection is key to opening channels of communication and allowing for discussion about important issues (Coyne et al., 2011). So although parental cocooning of media during early childhood may be appropriate, reasoned cocooning or prearming seem to be more effective

approaches to dealing with conflicting messages of values from media during the adolescent years.

Characteristics of the Child

Our Heavenly Father knows each of us individually, and our experiences are “tailored to the individual’s capacities and needs, as known by a loving Father in Heaven” (Hunter, 1990). As loving earthly parents, we too must carefully consider our child’s individual characteristics when determining what proactive approach might be most appropriate for that individual child. More specifically, it is important to consider the temperament and age of the child.

Individual temperament. Temperamental differences are influenced by biological factors and are reflected in behavioral tendencies such as fearfulness, aggression, or extroversion. Some children are temperamentally more susceptible to peer influences or to media influences than others are, so reasoned cocooning in childhood may be appropriate for this type of child, as any exposure might negatively influence behavior. For example, when my son was younger, he was prone to aggressive behavior. We found that any exposure to violent television resulted in his behavior becoming much more aggressive, so we tended to cocoon him from such programs as much as possible, while still providing an explanation for why we thought he should avoid certain media. In contrast, a child who is very good at regulating emotions and behaviors may not need as much cocooning, especially as he displays an ability to make good choices in regard to media and friends.

In addition, some children might be more or less receptive to different forms of proactive parenting as a function of their temperaments. For example, some children are particularly resistant to parental authority and might not be very responsive to cocooning of any kind. This type of child would require a parent to use increased levels of prearming to ensure that the child is prepared with the appropriate protection against conflicting values. Other children might be quite amenable to parental control, and while at

younger ages reasoned cocooning might be appropriate, it may be tempting to continue to shelter children because they will allow it. However, this approach may not serve children well, as eventually they will be on their own and will need the tools necessary to face a variety of influences. Although it is our task as parents to get to know our children individually, ultimately our Heavenly Father knows our children far better than we do, so it is important to seek for his help often when trying to determine what approach will work best for each individual child.

Age of the child. The Lord teaches us “line upon line, precept upon precept” (2 Nephi 28:30). In Doctrine and Covenants 50:40, he states, “Behold, ye are little children and ye cannot bear all things now; ye must grow in grace and in the knowledge of the truth.” We need to take the same gradual and individually tailored approach with our children. In addition to temperament, how effective each proactive strategy is depends largely upon the age of the child. Although I will be discussing age in terms of numbers, it is worth mentioning that developmental age (or level of maturity) is probably more accurate for parents to use as a gauge than is chronological age. Because each individual child, regardless of age, will develop on his or her own personal timetable, it is possible that the age ranges used in research do not apply to each practical situation, so please keep that in mind.

Early adolescence (preteens). Research on early adolescents (children ages 10–14) suggests that any strategy that contains prearming, or discussing issues with teens, seems to be positively associated with healthy outcomes (Mounts, 2011; Nathanson, 1999; Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011). This includes cocooning combined with prearming (reasoned cocooning), deference combined with prearming (reasoned deference), and prearming alone. Proactive parenting that includes prearming has been associated with adolescents who have a greater ability to understand the needs of others and to control their own impulses. Prearming has also been linked to lower levels of both depression and problem behaviors. In other words, whether parents allowed their early teens more autonomy (deference) or whether they sheltered their children a bit more (cocooning) did not seem to matter as

much as whether or not parents combined these strategies with discussion about potential influences. This is likely because as parents have open conversations with their teens about value-laden topics, parents are not only communicating values but are also allowing their children to engage in dialogue that will impact both moral reasoning abilities and feelings of self-generation. Self-generation means that adolescents feel *they* are choosing their own values and behaviors. Despite the importance of autonomy in promoting adolescents' feelings of self-generation, it is also clear from this research that deference (or allowing nearly complete autonomy) during early adolescence is not associated with positive outcomes if used without the accompanied parent-child conversation. This may be because deference is developmentally inappropriate if used as the sole proactive approach before adolescents' values are adequately internalized. Indeed, the need to consider a child's age when using deference is highlighted by research suggesting that deference and autonomy granting are more appropriate as children get older (Nelson et al., 2011).

