

Lessons and Lifelines

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At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. . . .

. . . It is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish. [Matthew 18:1–5, 14]

The resurrected Savior also showed his great love for little children when He ministered to the Nephites:

He took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them. . . .

And he spake unto the multitude, and said unto them: Behold your little ones.

And as they looked to behold they cast their eyes towards heaven, and they saw the heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of heaven as it were in the midst of fire; and they came down and

encircled those little ones about, and they were encircled about with fire; and the angels did minister unto them. [3 Nephi 17:21, 23–24]

And here is what our current prophet, Gordon B. Hinckley, has said about children:

Parents have not just a responsibility but a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God, and to be law-abiding citizens where they live. . . .

. . . If our children are really our greatest treasures, it stands to reason that they deserve our greatest attention. . . .

Children are of far greater value than any kind of material wealth. [Standing for Something (New York: Times Books, 2000), 146, 152–53]

We could fill this devotional hour with counsel from our Church leaders on our responsibilities toward the children in our lives. The messages in the scriptures and from

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modern-day prophets are consistent and clear. Children are to be highly valued and taught and protected. And, interestingly enough, in turn we need to develop some of their characteristics to enter the kingdom of heaven.

I have had the opportunity of spending many hours in the company of children in both school and church settings. It is a blessing to be in their company. I learned early in my teaching career the value of writing down what I was learning from my young students. They can be great teachers.

Today I will share a few experiences that illustrate lessons we can and cannot learn from children and also what caring adults need to do to provide a lifeline for children who are born into challenging families.

Let's start with the lessons children do not teach well. All of you who have daily contact with children will recognize some of these from the lighter side.

Lessons We Cannot Learn from Children

Young children say what they think without malice aforethought. A colleague who is a school media specialist in Las Vegas was doing a book-share with a kindergarten class about a man who was given three magic wishes.

When she paused to ask "If you had a magic wish, what would you wish for?" one wiggly five-year-old quickly responded, "I wish you'd stop talking so we could check out our library books."

Real danger areas with children are appearance and age:

"Miss Tuttle, do you think you look nice with your hair like that?"

"Mrs. Smith, why do you have black hairs on your lip? They look like a moustache."

And then there is the popular favorite: "Teacher, you look even older than my grandma."

Younger children also have their own perspective of time-honored proverbs. As adults we say:

—Better be safe than sorry.

—Never bite the hand that feeds you.

—You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

—A penny saved is a penny earned.

—If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

—Laugh and the world laughs with you. Cry and you cry alone.

First graders say:

—Better be safe than punch a fifth grader.

—Never bite the hand that looks dirty.

—You can't teach an old dog new math.

—A penny saved is not much.

—If at first you don't succeed, get new batteries.

—Laugh and the world laughs with you. Cry and you have to blow your nose.

At a university you are required to take many exams. But test-taking is another example of a skill we cannot learn from children—at least not from this student in the Jordan School District. [A graphic of a math test was shown.]

Notice this child starts out with confidence on this math sheet. For those of you who find it difficult to read his handwriting, I'll read some of the responses for you. One of them says, "Stumped." Here's another: "Is it time to go home yet?" One of them says, "Uh-oh." My favorite is the last one: "Is there a teacher in the house?"

Children are great learners, but it takes time for them to grasp some gospel concepts.

[A video clip was shown.]

I appreciate T. C. Christensen for giving me permission to show those video clips from *Out of the Mouths of Babies*.

Lessons We Can Learn from Children

Children can teach us humility and trust. First graders produce a high volume of paperwork. Miss Tranter enlisted some helpers to pass papers back. She told her helpers if they licked their thumb, they could pass the papers

out faster. She looked back some minutes later to see one little girl dutifully following her directions by licking the thumb of one hand but passing the papers with the other hand.

That incident is both humorous and touching. What a responsibility it is to give directions to children, most of whom will try faithfully to do as they've been asked.

Every family has examples of the teachability of children. My brother, Lynn, was teaching his son to bat a ball. He was little and was having trouble holding the bat tip up. Lynn kept saying, "Choke up and you can hit it." Despite his repeated counsel, his son did not slide his hands closer to the middle of the bat. When Lynn approached the batter to show him where to put his hands, he realized each time he called "choke up," his son was dutifully trying to choke and making gagging sounds.

