

It's Never Too Early and It's Never Too Late

By Elder Bradley D. Foster

Of the Seventy



It's never too early and it's never too late to lead, guide, and walk beside our children, because families are forever.

Brothers and sisters, we are engaged in a battle with the world. In the past, the world competed for our children's energy and time. Today, it fights for their identity and mind. Many loud and prominent voices are trying to define who our children are and what they should believe. We cannot let society give our family a makeover in the image of the world. We must win this battle. Everything depends on it.

The children of the Church sing a song that teaches them about their real identity: "I am a child of God. ... He has sent me here, has given me an earthly home with parents." Then, the children's plea to us: "Lead me, guide me, walk beside me. ... Help me to understand his words before it grows too late."¹

President Russell M. Nelson taught us in our last general conference that, from here on out, we must be engaged in "intentional parenting."² These are perilous times. But the good news is God knew this would be the case, and He has provided counsel in the scriptures for us to know how to help our children and our grandchildren.



In the Book of Mormon, the Savior appeared to the Nephites. He gathered their little children around Him. He blessed them, prayed for them, and wept over them.³ Then He said to the parents, “Behold your little ones.”⁴

The word *behold* means to look and see. What did Jesus want the parents to see in their little ones? Did He want them to catch a glimpse of their children’s divine potential?

As we look at our children and our grandchildren today, what does the Savior want us to see in them? Do we recognize that our children are the largest group of investigators of the Church? What must we do to bring about their lasting conversion?

In the book of Matthew, the Savior teaches us about lasting conversion. A large group of people had gathered near the Sea of Galilee to hear Him teach.

On this occasion, Jesus told a story about planting seeds—the parable of the sower.⁵ In explaining this to His disciples, and ultimately to us, He said, “When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it *not*, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart.”⁶ The message for parents is clear: there is a difference between hearing and understanding. If our children merely hear but do not understand the gospel, then the door is left open for Satan to remove these truths from their hearts.

However, if we can help them grow roots of deep conversion, then in the heat of the day, when this life gets tough—and it will—the gospel of Jesus Christ can give them something within that cannot be affected from without. How can we ensure that these powerful truths are not just going in one ear and out the other? Hearing words just might not be enough.

We all know that words evolve. Sometimes we say our words, and they hear their words. You might say to your young children, “You sound like a broken record.” They’d probably respond with, “Dad, what’s a record?”

Our Heavenly Father wants us to succeed because really, after all, they were His children before they were ours. As parents in Zion, you have received the gift of the Holy Ghost. As you pray for guidance, “it will show unto you all things what ye should do”⁷ in teaching your children. As you develop processes of learning, “the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children.”⁸

I can’t think of a better example of helping someone gain understanding than the story of Helen Keller. She was blind and deaf and lived in a world that was dark and quiet. A teacher named Anne Sullivan came to help her. How would you teach a child who can’t even see or hear you?



For a long time, Anne struggled to connect with Helen. One day around noon, she took her out to the water pump. She put one of Helen’s hands under the waterspout and began to pump the water. Anne then spelled out the word *W-A-T-E-R* on Helen’s other hand. Nothing happened. So she tried again. *W-A-T-E-R*. Helen squeezed Anne’s hand because she began to understand. By nightfall, she had learned 30 words. Within a matter of months, she had learned 600 words and was able to read Braille. Helen Keller went on to earn a college degree and helped change the world for people who couldn’t see or hear.⁹ It was a miracle, and her teacher was the miracle worker, just like you will be, parents.

I saw the results of another great teacher while serving as the president of a single adult stake at BYU–Idaho. That experience changed my life. On one particular Tuesday evening, I interviewed a young man named Pablo, from Mexico City, who wanted to serve a mission. I asked him about his testimony and his desire to serve. His answers to my questions were perfect. Then I asked about his worthiness. His answers were exact. In fact, they were so good, I wondered, “Maybe he doesn’t understand what I’m asking him.” So I rephrased the questions and determined that he knew exactly what I meant and was completely honest.

