

Essential Conversations

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Have you ever wondered why we call Primary “Primary”? While the name refers to spiritual learning children receive in their earliest years, to me it is also a reminder of a powerful truth. To our Heavenly Father, children have *never* been secondary—they have *always* been “primary.”¹

He trusts us to value, respect, and protect them as children of God. That means we never harm them physically, verbally, or emotionally in any way, even when tensions and pressures run high. Instead we *value* children, and we do all we can to combat the evils of abuse. Their care is primary to us—as it is to Him.²

One young mother and father sat at their kitchen table reviewing their day. From down the hall, they heard a thud. The mother asked, “What was that?”

Then they heard a soft cry coming from their four-year-old son’s bedroom. They rushed down the hall. There he was, lying on the floor next to his bed. The mother picked up the little boy and asked him what had happened.

He said, “I fell out of bed.”

She said, “Why did you fall out of bed?”

He shrugged and said, “I don’t know. I guess I just didn’t get far enough in.”

It is about this “getting far enough in” that I would like to speak this morning. It is our privilege and responsibility to help children “get far enough in” to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we cannot begin too soon.

There is a uniquely special time in children’s lives when they are protected from Satan’s influence. It is a time when they are innocent and sin free.³ It is a sacred time for parent and child. Children are to be taught, by word and example, before and after they have “arrived unto the years of accountability before God.”⁴

President Henry B. Eyring taught: “We have the greatest opportunity with the young. The best time to teach is early, while children are still immune to the temptations of [the] mortal enemy, and long before the words of truth may be harder for them to hear in the noise of their personal struggles.”⁵ Such teaching will help them realize their divine identity, their purpose, and the rich blessings

that await them as they make sacred covenants and receive ordinances along the covenant path.

We cannot wait for conversion to simply happen to our children. Accidental conversion is *not* a principle of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Becoming like our Savior will not happen randomly. Being intentional in loving, teaching, and testifying can help children begin at a young age to feel the influence of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is essential to our children's testimony of and conversion to Jesus Christ; we desire them to "always remember him, that they may have his Spirit to be with them."⁶

Consider the value of family conversations about the gospel of Jesus Christ, *essential* conversations, that can invite the Spirit. When we have such conversations with our children, we help them create a foundation, "which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if [they] build they cannot fall."⁷ When we strengthen a child, we strengthen the family.

These vital discussions can lead children to:

- Understand the doctrine of repentance.
- Have faith in Christ, the Son of the living God.
- Choose baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost when eight years old.⁸
- And pray and "walk uprightly before the Lord."⁹

The Savior urged, "Therefore I give unto you a commandment, to teach these things *freely* unto your children."¹⁰ And what did He want us to teach so freely?

1. The Fall of Adam
2. The Atonement of Jesus Christ
3. The importance of being born again¹¹

Elder D. Todd Christofferson said, "Certainly the adversary is pleased when parents neglect to teach and train their children to have faith in Christ and be spiritually born again."¹²

In contrast, the Savior would have us help children "put [their] trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good."¹³ To do so, we can assist children in recognizing when they are feeling the Spirit and in discerning what actions cause the Spirit to leave. Thus they learn to repent and return to the light through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. This helps encourage spiritual resilience.

We can have fun helping our children build spiritual resilience at any age. It doesn't have to be complicated or time intensive. Simple, caring conversations can lead children to know not only *what* they believe, but most important, *why* they believe it. Caring conversations, happening naturally and consistently, can lead to better understanding and answers. Let's not allow the convenience of electronic

devices to keep us from teaching and listening to our children and looking into their eyes.

Additional opportunities for essential conversations can occur through role-playing. Family members can act out situations of being tempted or pressured to make a bad choice. Such an exercise can fortify children to be prepared in a challenging setting. For example, we can act it out and then talk it out as we ask children what they would do:

- If they are tempted to break the Word of Wisdom.
- If they are exposed to pornography.
- If they are tempted to lie, steal, or cheat.
- If they hear something from a friend or teacher at school that disputes their beliefs or values.

As they act it out and then talk it out, rather than being caught unprepared in a hostile peer group setting, children can be armed with “the shield of faith wherewith [they] shall be able to quench *all* the fiery darts of the wicked.”¹⁴

A close personal friend learned this crucial lesson as an 18-year-old. He enlisted in the United States military during the conflict between the United States and Vietnam. He was assigned to basic training in the infantry to become a foot soldier. He explained that the training was grueling. He described his drill instructor as cruel and inhumane.

One particular day his squad was dressed in full battle gear, hiking in sweltering heat. The drill instructor suddenly shouted orders to drop to the ground and not move. The instructor was watching for even the *slightest* motion. Any movement would result in serious consequences later on. The squad suffered for more than two hours in the heat with growing anger and resentment toward their leader.

Many months later our friend found himself leading his squad through the jungles of Vietnam. This was real, not just training. Shots began to ring from high in the surrounding trees. The entire squad immediately dropped to the ground.

What was the enemy looking for? Movement. Any motion at all would draw fire. My friend said that as he lay sweating and motionless on the jungle floor, waiting for dark for several long hours, his thoughts reflected back on basic training. He remembered his intense dislike for his drill instructor. Now he felt intense gratitude—for what he had taught him and how he had prepared him for this critical situation. The drill instructor had wisely equipped our friend and his squad with the ability to know what to do when the battle was raging. He had, in effect, saved our friend’s life.

How can we do the same for our children spiritually? Long before they enter the battlefield of life, how can we more fully strive to teach, fortify, and prepare them?

¹⁵ How can we invite them to “get far enough in”? Wouldn’t we rather have them

“sweat” in the safe learning environment of the home than *bleed on the battlefields of life*?

As I look back, there were times when my husband and I felt like drill instructors in our earnestness to help our children live the gospel of Jesus Christ. The prophet Jacob seemed to voice these same feelings when he said: “I am desirous for the welfare of your souls. Yea, mine anxiety is great for you; and ye yourselves know that it ever has been.”¹⁶

As children learn and progress, their beliefs will be challenged. But as they are properly equipped, they can grow in faith, courage, and confidence, even in the midst of strong opposition.

Alma taught us to “prepare the minds of [the] children.”¹⁷ We are preparing the rising generation to be the future defenders of the faith, to understand “that [they] are free to act for [themselves]—to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life.”¹⁸ Children deserve to understand this great truth: eternity is the wrong thing to be wrong about.

May our simple yet essential conversations with our children help them to “enjoy the *words* of eternal life” now so that they may enjoy “eternal life in the world to come, even immortal glory.”¹⁹

As we nurture and prepare our children, we allow for their agency, we love them with all our heart, we teach them God’s commandments and His gift of repentance, and we never, *ever*, give up on them. After all, isn’t this the Lord’s way with each of us?

Let us “press forward with a steadfastness in Christ,” knowing that we can have “a perfect brightness of hope”²⁰ through our loving Savior.

I testify that He is always the answer. In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.