

LARRY J. NELSON & LAURA M. PADILLA-WALKER

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Parenting Lasts *More Than 18 Years:*

Parenting Principles and Practices for Emerging-Adult Children

A LOOK at the parenting section of a bookstore or library provides parents with shelves of books aimed at helping them parent infants, young children, and adolescents. Notably lacking are books on how to parent children who are 18 and older. Because 18- to 27-year-olds are no longer children but are still not quite adults, these young people are called “emerging adults.” The need to be heavily involved in the parenting of emerging adults is a relatively new phenomenon. In past decades, marriage, parenthood, and the beginning of careers tended to, on average, occur in the late teens or early twenties (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). However, as the average age of marriage has risen (28 for males and 26 for females in the United States; US Census Bureau, 2010), and the number of jobs available to those without higher education has decreased, more and more young people are single, living at home, and financially dependent on parents well into their twenties. As a result, compared to past generations, there is a greater need for many parents to remain engaged in the parenting process longer than previously expected.

Based on our discussions with parents, many parents report that parenting emerging adults is more challenging than guiding toddlers through the “terrible twos” or adolescents through the “terrible teens” because the stakes

are higher and the issues much more complex. Indeed, the challenges facing today's young people as they make the transition to adulthood leave even the best of parents wanting to help their children but not really knowing the best way to do so. The purpose of this chapter is to identify parenting principles and practices that are adapted to fostering healthy outcomes in emerging-adult children. We will describe the period of life known as emerging adulthood (ages 18 to the mid-to-late twenties) so as to better understand the context for parenting children in this stage of life. Next, we will present specific parenting principles and practices that have been identified as important in parenting children at every stage of life. Then we will specifically examine these principles and practices as they apply to parenting emerging-adults. We will give special attention to the problematic potential that parental control may play during this period of life. Conversely, we will highlight for the reader the importance of focusing on the parent-child relationship and provide examples of practices that promote that important relationship during emerging adulthood. Finally, we will provide a word of comfort and support for parents as they undertake the challenge of parenting during one of the most important periods of development in the lives of their children.

The New Stage of Emerging Adulthood

One of the defining features of emerging adulthood is that young people feel a sense of being in between—no longer an adolescent but not yet an adult (Arnett, 2004). When asked whether they feel like they have reached adulthood, most young people between the ages of 18 and 27 tend to respond with “no” or “in some respects yes, in some respects no” (see Arnett, 1998; Nelson & Barry, 2005). In a recent study (Nelson et al., 2007), we found that 16% of the emerging adults answered “yes,” 13% answered “no,” and 72% answered “in some ways yes, in some ways no.” Interestingly, their parents felt the same way about their emerging adults. We asked them, “Do you think that your child has reached adulthood?” For fathers, 19% answered “yes,” 16% answered “no,” and 65% answered “in some ways yes, in some

ways no.” For mothers, 16% answered “yes,” 16% answered “no,” and 68% answered “in some ways yes, in some ways no.”

In order to better understand why 18- to 27-year-olds are not generally considered adults, researchers have asked what the criteria for adulthood are according to today’s young people and their parents. Initial studies in this area (Arnett, 1998; Nelson & Barry, 2005) documented that contemporary emerging adults tend to view necessary criteria for adulthood as the following: (a) being independent and self-reliant (for example, accepting responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions, becoming financially independent of parents), (b) being able to form mature relationships (that is, becoming less self-oriented and developing greater consideration for others), (c) being able to comply with societal norms (for example, avoiding drunk driving and committing petty crimes), and (d) being able to provide for and care for a family (for example, becoming capable of caring for children).

When we compared young people’s answers to their parents’, we found that parents emphasized similar characteristics as requisite for adulthood (Nelson et al., 2007). Interestingly, items such as marriage, parenthood, finishing education, and purchasing a home ranked very low by both emerging adults and their parents. This is likely because many young people realize that “doing” something (for example, graduating from high school) does not automatically make one an adult. Instead, the criteria endorsed by young people show that they likely understand one’s transition to an adult by *becoming* ready to marry, care for children, and take on other responsibilities.

