



Elder L. Whitney Clayton and Kathy Clayton (center, back row) with family

On Grocery Shopping with Children: Nurturing Spiritual Self-Reliance

Elder L. Whitney Clayton and Kathy Clayton

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After teaching our seven children, who all managed more often than not to comply fairly well with classroom regulations, a fourth-grade teacher pulled our youngest son aside and asked, “So what do your parents do to make you behave? Do they yell at you? Do they ground you? Do they spank you?” Her list of threatening consequences exhausted, she waited for the pensive boy to answer. After a moment’s thought, he responded, “They guilt us to death.”

We were not entirely proud of the characterization of our parenting strategy. Although we were glad he did not report screaming, grounding, or spanking as our compelling motivators, we wish he would had responded with euphemistic composure, “They provide conscience training.”

After a long laugh and a short wince over the teacher-student exchange, we considered in earnest her question in an attempt to identify, somewhat after the fact, a methodology. We concluded that we had both deliberately and inadvertently interacted with our children with a generally unified ideology.

Be Careful with External Rewards or Punishments

We agreed that any method of discipline that depends on imposing external punishment, or even granting rewards, risks becoming manipulative and delays or minimizes a child’s privilege of tasting the sweet, personal sensation of the affirming approval of heaven for right choices. Children who become satisfied to fold their arms and sit quietly in Church services solely

because they crave the gold star their parents will put on their foreheads at the end of the exercise may neglect to recognize the sweet sense of worship and connection to heaven they are entitled to for their reverent behavior.

As short-term motivators, gold stars provide bright, positive encouragement along the way, but they are superficial substitutes for the more internal, long-lasting rewards of good choices and jobs well done. Although we parents all celebrate a report card with excellent marks, the enthusiasm in the voice and the light in the eyes of children who have solved a simultaneous equation or written their first sonnet underline and punctuate a love of learning in a lasting and profound way. Straight A's will not be a realistic goal for all children, but satisfying, personal experiences with learning, discovery, and accomplishment are realistic goals. Our current educational system may not allow for such an idealistic view of personal educational success, but, as parents, we can espouse that view by celebrating effort, completion, and personal bests.

Nurture Self-Reliance

Educators talk of the ideal learning level as “competence plus one,” meaning that a wise teacher offers students familiar, mastered material, plus a little more. The wisdom of the concept is clear. Preserving elements of a familiar curriculum builds student confidence and nurtures self-reliance, and the introduction of new material promotes growth. A similar formula could be useful for parents. A trip to the grocery store with young children serves as an illustration. Although it is always easier to leave young children at home than to take them along, the opportunity to develop self-control is worth the inconvenience for the parents. When children are very young, going to the store at all may be the “plus one” part of the equation, so they may be stretched to an appropriate level just sitting in the shopping cart and lasting the hour without a tantrum.

As a child masters that level of behavior, a wise parent might take the child out of the shopping cart to allow him or her to walk alongside with one hand either held by the parent or holding onto the cart. That free hand with the potential to reach low-level temptations becomes the “plus one.” Anticipating a readiness for more-advanced self-discipline, the parent might next release the child's hand but still require him or her to stay adjacent to the cart. With two hands free and no material tether, that maturing child must strengthen the capacity to resist the runaway inclination of the natural man and stay beside the parent, in spite of the very real freedom the child has to tear down the aisles.

A little older and more self-disciplined, the child may next experience the “plus one” of an assigned errand to the end of the aisle to retrieve something from the shopping list or even be given the prerogative to make a choice of his or her own.

Help Children Correct Their Behavior

It all sounds very academic, but the fact is, based on our own nonacademic, repeatedly practical experience, there are risks every time we take children to the store at all, much less allow them space beyond the shopping cart. What if that previously well-behaved child takes off to the end of the aisle and impulsively snatches an apple from the bottom row of a towering display? Has the experience with self-discipline been a total failure? Although we would likely have hesitated with the answer some years ago when we were taking our own unpredictable children to the grocery store, we think even then we would have affirmed our commitment to the principle of “competence plus one,” despite the risks that “plus one” inevitably implies. Thus, if the display topples and apples bump to the ground and roll down the aisle, what do we recommend? The obvious—we take the young culprit to the scene of the crime and assist him or her in picking up every one.

While we were visiting family friends one warm California afternoon, our young sons were amusing themselves wrestling in the front yard. With a sudden flare of temper, one boy grabbed a small toy and bonked another over the head, necessitating several stitches. That young offender's mother taught him a lesson with her response that he shared with us fondly fifteen years later. She drove him to a doughnut store, where she expected him to spend his own money buying a box of doughnuts for his injured friend. As if that were not enough, she took him to his friend's house and waited while he made the long trek to the front door to deliver the offering to his friend with a pained apology. Repentance is an essential privilege, even for very young wrongdoers.

Prepare Children's Minds to Make Good Choices

Although we cannot anticipate every possible challenging choice, we can appropriately brief our children by reviewing in advance the likely experiences and temptations they might face. A girl who has pictured tantalizing cereal boxes strategically placed at her eye level and made a mental commitment to avoid the temptation of snatching them willfully off the shelves will be better equipped for her "plus one" experience of walking down the grocery store aisles without physical restraint. If we think to talk about the cereal boxes but neglect to consider the appealing apples, conversation after the fact might be helpful for the next time. Learning and repentance are lifelong projects.

Cultivate an Appetite for Good Things

Other benefits to our taking children with us to the grocery store and everywhere else that is enriching and interesting are the opportunity to spend time together in conversation and to expose them to the varied, lovely things of life. Part of cultivating a craving for the good implies children's having been richly exposed to it. As a result of what we know about our children's eternal identity as children of God, we can believe that they have a disposition to recognize and desire that which is good. We can trust they will know what is "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy," and they can cultivate an eagerness and determination to "seek after these things" (Articles of Faith 1:13), even in their friends, their hobbies, and their activities. Parents, then, assume the fortunate task of offering children exposure to and experience with wonderful things.