Children can teach us perseverance. Children know that anything worth doing is worth doing poorly. They are not very skilled at most of the things they do, but they keep trying: tying shoes, riding bikes, roller-skating, reading, helping in the kitchen.

As adults we often develop a different attitude. If we can't do it well, too often we don't want to do it at all. We are less likely to participate in activities we are not good at. We become less and less willing to do that which is difficult for us, especially if someone else is watching our poor performance.

Children can teach us appreciation for little things. Children appreciate simple things such as our laughing at their jokes, calling them by name in church, and listening to their stories. They like a handshake, a pat on the back, a letter or card recognizing their achievements, their talk, or their baptism. Children want to save those notes and cards forever. If all the mail you ever got to open was a yearly birthday card from Grandma and the family mail addressed to Occupant, you would save the personal notes in your desk at school for a long time, too. All adults should attend a week of

show-and-tell in the youngest grades. They would quickly see how their cards and notes of encouragement are especially valued by children.

Several weeks ago I attended meetings near Bryce Canyon and went for a walk in the forest with a few colleagues at the end of the day. We saw deer, wildflowers, and many kinds of trees. In a short time we covered a lot of ground because we didn't keep stopping to pick up rocks or look closely at a bug or select from a variety of walking sticks along the trail. Walking with a child in the mountains or in the park is a different and richer experience than walking with adults because of the detail children notice and appreciate.

Children can teach us about seamless perspective. They don't separate church from the rest of their life as easily as adults do. While observing a math lesson in the first grade, the student teacher held up a giant penny and said, "This is an important American president. Do you know which president is on the penny?"

Her first graders responded, "Abraham Lincoln."

"That is correct." She turned the penny and said, "On the back of the penny is a very important building that is a tribute to President Lincoln."

The children asked, "Is it the log cabin where Lincoln was born?"

The student teacher said, "That's a good guess, but this is a very formal building. It is white and it has big pillars and it was built in Washington, D.C., to honor President Lincoln."

One little girl called out, "That is the building where President Lincoln was resurrected."

When I shared that incident with a colleague, she related a similar experience:

"Do you know whose head is engraved on the penny?"

There was almost a unanimous choral response: "Gordon B. Hinckley."

The student teacher carefully explained the differences between Church presidents and national presidents and then confidently held

up the nickel. She got another choral response of “Spencer W. Kimball.”

In each general conference we are counseled to be sure the gospel is reflected in our lives daily—at home, at school, and in our work as well as in our Church responsibilities.

Children see the gospel with an elegant simplicity that teaches and builds testimony. Primary leaders through the years have been inspired to design programs and select music that continue to help us as adults.

I am touched by the number of CTR rings that are worn well after the Primary years. They continue to remind to “choose the right.”

Students in my local elementary school coach each other with WWJD: What would Jesus do? That question is not an oversimplification. It is always a good question for adults as well as children to ask when faced with difficult decisions.

The time we spend in the company of children can make us better people.

I often read this poem by Bertha Klienman at our student teacher orientation:

*If I would travel the holy land
I need not travel far
For the kingdom borders near at hand
Where the feet of the children are.*

Scientists concur with prophets and poets that children influence us for good. Let me quote the psychologist Tom Lovett:

Because teachers are with youngsters and can witness their insights and their revelations, teachers are relatively sane, non-violent and honest. Most of the people I know who work day to day with children do not rape, pillage, plunder or get involved in extortion plots. Perhaps the reason they don't engage in such high powered wrong doing is that they are too tired from teaching. . . . But I would contend that the primary reason that teachers are adequately socialized is that their children have helped them. Their pupils have kept them honest by

challenging some of their values and by providing them with fresh strategies for viewing the environment. [reference??]

Now let us go from lessons to lifelines. Years ago, while waterskiing with a friend, Bruce, we found ourselves in trouble as a thunderstorm with high winds moved over the lake so quickly that we had no time to seek the shore. A large wave broke over the motor, and the boat slid backwards into the water. Our swamped boat continued to float just under the surface with only the windshield visible above water. We held onto the side of the submerged boat as we waved for help to other boaters making their way to shore in the storm. As luck would have it, the first boat to arrive held three young boys—so young I was surprised to see them navigating a boat on their own. They moved in as close as they could and immediately shut off their motor. This was a mistake. Again and again they attempted to throw us a rope, but they were not strong enough and the wind prevailed. When they couldn't restart their motor, they, too, were in trouble. I remember saying as I shivered in the water, “I hope those kids don't drown because they stopped to help us.” Just a few minutes later two larger boats appeared, and we were encouraged when we saw they both had adult occupants. About the same time, the wind began to subside almost as quickly as it had begun. One man threw a towline to the boys, called out a few instructions, and headed for the dock. As they were being towed, the boys whooped and hollered—obviously enjoying the adventure more than we were.