It is important to note that this perspective is no different among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In a study of young, active Latter-day Saints, only 24% of participants considered themselves to be adults (Nelson, 2003). The criteria they rated as most necessary for adulthood included “accept responsibility for the consequence of your actions,” “decided on personal beliefs/values independently of parents and other influences,” “become less self-oriented, develop greater consideration for others,” and “learn always to have good control of your emotions.” Out of 48 items on the list, serving a mission for men was 28th, settling into a long-term career

was 37th, marriage ranked 39th, finishing education was 41st, having a child ranked 45th, and serving a mission for women ranked 46th. These findings show that many Latter-day Saint young people, like their peers, understand that becoming an adult takes much more than just reaching a certain age or accomplishing a certain task (for example, getting married). They realize that it takes much more than just finding someone, getting married in the temple, and living happily ever after. They know it is less about simply taking on adult roles and more about becoming prepared to take on those roles.

For emerging adults, parents are important in the process of developing the skills and abilities to take on adult roles. Some parents may not understand how instrumental they can and need to be in their emerging-adult children's lives as their children are making the transition to adulthood. Some parents may take the approach that once children reach the age of 18, they are on their own. Unfortunately, many parents who take this approach may underestimate the challenges of preparing to step into adulthood in today's society. Latter-day Saint emerging adults are trying to successfully make the transition to adulthood in a society in which typical 18- to 27-year-olds (a) are becoming increasingly devoted to individualistic-oriented rather than other-oriented goals; (b) are experimenting with work, relationships, and worldviews; (c) lack specific transitional roles that prepare them for adult roles; (d) are entering into increasingly intimate, non-marital relationships; and (e) are engaging in relatively high rates of risky behaviors such as unprotected sexual intercourse, illegal drug use, and drunk driving (see Arnett, 2000). Indeed, emerging adults who are not Latter-day Saints report that emerging adulthood is a time to experience a carefree lifestyle filled with traveling and adventure; participating in social events; experimenting with alcohol, tobacco, and drugs; engaging in multiple sexual experiences; and, in general, taking advantage of one's independence (Ravert, 2009). It is within this carefree culture that our young people are attempting to find their way towards righteous goals.

The challenges facing our young people are not just in the form of temptation all around them. Rather, the challenges are practical as well. Gone

are the days in which, on average, a high school diploma is enough to get a job that can provide for a family (Danziger & Rouse, 2007). It takes time and money to acquire the skills and education needed to become self-reliant. Many adults think that emerging adults enjoy “living off” their parents. However, financial independence is a goal of most young people (Arnett, 1998; Nelson & Barry, 2005; Nelson et al., 2007), but the process of getting there is daunting, especially in today’s economic climate.

The process of becoming an adult capable of caring for himself or herself as well as others is a daunting task in a society that promotes individualism, self-indulgence, and putting off responsibility and commitment. It is likewise challenging because of the need for education or specialized training compounded by both the high costs of higher/specialized education and the high costs of living while trying to pay for and attain that education. Things are made even worse for young people if they have to make this transition alone. Just as when they were young, emerging adults need their parents’ support and involvement during this important period of their lives. Emerging adults who are left to tackle these challenges on their own tend to struggle during emerging adulthood and be less prepared to successfully transition into adult roles such as spouse, parent, and provider. We will now explore principles and practices that might assist parents of emerging adults.

Parenting Principles and Practices

Researchers have identified three important features of parenting: (a) support shown to a child (for example, acceptance, warmth, affection, involvement, nurturance) aimed at forming an emotional connection with the child, (b) behavioral control (such as, limit setting, supervision, reasoning about consequences) of the child aimed at promoting mature behavior, and (c) autonomy granting (for example, giving choices, allowing the child input on rule making, permitting the expression of ideas, avoiding intrusive behavior) aimed at fostering emotional and psychological self-reliance (Hart et al., 2003). Each aspect of parenting has been found to be linked to specific child outcomes, but

the unique balance, or ratio, of each feature of parenting appears to be especially important. In other words, researchers have identified potential combinations of support, control, and autonomy granting that appear to be more or less adaptive across childhood and adolescence. For example, parenting that reflects an appropriate combination of support and behavioral control has been linked to numerous indices of social, emotional, cognitive, and academic well-being and functioning from early childhood through adolescence (see Aunalo et al., 2000; Bean et al., 2006; Eccles et al., 1997; Hart, Yang, Nelson, Jin, Bazarskaya, & Nelson, 1998; Steinberg et al., 1994). Conversely, the combination of high levels of control and the absence of support has been linked repeatedly to negative child outcomes such as anxiety, withdrawal, unhappiness, aggression, anger, defiance, hostility, low self-esteem, poor school performance, and deviant behaviors (see Baumrind, 1967, 1971; Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen, & McNeily-Choque, 1998; Hart et al., 2003; Lamborn et al., 1991; Steinberg et al., 1994).