Mid to late adolescence. Research with children in middle adolescence (about ages 14–16) focuses on adolescents' development of personal values or the internalization of values (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Padilla-Walker, Fraser, & Harper, 2012). General Authorities have counseled that our teens cannot live on borrowed light, or that it is important that they internalize testimonies and values of their own (Bednar, 2012). If proactive parenting is an attempt to avoid misbehavior in the face of potentially conflicting values, then being proactive is one way that we as parents, leaders, or teachers attempt to promote family or societal values in our children. *Values* are defined as broad, stable goals or motivational constructs that communicate what is important to an individual (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003). For example, one might value being kind and honest to those around him or her, a value that researchers term a benevolent or prosocial value. Others might value achievement, defined as striving to excel in an area such as school or athletics. If adolescents value benevolence, they should be more likely to volunteer and be kind to their neighbors. If other adolescents value academic

achievement, they should be more likely to do well in school. This is called value-congruent behavior, or behavior that is congruent with one's internalized values.

Internalization of values is the process whereby children acknowledge values and integrate them into their identities (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). More specifically, if values are externally regulated (that is, we value something only inasmuch as we would get punished for *not* doing it), then those values are less likely to be reflected in our behaviors. However, if our values are internally regulated (we value something because we enjoy it or because it is part of who we are and how we define ourselves) then those values are much more likely to be reflected in our behaviors. This pattern applies to our children's development of spiritual values as well. Are our children engaging in church activities and communication with the Lord because they are sanctioned to do so (external regulation), or are they doing such because they enjoy it and it is becoming part of who they are (internal regulation)? In Matthew 15:8 the Lord speaks of this condition when he says, "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." Internalization suggests not only external behavioral obedience but obedience with all our might, mind, and strength as well.

Although internalization of values is clearly a gradual process in teens and even in adults, proactive parenting has been found to be associated with internalization of values during mid- to late adolescence (Padilla-Walker, Fraser, & Harper, 2012). More specifically, parental use of deference and reasoned deference were associated with the most consistent value-congruent behaviors across a variety of values and behaviors. In other words, parents who talked to their adolescents, but also allowed autonomy in the face of potentially conflicting values in an attempt to show trust in their children, had teens whose values were more strongly tied to their behaviors. This might be reflected in a parent who allowed their child to read a book without the parent reading it first or to attend a party without the parent attending. Now, for many of us, this finding may be difficult to digest. Is doing nothing really the best way to help our teens make correct



When our children internalize eternal values, they engage in church activities and communication with the Lord because they enjoy it and it helps them become who they are.
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choices? Absolutely not. Remember that parents who use deference before misbehavior has occurred have often spent years using reasoned cocooning and prearming to teach their children values, and they are now giving those children the autonomy necessary to make their own decisions (and to practice what their parents have taught them). If parents want to be capable of allowing the freedom that many adolescents and young adults desire, they are better served to begin the work of teaching values much earlier than adolescence. Early preparation will keep lines of communication open throughout the teenage years.

This allowing for agency with continued oversight is again consistent with the teachings of the Savior. After his feeding of the 5,000, the Savior went to a mountain to pray, and his disciples headed out to sea. Soon, the ship was caught in a storm, so the Savior walked across the water to the disciples, who were unsure of who was approaching them. He told them, “Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid” (Matthew 14:27). Now, at this point, a controlling parent might say, “It is I; end of discussion.” But the Savior is never controlling. He taught his disciples a great deal before this point, and he allowed Peter to experience a great lesson. Peter said to the Lord, “If it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water,” and he left the ship to walk on the water. As Peter used his agency and began to be afraid and to doubt, he began to sink. Again, the Savior did not allow him to sink, but immediately reached out his hand and rescued Peter, with a mild rebuke (see Matthew 14:28–31). Peter learned much more from this experience than he would have if the Lord had said, “It is I; end of discussion.” As parents, this is a pattern that we too should follow. This means extensive teaching initially and then the allowance of autonomy with our continued willingness to immediately reach out and save our children should they begin to sink. As children get older and gain more autonomy (especially as they leave the parental home; see chapter 12, this volume; Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Christensen, Evans, & Carroll, 2011), this earlier support will help provide a secure foundation from which parents can then step back even further and defer to their child.



Adolescence is a time of transition where many teens want to make their own decisions. Welden Andersen, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Helping Children Become Agents unto Themselves

Adolescence is a time of transition, and most teens balk at the idea of being controlled or may even interpret well-meant parental suggestions as annoying lecturing that is infringing upon their abilities to make their own decisions. If parents start when their children are young and talk to them about values, behaviors, and different situations they may be faced with and how to respond to them, it is likely that once teens hit mid-adolescence (about age 14 or 15), their values will be beginning to solidify and will be at least moderately reflected in their behaviors. As such, parents will be able to stand back and increasingly defer to their child. Elder David A. Bednar (2010) highlights the need for parents to be watchful and discerning in

regard to their children; one of the ways he suggests that parents do this is by inviting their children to become agents until themselves; to act, and not merely be acted upon. He said:

Parents have the sacred responsibility to help children to act and seek learning by faith. And a child is never too young to take part in this pattern of learning.