A man in the other boat threw Bruce a line. He said he'd seen our boat go under and had immediately altered his course to help us. Gratefully we collected the floating items from our boat and passed them to our rescuers. A short time later we were headed to shore in their boat—towing a windshield attached to a submerged boat—and definitely not whooping.

I think of that ill-fated trip when I see children in trouble, particularly those riding the waves in troubled homes. I know the importance of a line thrown to a child by a concerned adult inside or outside the family circle.

There is such a need for more of these lifelines. Some children have families very different from those typically profiled in the *Friend* or the *Ensign*. They live in conditions that are far from the nurturing, safe environment we try to provide for our children.

Marion Edelman penned the following:

Loving God,

We pray for children

*who put chocolate fingers everywhere,
who sneak Popsicles before supper,
who can never find their shoes.*

And we pray for those

*who stare at photographers behind barbed wire,
who can't bound down the street in a new pair
of sneakers,
who are born in places we wouldn't be caught
dead.*

We pray for children

*who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of
dandelions,
who hug us in a hurry and forget lunch money,
who cover themselves in Band-Aids and sing
off-key.*

And we pray for those

*Who never get dessert,
Who can't find any bread,
Who don't have any rooms to clean up.*

We pray for children

*Who spend all their allowances before Tuesday,
Who pick at their food,
Who squirm in church and synagogue.*

And we pray for those

*whose nightmares come in the daytime,
who will eat anything,
who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to
sleep.*

We pray for those

*who want to be carried and for those who must,
For those
we never give up on
and for those who don't get a second chance.*

For those

*we smother with love,
and for those who will grab the hand of anybody
kind enough to offer it.*

[Marion Wright Edelman, "Loving God,"
Children's Defense Fund]

Some children live in homes with neglect, alcoholism, and abuse or with family members in trouble with the law.

Some children live without the supervision of an adult for long periods of time each day.

Some children simply live in homes where parents don't know enough about how to be good parents.

All children receive many incorrect messages from media in the 4,000 hours of TV they watch before starting elementary school (U.S. Department of Education). In contrast, approximately 800 hours are spent in Primary. In most families in America, only sleep consumes more of a child's time than watching TV.

I recently listened to presentations by Ronald Slaby and James Barbarino, both of whom study youth violence in America. They reported there is increasing aggressive behavior in children across the nation. A desensitization to violence is evidenced in the popularity of professional wrestling and other shows with violent content. Young boys become fascinated with and mimic what they see on TV, on the playgrounds, and in the backyard (Learning and the Brain Conference [Boston: Public Information Resources, Inc., April 2000]).

Our local Division of Family Services also reports an increase of child-against-child violence at younger and younger ages and an alarming increase of children accessing pornography on the Internet during unsupervised time. There are many children in need of rescue today. They are in our neighborhoods, our ward boundaries, our communities. Their rescuers will be caring adults like you.

Some longitudinal studies, several of which follow individuals over the course of a life span, have consistently documented that between half and two-thirds of children growing up in families with mentally ill, alcoholic, abusive, or criminally involved parents or in poverty-stricken or war-torn communities do overcome the odds and turn a life trajectory of risk into one that manifests . . . "resilience." [Bonnie Benard, *Fostering Resilience in Children*, ERIC Digest, EDO-PS-95-9, August 1995, ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Children's Research Center, Champaign, Illinois]

One of the three key factors in reversing the expected negative outcomes is the presence of at least one caring person. If that person was outside the family circle, he or she was most frequently a favorite teacher (see Bonnie Benard, *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community* [San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1991]).

Most of us grew up with the phrase "every member a missionary." Missionary work is a shared responsibility, with full-time missionaries working in a complementary role with members of the Church, who have a call to be lifetime missionaries.

In the new edition of *Teaching, No Greater Call*, "every member a teacher" is stressed. This excellent resource not only gives ideas for home and visiting teaching but also offers strategies to mothers and fathers for family teaching, even

advising how brothers and sisters and extended family can better teach the gospel in the family (see *Teaching, No Greater Call: A Resource Guide for Gospel Teaching* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999]).