This research shows that the balance between support, control, and granting autonomy to the child is central to increasing the chances for positive outcomes in children. However, it is important to understand that this balance changes depending on the age of the child. For toddlers, there will be many more limits imposed on them than adolescents. Adolescents should be given much more freedom to make choices than preschoolers should. Not only does the balance between the key aspects of parenting change, but so do the forms they take. For example, parents show support to toddlers by reading them bedtime stories, helping them up when they fall, showering them with general verbal praise, and giving hugs and kisses. Support evolves in childhood into helping with homework, driving to soccer games, attending recitals, and giving specific compliments as well as physical affection. Additional changes will occur in adolescence to include greater levels of discussion, verbal give-and-take, and listening intently to teenagers' concerns and problems. The question for many parents is what the balance should be between support, control, and autonomy granting in emerging adulthood.

Balancing Support and Control in Emerging Adulthood

In order to be prepared to parent in emerging adulthood, it is necessary to understand that (a) support, control, and autonomy granting are still important, (b) the balance between them must change, and (c) the form that each takes will change to fit the development or age of the child. In a recent study, we identified different approaches to parenting emerging adults and determined which were the most effective at promoting positive outcomes for emerging adults (Nelson et al., 2011). We found that emerging adults with the most positive outcomes (that is, the lowest levels of risk behaviors, depression, and anxiety as well as the highest levels of kindness, self-worth, and closeness to parents) were those who had parents who displayed high levels of support and communication with their children, but also allowed for high levels of autonomy. In addition, these parents displayed low levels of control. It seems that these parents were still quite involved in the lives of their children, but in a very supportive and autonomy-promoting manner.

In contrast, the parents whose children had the most negative outcomes were those parents who displayed high levels of control and low levels of support. As mentioned previously, the use of parental control in the absence of parental support is rarely effective, and this seems to be even more marked during the emerging adult years when there is a clear expectation for increased autonomy. Indeed, it has been suggested that perhaps any amount of parental control is seen as inappropriate for college-age children, even when parental support is present (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, in press). However, parental control should be distinguished from parental involvement, although there is often a fine line between the two, especially when involvement borders on *overinvolvement*. In order to demonstrate the difference between parental control and parental involvement we will first examine three forms of parental control that have been found among parents of emerging adults, and then we will identify

parental practices that reflect appropriate involvement and support that lead to a positive parent-child relationship during emerging adulthood.

Behavioral Control

Behavioral control during emerging adulthood generally looks slightly different than behavioral control at earlier ages. At younger ages, behavioral control might take the form of time-outs, grounding, revoking television/computer/video game privileges, and so forth. Such techniques are age-inappropriate for emerging adults even if they live at home. Unfortunately, many parents still try to control the behavior of their emerging adults. For example, if parents are financially involved in the lives of their emerging adults, they often are seen by their emerging adults as having some legitimate authority in decisions (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). However, some parents use this financial leverage as a means to control emerging-adult children inappropriately (Nelson et al., 2011). For example, some parents will say they will help pay for an emerging adult's college tuition only if he or she declares a major of the parents' choosing.

Other examples of parental attempts at controlling emerging-adult children include conditional promises such as “if you go on a mission, I will buy you a new car,” as well as yelling, anger, and other forms of verbal hostility. Certainly parents have the right to hold certain expectations of their student (for example, attend class, do one's best, maintain a realistic GPA) if they are providing financial support. Of course, adherence to family rules and serving a mission are desirable outcomes. However, the problem hinges on the element of control being exercised by the parent(s) in these examples. Once while teaching a lesson on this topic at church, one of the authors of this chapter was asked by a member of the class, “Isn't it okay to make your children do something as long as it is right and for their own good?” With as much sensitivity and kindness as the author/teacher could muster, he pointed out just how much that proposal sounded like one presented by another individual in the great, premortal council in heaven. He then

suggested that since Heavenly Father rejected that proposal then, we should not embrace it now.