I was so impressed with this young man that I asked him, “Pablo, who was it that helped you come to this point in your life standing so uprightly before the Lord?”

He said, “My dad.”

I said, “Pablo, tell me your story.”

Pablo continued: “When I was nine, my dad took me aside and said, ‘Pablo, I was nine once too. Here are some things you may come across. You’ll see people cheating in school. You might be around people who swear. You’ll probably have days when you don’t want to go to church. Now, when these things happen—or anything else that troubles you—I want you to come and talk to me, and I’ll help you get through them. And then I’ll tell you what comes next.’”

“So, Pablo, what did he tell you when you were 10?”

“Well, he warned me about pornography and dirty jokes.”

“What about when you were 11?” I asked.

“He cautioned me about things that could be addictive and reminded me about using my agency.”

Here was a father, year after year, “line upon line; here a little, and there a little,”¹⁰ who helped his son not only hear but also understand. Pablo’s father knew our children learn when they are ready to learn, not just when we are ready to teach them. I was proud of Pablo when we submitted his missionary application that night, but I was even prouder of Pablo’s dad.

When I drove home that night, I asked myself, “What kind of father will Pablo be?” And the answer was crystal clear: he’ll be just like his dad. Jesus said, “The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do.”¹¹ This is the pattern of how Heavenly Father blesses His children from generation to generation.

As I continued to think about my experience with Pablo, I felt sad because my four daughters were grown and the nine grandchildren I had at the time didn’t live nearby. I then thought, “How could I ever help them the way Pablo’s father helped him? Had too much time gone by?” As I offered a prayer in my heart, the Spirit whispered this profound truth: “It’s never too early and it’s never too late to begin this important process.” I knew immediately what that meant. I could hardly wait to get home. I asked my wife, Sharol, to call all of our children and tell them that we needed to visit with them; I had something really important to tell them. My urgency startled them a little.

We began with our oldest daughter and her husband. I said: “Your mother and I want you to know that we were your age once. We were 31, with a small family. We have an idea of what you might encounter. It might be a financial or health challenge. It may be a crisis of faith. You may just get overwhelmed with life. When these things happen, we want you to come and talk to us. We’ll help you get through them. Now, we don’t want to be in your business all the time, but we want you to know that we are always in your corner. And while we’re together, I want to tell you about an interview I just had with a young man named Pablo.”

After the story, I said, “We don’t want you to miss helping your children and our grandchildren understand these important truths.”

Brothers and sisters, I now realize in a more meaningful way what the Lord expects of me as a father and as a grandfather in establishing a process to help my family not only hear but understand.

As I grow older, I find myself reflecting on these words:

O time, O time, go back in flight,
And let them be my little children for just one more night!¹²

I know I can’t turn back time, but this I now know—that it’s never too early and it’s never too late to lead, guide, and walk beside our children, because families are forever.

It is my witness that our Heavenly Father loved us so much that He sent His Only Begotten Son to live the life of a mortal so that Jesus could say to us, “I’ve been where you are, I know what comes next, and I’ll help you through it.” I know He will. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

1. “I Am a Child of God,” *Hymns*, no. 301.
2. See Russell M. Nelson, “The Sabbath Is a Delight,” *Ensign or Liahona*, May 2015, 131.
3. See 3 Nephi 17:21.
4. 3 Nephi 17:23.
5. See Matthew 13:1–13.
6. Matthew 13:19; emphasis added.
7. 2 Nephi 32:5.

8. 2 Nephi 33:1.

9. See “Anne Sullivan,” biography.com/people/anne-sullivan-9498826; “Helen Keller,” biography.com/people/helen-keller-9361967.

10. Isaiah 28:10.

11. John 5:19.

12. Adapted from Elizabeth Akers Allen’s poem “Rock Me to Sleep,” in William Cullen Bryant, ed., *The Family Library of Poetry and Song* (1870), 222–23.