We admired a group of six young mothers who organized for their four-year-old boys a weekly music appreciation group. As those energetic little music lovers played with happy lyrics and rhythms, the imaginative mothers were not only taking initiative for cultivating a God-given gravitation to positive influences but also engaging affirmatively in activity with their young sons and their young sons' friends. Those mothers were deepening their own affection for homemade tambourines and other people's four-year-old boys. The open-minded shared embracing of good music together will likely have lasting benefits for them all.

Another family of six we know formed a family museum club. Together they searched the Sunday newspapers for listings of appropriate exhibits they could study and attend together. When we joined them on a family outing to a traveling exhibit at the Getty Museum, we were impressed by their children's intelligent, cultural pleasure at viewing those challenging, beautiful works of art. Beginning with a "competence plus one" measure as their guide when the children were young, the parents had cultivated and believed in their children's Godlike gravitation to lovely things. **Spend Time Reviewing Each Day's Choices**

Being affirmative with the use of time increases the opportunity for exposure to praiseworthy things, and it minimizes the vacant time for misuse. We might avoid thinking in terms of "passing time" or "killing time" and choose rather to "take time," "make time," or "invest time."

At the end of every day, sometimes wearily but always with determination, we sat for a few minutes at the side of each child's bed for each to consider in the semidarkness of his or her room the answer to the ritualistic nightly request, "Tell me all the things you've done today." Over the years, we heard sweet recollections of meaningful firsts, tender confessions of childlike regrets, earnest deliberations of pending decisions, nostalgic reflections of missed opportunities, and thoughtful perceptions of right and wrong. The children were reviewing in meaningful ways, almost as soon as they could talk, the productive events of their day with pleasure, building determination to eliminate or adjust the wasted or poorly spent moments.

One exemplary family has made it a practice, beginning when their children were very young and continuing through their teenage years, to ask each child at the end of the day to recall and report a "happy thought." A life well lived begins with a spiritual creation, continues with a worthy execution, and then concludes with a review and analysis. We might use the pattern of the creation of the earth as our example. That end-of-the-day review assists us and our children as we seek to identify, and then duplicate, those activities and behaviors that were the substance of the "happy thought."

Take Young People's Decisions Seriously

Although we were sometimes glad to have our smiles veiled by the evening darkness when our children reviewed in earnest the childlike things we recognized as inconsequential in the long term, we sought to take their thoughts and concerns very seriously. When we approached my father for counsel early in our marriage regarding the possible purchase of a first home, he set a valuable example for us. We were poor. The condominium we were renting in graduate school was going up for sale, so we were obligated either to purchase it or find another home. The cost of the very small, two-bedroom condominium was \$18,000. With a mortgage instead of rent, our monthly payments would actually decrease, but we worried about the down payment and the commitment of the purchase. A loving parent, surely smiling on the other end of the telephone about our ardent concern over what must have seemed to him a small amount of money and an easy decision, listened with gracious sincerity, offered his best professional analysis for our consideration, and then expressed his confidence in our ability to make a good decision.

Likewise, our Heavenly Father sees from His vantage point the eternally inconsequential nature of many of our concerns; but His attention is, nonetheless, never condescending. We and our children are all works in progress.

Trust Children's Ability to Receive Inspiration

Happily, we parents can trust our children's ability to receive their own inspiration. Our job, then, becomes one of teaching them to seek and be sensitive to the Spirit and then honor those feelings, not demanding with proud imposition that they be obedient to our arbitrary rules. We are seeking for them, as we are seeking for ourselves, the determination, wisdom, and willingness to embrace the will of heaven, not a long list of family "musts." Compelling our children's obedience to our laws as our highest goal glorifies our ability to know always the best course for them, underrates their privilege of receiving inspiration, and intensifies the pressure we feel to control.

The Light of Christ is given to everyone, even young men and women, in sufficient quantity for them to feel the difference between right and wrong. Our goal is to cultivate their hearts to crave, their ears to hear, and their wills to honor that light. The nurture of such spiritual sensitivity begins before age three, continues to age eight when they receive the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, and then goes beyond. As their lives and decisions become more complicated, their privilege of inspiration and heavenly assistance becomes more comprehensive. Ideally and

with attentive nurture, their ability to discern worthy voices from others increases as the need for that discernment intensifies.

The privilege of agency has always implied risks, but the quest to promote spiritual self-reliance is a heavenly one. Trusting in the Light of Christ, the eternal nature of our project, and the supplementary grace of God, we can embrace the task with patience, determination, and joy.

Use the Building Blocks for Nurturing Self-Reliance

In summary, we have learned to view the elements of the above ideological thinking as building blocks for nurturing spiritual self-reliance, and we recommend all parents adopt the methodology that has proven so successful in our lives: • Be careful to avoid using external rewards and punishments as the ultimate results of right choices.

- Nurture self-reliance with a “competence plus one” formula.
- Prepare children to make responsible choices by discussing alternatives and visualizing possible outcomes in advance.
- Assist children with appropriate opportunities to repent, and correct errors by helping children accept the natural consequences of their mistakes.
- Cultivate an appetite for lovely and praiseworthy things by exposing children lavishly to them.
- Review and analyze the results of choices made to reinforce commitment to good choices and to rethink poor ones.
- Take young people’s decisions seriously with honest attention and thoughtful counsel.
- Trust children’s ability as heavenly heirs to receive their own inspiration.



Eleventh-century Qur'an from Turkey