As pointed out previously, depending on the age of the child and the context, parents will indeed exercise varying levels of control in order to protect their children. However, as a general rule, forcing individuals to behave a certain way is not a Christlike characteristic, nor is it an effective parenting practice. Research shows that these forms of control are linked to negative outcomes (such as low self-worth, high depression, anxiety, impulsivity) for emerging adults and tend to hurt the parent-child relationship (Nelson et al., 2011). It is as Brigham Young (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church*, 1997) said, “Kind looks, kind actions, kind words, and a lovely, holy deportment towards [them] will bind our children to us with bands that cannot be easily broken; while abuse and unkindness will drive them from us” (p. 166). Indeed, frequent and harsh attempts by parents to control the behavior of their emerging-adult children tend to harm young people rather than help them. Such behaviors also jeopardize the parent-child relationship, which, as we will discuss, is the most important aspect of parenting emerging-adult children.

Psychological Control

Unfortunately, sometimes because parents are unable to behaviorally control their children at this age, they turn to psychological control as a means of staying involved. Psychological control is a parent’s attempt to control his or her child’s thoughts and psychological world and is associated with a host of negative outcomes at all ages (see Barber, 1996; Barber & Harmon, 2002), but particularly during emerging adulthood (for example, Luyckx et al., 2007; Nelson et al., 2011; Urry et al., 2011). Psychological control includes parents inducing guilt if the child does not do what is desired (“After everything I’ve done for you, this is all that you’re going to do for me?”), ignoring the child if behavior is seen as unacceptable (referred to as love-withdrawal), and trying to change how the child thinks or feels about something through manipulation. Although many seemingly negative aspects of parenting can be positive when

done in a loving manner, research has never linked psychological control to positive outcomes in children at any age. Instead, as noted, it has been linked repeatedly to negative outcomes in children, adolescents, and emerging adults (see Barber, 2002; Barber et al., 2005; Nelson et al., 2011).

Not only is there no empirical support endorsing the use of psychological control, but there are no examples in the scriptures of our Savior or Heavenly Father trying to lead us by controlling us psychologically or guiltting us into good behavior. Though guilt is the natural result of sinning and “godly sorrow” (see 2 Corinthians 7:10) and leads us to want to do better, it is unhealthy for parents to try to use guilt to psychologically control their children. A loving approach to parenting is always done via patience and long-suffering rather than guilt induction or love-withdrawal. Even when (or we might say *especially* when) children might not be making decisions that are in their best interests, we should not withdraw our love and support as a way of manipulating them into course corrections. In a conference talk by Elder Dallin H. Oaks called “Love and Law,” he suggested that when children are making decisions with which parents do not agree, parents do not need to endorse those decisions, but should always maintain a loving relationship with their children. Elder Oaks (2009) said:

If an adult child is living in cohabitation, does the seriousness of sexual relations outside the bonds of marriage require that this child feel the full weight of family disapproval by being excluded from any family contacts, or does parental love require that the fact of cohabitation be ignored? I have seen both of these extremes, and I believe that both are inappropriate. Where do parents draw the line? That is a matter for parental wisdom, guided by the inspiration of the Lord. There is no area of parental action that is more needful of heavenly guidance or more likely to receive it than the decisions of parents in raising their children and governing their families. This is the work of eternity. As parents grapple with these problems, they should remember the Lord’s teaching that we leave



Elder Dallin H. Oaks said, “There is no area of parental action that is more needful of heavenly guidance or more likely to receive it than the decisions of parents in raising their children and governing their families.” Craig Dimond, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

the ninety and nine and go out into the wilderness to rescue the lost sheep. (p. 28)

Because the Lord's commandments are unchanging and nonnegotiable, parents may have to chastise a child for his or her behavior. But a child's choices should not detract from a parent's love for the child or the communication of that love. Love-withdrawal, using guilt to control, and manipulation are neither in harmony with principles of righteousness nor found in any examples from Deity. Although our blessings and privileges may change as we disobey God's laws, his love for us does not decrease. Parents should follow this example in regard to parenting their emerging-adult children. To reiterate, parents might disapprove of and even chasten emerging adults for their behavior, but it should be done with persuasion, gentleness, and love unfeigned rather than any form of manipulation (for example, guile) or control (see D&C 121:41–42).