Giving a man a fish feeds him for one meal. Teaching a man to fish feeds him for a lifetime. As parents and gospel instructors, you and I are not in the business of distributing fish; rather, our work is to help our children learn “to fish” and to become spiritually steadfast. This vital objective is best accomplished as we encourage our children to act in accordance with correct principles—as we help them to learn by doing. (pp. 42–43)

This clearly is one of the strongest weapons parents can give to their children against negative influences from media or other sources: not just enforcing rules that do not apply to every situation, but by encouraging the use of moral agency to think critically about what is being learned and to then choose to act in accordance with the will of the Lord.

Proactive parenting, especially prearming, during childhood and early adolescence will also increase the chances that adolescents will come to parents when they are faced with conflicting values or situations that they are not sure how to deal with. For example, I knew a couple that was very open about discussing sexuality with their children. As their children got older, they always went to their parents to discuss these types of issues rather than talking to peers or looking on the Internet for answers. Alternatively, those parents who do not lay this foundation in childhood and early adolescence may find themselves struggling to help teens who have been thrust into a world with numerous conflicting values from countless sources, have very little advanced armor with which to protect themselves, and do not feel they can discuss difficult issues with their

parents. If parents find themselves in this position, it is not too late to start opening lines of communication and increasing parent-child connection. Although long-standing patterns of communication and family interaction are difficult to change, acknowledgement of the need to change is an important first step.

It is important to note, however, that when given autonomy, not all children will make good choices. Many of us are all too aware that despite our best efforts, our children continue to make poor choices. Even proactive parenting is not a fail-safe approach, and although I can share with you what research suggests is the most effective for teens “on average,” clearly there are individual situations that require special measures. Elder Howard W. Hunter (1983) said:

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. (p. 65)

Thus, taken together, we can conclude that the most effective approach to proactive parenting is a flexible approach that may change depending on the source of influence, on the individual child, and on the type of outcome being measured. This flexibility highlights the need for parents to prayerfully follow the Spirit as they contemplate which approach might be best for each of their children. No one loves our children and knows their needs better than our Father in Heaven, and if parents earnestly seek his guidance in rearing their children he will lovingly provide the advice and direction needed.

Raising Children in Enemy Territory

Regardless of what stage of life each of us is in, being proactive can benefit us in many ways, as being proactive is essential to our successful temporal and spiritual progression. Many sinful patterns can be avoided by being proactive against the influences of the adversary. Avoiding our own personal pitfalls requires that we are aware of them and willing to face them, just as helping our children to avoid their pitfalls requires that we take the time to get to know our children and their vulnerabilities. Anticipating vulnerability and taking the necessary precautions *before* serious sin occurs is always easier than repenting afterward.

Counsel to be prepared both temporally and spiritually is not something that we are unfamiliar with in the Church, and being self-reliant in these ways requires us to be proactive. As mentioned previously, being proactive should be likened to putting on the whole armor of God. “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (Ephesians 6:11–13). Whether we apply this principle to ourselves, or help to provide our children with these tools, this proactive approach helps us and our children to stand strong in both temporal and spiritual situations. We have been counseled to be in the world, but not of the world. Elder Quentin L. Cook said, “We cannot avoid the world. A cloistered existence is not the answer. In a positive sense, our contribution to the world is part of our challenge and is essential if we are to develop our talents” (Cook, 2006, 54). He mentioned that one way for us to do this is to be confident about our beliefs and to live them. We must proactively prepare ourselves and our children to do so.

Church leaders have increasingly warned us that the youth of the Church are being raised “in enemy territory” (Packer, 2011, 16), in a world where

moral standards are blurred or even nonexistent (Monson, 2011, 60). Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (2003) said:

Some days it seems that a sea of temptation and transgression inundates [our children], simply washes over them before they can successfully withstand it, before they should have to face it. And often at least some of the forces at work seem beyond our personal control.

Well, some of them may be beyond our control, but I testify with faith in the living God that they are not beyond His.” (p. 85)

With the help of Almighty God, we can seize the opportunity to be proactive today in the lives of our children and help them to be agents in their own lives. A proactive approach to parenting provides our children with the armor needed to enter enemy territory with protection and to ultimately return with honor.

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