Helicopter Parenting

A final way that parents sometimes mistakenly attempt to control their children during emerging adulthood is called helicopter parenting. This approach consists of parents "hovering" over their emerging-adult children, making important decisions for them such as where they should live, whom they should date, and what classes they should take. It is unclear how much of this parental help is solicited by emerging adults. But it is clear that while helicopter parenting is not as destructive as behavioral or psychological control, helicopter parenting may be growth-inhibiting for emerging adults and may delay their ability to transition into healthy adult roles (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012).

Helicopter parenting is a form of overinvolvement and is often well-intentioned on the part of parents. Instead of providing parental input or guidance, helicopter parents continue to solve problems for their emerging-adult children. Rather than calling a professor because of a late assignment



Rather than doing things for your young adult, it is more appropriate to help them succeed by themselves and act as a sounding board as they are making decisions. Mark A. Philbrick, © 2012 BYU Photo.

or filling out a job application for your emerging adult, it is more appropriate to help him or her (as needed) succeed at doing it by him or herself. It is also more appropriate to act as a sounding board as decisions are being made instead of making decisions for your emerging adult.

This approach is reminiscent of how the Lord dealt with the brother of Jared as he was preparing for his journey to the promised land. In the early stages of preparation, the Lord solved problems for the brother of Jared. For example, he gave him a solution for the problem of no air in the barges (much like parents sometimes provide solutions for their children during childhood and the teen years). However, when the brother of Jared asked the Lord for help a second time, with the problem of not having light in the barges, the Lord responded, “What will ye that I should do?” It certainly would have been easier for the Lord to solve the problem. But he consecrated the brother of Jared’s decision, as we should our children’s decisions, even if they are not the solutions we might have thought of initially. In a recent conference talk, Elder Larry Y. Wilson (2012) said: “Wise parents

prepare their children to get along without them. They provide opportunities for growth as children acquire the spiritual maturity to exercise their agency properly. And yes, this means children will sometimes make mistakes and learn from them” (p. 104).

In summary, parental attempts at controlling emerging-adult children are inconsistent with gospel principles, tend to place the emerging adults at risk of negative outcomes, and harm the parent-child relationship at a time when emerging-adult children need supportive parents. Control just is not the Lord’s way. Elder Wilson (2012) again underscored this point when he cautioned:

[The scriptures say] we must lead by “principles of righteousness.” Such principles apply to all leaders in the Church as well as to all fathers and mothers in their homes. We lose our right to the Lord’s Spirit *and* to whatever authority we have from God when we exercise control over another person in an unrighteous manner. We may think such methods are for the good of the one being “controlled.” But anytime we try to compel someone to righteousness who *can* and *should* be exercising his or her own moral agency, we are acting unrighteously. When setting firm limits for another person *is* in order, those limits should always be administered with loving patience and in a way that teaches eternal principles. (p. 103)

Taking this approach will help parents of emerging-adult children to be involved and will foster a stronger relationship, but in a manner that promotes autonomy rather than a manner that might hinder growth and independent decision making.

Indeed, in counseling parents to be careful not to be controlling in their interactions with their emerging adults, some might mistakenly think we are suggesting that parents abdicate their responsibilities as parents. Absolutely not! While we need to allow greater autonomy to our emerging-adult children, and our approach to parental support may change, our children still

consistently need our support and involvement in their lives. Parents still have a solemn responsibility to care for their children, even if those children are in the process of becoming adults. The point we are trying to stress is *how* that is done especially in emerging adulthood. In “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” parents are told that this sacred duty of rearing children needs to be done in *love and righteousness*, not control and manipulation. Therefore, we will now focus on the positive things parents can do in providing support and staying involved in ways that foster a positive parent-child relationship during this period of life.

Fostering a Positive Parent-Child Relationship through Parental Support and Involvement

Concerned parents would still like to have, if not control, at least some knowledge of what is going on in their children’s lives. Ultimately, the best way to stay informed about a child’s behavior and stay involved in his or her life during this time period, without being controlling, is to maintain a strong relationship that will promote open communication. This is important at younger ages as well, but becomes even more essential as children leave their parents’ home. The main way that parents will be informed of their child’s whereabouts or activities once the child has left home will be if the child chooses to tell them. Our work shows this only happens if there is a good relationship between the parent and the child (Urry et al., 2011). Thus it is important that parents open these lines of trust and communication early in the parent-child relationship—long before emerging adulthood—so that child disclosure to parents is a normal and frequent occurrence. This will likely lead to emerging adults who seek their parents out for advice and guidance rather than needing to be hounded or controlled by parents.

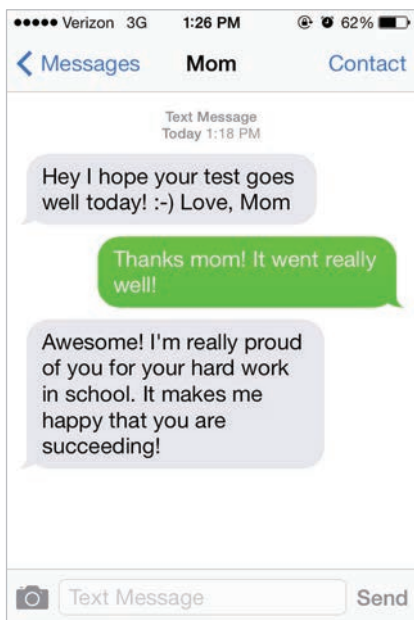
While young people may be striving for greater independence and self-reliance, this does not mean that they want to distance themselves from parents (unless, again, the parents tend to be too controlling). Numerous studies have shown that a major desire of emerging adults is to



Emerging adults want to develop a stronger, more mature and equal relationship with their parents. © Arekmalang.

develop a stronger, more mature and equal relationship with parents (for example, Arnett, 1998; Nelson & Barry, 2005; Barry & Nelson, 2005). Thus the most effective thing parents can do is focus on the relationship. A recent study of ours (Urry et al., 2011) illustrates this point well. We found that emerging adults who reported a good relationship with mothers told their parents what they were doing, *and* they engaged in fewer negative behaviors.

Again, parents may ask how to foster that relationship. To reiterate, it comes via warmth, support, love, concern, and communication. To let their emerging adults know they care, parents should check in with them, which shows love and concern. Checking *in* is different than checking *up* on them, which reflects attempts at behavioral control. Ask emerging adults how they are doing, not where they were the night before. Parents should *encourage* their emerging adults in the decision-making process. It is time for emerging adults to be learning how to make important decisions on their own. So, instead of deciding for your emerging adult, here are some ways you can provide guidance and support while allowing your child to exercise autonomy in making his or her own decisions. First, ask your emerging adult where he or she is in the decision-making process. Listen to the issues being weighed by your child and empathize with how he or she is feeling about the situation. Then, *if asked*, provide additional points the emerging adult might consider in the decision-making process. Finally, express support and confidence in the emerging adult's ability to make the right decision. When your emerging adult does make a decision, congratulate him or her on it. *Do not* say things like "that isn't what I would have done," or, if things don't go well, "I told you so." In general, reciprocate your emerging adult's willingness to talk with you by listening more than talking. Additionally, still make attempts to spend time with your emerging adult, whether that be a set "date" for lunch, watching a favorite show or sporting event together, or catching up on the phone. Finally, do not forget expressions of love and affection verbally (such as, "I miss you," "I love you," "I'm proud of you"), physically, and, yes, electronically. A text



A supportive text message from Mom and Dad during a hard moment can mean a lot. Courtesy of Maddie Lee and Rachel Ishoy.

message from Mom and Dad just before a hard exam or after a long shift at work can mean a lot.

A Final Word of Comfort and Support to Parents

Allowing children the autonomy to make more and more decisions on their own can be challenging for many parents. Many parents of emerging adults are worried that their emerging adults will fail, but there may simultaneously be just as much or more heartache knowing they may succeed, which means transitioning out of the home and away from us as parents. The first

author's own daughter recently joined the ranks of emerging adulthood. Therefore, the author is numbered with those countless parents who stand with excitement and awe as well as fear and worry as they watch their children embark on adulthood. Certainly the emotions he experiences as he watches his daughter "stretch her wings" include trepidation and concern over whether she will make the right choices that lead to success in adult roles. But the emotions are even stronger realizing that his little girl is growing up and that he has to prepare to let her do so. Parenting an emerging adult is certainly not an easy time for parents, but we need to make sure that we provide the support and autonomy that will allow our children the best chances to grow.

Again, it can be hard not to be controlling during this time because parents want to see their children succeed. We do not want to see those we love get hurt. What must it have been like for Lehi to see his sons Laman and

Lemuel make the poor decisions they made? What must Alma and Mosiah have thought as their sons were out defying everything they had ever been taught? What must our Heavenly Father have felt like as he watched a third part of his children leave his presence in the premortal life? How does he feel now as he watches even more enter paths that lead away from him? It is hard, but agency is essential to the plan! We cannot force our children to do anything. Elder Robert D. Hales (1999) has counseled:

Act with faith; don't react with fear. When our teenagers begin testing family values, parents need to go to the Lord for guidance on the specific needs of each family member. This is the time for added love and support and to reinforce your teachings on how to make choices. It is frightening to allow our children to learn from the mistakes they may make, but their willingness to choose the Lord's way and family values is greater when the choice comes from within than when we attempt to force those values upon them. The Lord's way of love and acceptance is better than Satan's way of force and coercion, especially in rearing teenagers. (p. 34)

While this counsel was directed at parents of teenagers, the principles contained therein apply even more so to emerging adults because it is a time in which even greater autonomy is expected and needed by emerging-adult children. So while we cannot force and control (because those techniques belong to the proposal rejected already in the premortal life), there are things we can do as parents. First, we can have faith in the principles we have taught our children. We can only hope there are a lot more young people like Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah, who eventually return strong, than there are like Laman and Lemuel who do not. It is interesting to consider the additional 60 young men who joined Helaman's band of 2,000 stripling warriors. Why did they join their brethren later? Were they not old enough to begin with or did they possibly have some personal struggles to overcome first? Indeed, how many poor choices were made as part of



Our young people, like the stripling warriors, will be strengthened to make it because of wonderful mothers (and fathers and leaders) who taught them well and then let them make decisions for themselves. Friberg Fine Art Prints, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

the learning process by the young men who would eventually become the stripling warriors that we read about? Our young people, like the stripling warriors, will be strengthened to make it because of wonderful mothers (and fathers and leaders) who taught them well and then let them make decisions for themselves.

Second, if emerging adults do wander off the path, or simply struggle along the way, we can know that the Lord is mindful of them. More than just “mindful,” we need to remember our children are his children. Elder Orson F. Whitney (1929) reminds us:

The Shepherd will find his sheep. They were his before they were yours—long before he entrusted them to your care; and you cannot begin to love them as he loves them. They have but strayed in ignorance from the Path of Right, and God is merciful to ignorance. Only the fullness of knowledge brings the fullness of accountability. Our Heavenly Father is far more merciful, infinitely more charitable, than even the best of his servants, and the Everlasting Gospel is mightier in power to save than your narrow finite minds can comprehend. (p. 110)

Likewise, President Faust (2003) has reminded us of the doctrine Joseph Smith taught about the power of temple sealings to bring wayward children back to their families.

The Prophet Joseph Smith declared—and he never taught more comforting doctrine—that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity. Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they

will return. They will have to pay their debt to justice; they will suffer for their sins; and may tread a thorny path; but if it leads them at last, like the penitent Prodigal, to a loving and forgiving father's heart and home, the painful experience will not have been in vain. Pray for your careless and disobedient children; hold on to them with your faith. Hope on, trust on, till you see the salvation of God. (p. 62)

We need to remember that Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah came back stronger after they had endured their trials. It is never better to sin and we are not made stronger through sin. But we can learn from the trials which are part of natural life experiences. As unlikely as that may seem at times in the lives of some of our children, we must allow them their agency and then have faith that they will return to righteousness or persevere in righteousness.

Conclusion

Emerging adulthood is not always easy for young people. It is a challenging period for parents as well, but parents need to avoid controlling behaviors, whether that be forcing decisions upon their emerging adults (that is, behavioral control), withholding love or inducing guilt (psychological control), or doing things for them that they should be doing themselves (helicopter parenting). All of these forms of control are not in line with gospel principles and hinder a healthy and positive transition to adulthood by our young people. For our children to be successful, parents must be warm, supportive, and encouraging. They need to foster open communication. They need to allow their children the opportunity to make decisions for themselves while still being there to lend a listening ear, provide appropriate counsel, teach gospel principles and standards, and express love for and confidence in them. In sum, emerging adults want a strong relationship with their parents. So foster that relationship. Work together in forging a new and stronger relationship.



The Lord is mindful of each of us. If emerging adults wander off the path or struggle along the way, he is right there, ready to help and love them; they are his children. Jeff Hein, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

In doing so, remember to do exactly like the Lord does with all of us—allow them their agency and love them completely.

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