The resurrected Savior taught the Nephites: "Hold up your light that it may shine unto the world. Behold I am the light which ye shall hold up—that which ye have seen me do" (3 Nephi 18:24).

How do we as university students, neighbors, or ward members throw a line to a struggling child? I have a few suggestions. First, we look at the example we are currently providing to the children in our lives and we remove the negatives. Do we engage in teasing and belittling and put-down humor that sows seeds of anger in children? What model do we provide for our younger brothers and sisters? Do we correct children by reteaching, or do we embarrass them by pointing out their mistakes in the presence of other family members or friends? This is a strategy most of us wouldn't dream of using with co-workers but use without thinking with children. Where did we ever get the crazy idea that to help children do better we first have to make them feel worse?

We must increase the positives. Do we understand the powerful example we are to younger brothers and sisters? Do we value a note, a card, or some quiet time together? Remember, these are little people who pick up and save sticks and rocks from the driveway and consider them treasures. We must remind ourselves of how much is taught in our families when we think no one is watching.

*When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you hang
my first
painting on the refrigerator, and I wanted to paint
another one.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you feed
a stray cat,
and I thought it was good to be kind to animals.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you make
my favorite
cake just for me, and I knew that little things are
special things.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking, I heard you say
a prayer, and
I believed there is a God I could always talk to.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking, I felt you kiss
me goodnight,
and I felt loved.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw tears
come from your
eyes, and I learned that sometimes things hurt, but
it's OK to cry.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw that you
cared, and I
wanted to be everything that I could be.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking, I looked—and
wanted to say
thanks for all the things I saw when you thought I
wasn't looking.*

[John W. Schlatter, "A Simple Gesture"]

So first we set a good example. Second, we must seek the Spirit to guide us. Who are the children in our families, neighborhoods, or wards who are caught in stormy situations? Can we identify a child today who needs another caring adult in his or her life? Most of us have little experience with children in crisis, and we'll need inspiration to know how to show our love and our willingness to help in the most effective ways.

Third, we must alter our course to help others. We must listen, show kindness, recognize their good efforts, and teach them by example. And we must widen our circle to include them whenever we can.

There are no quick fixes here. Like children, we'll need to persevere and celebrate small improvements. Children who have learned to

be survivors may at first rebuff those who try to help them. I am reminded of Dale, a third grader I had in Las Vegas who took three days to accept a pair of shoelaces.

On the first day I told Dale I had an extra pair of laces he could have. I told him I had noticed his sneakers coming off when he kicked the ball or ran the bases.

"Nope," he replied. "I like my shoes this way."

On the second day he asked, "Teacher, do you still have those shoelaces?"

When I answered yes, he said, "Well, I still don't want them."

On the third day he said, "Teacher, I guess I'll take those shoelaces, but I don't really need them."

I said, "You're welcome to have them."

Fourth, we must enlist the help of others for a network of support. We should contact our bishop and request his help. He is in the best position to know what is already being done by others in the ward. Reaching out to families often requires the coordinated efforts of many ward members. We can do some social engineering with other children and teach them how to friendship children in need. Children in challenging family situations will keep riding the swells until someone alters their course to help or until they are lost. The lifelines can't all be thrown by agencies and school teachers.

As a parent, son, daughter, husband, wife, brother, sister, Church leader, classroom teacher, home teacher, visiting teacher, co-worker, neighbor, or friend, you have opportunities to reach children. Many of you have expended great effort to send sons and daughters or brothers and sisters on missions to foreign countries while at the same time younger priceless converts—the children within our ward boundaries and communities—are slipping away.

In his closing remarks in the October 1996 general conference, President Gordon B. Hinckley asked us to "resolve to seek those who need help, who are in desperate and

difficult circumstances, and lift them in the spirit of love into the embrace of the Church” (“Reach with a Rescuing Hand,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 85, 86).

I am grateful to live in a ward where I see families who have the gospel in their lives reach out to children in need. I know all children are precious to our Heavenly Father. As caring adults we have a responsibility to love,

to reach out to, and to teach them as our Father in Heaven instructs us to do. I pray that each of us will reexamine our influence upon the children in our family circle and then reach out “with a rescuing hand” to children we know who do not live in the “light of his love” (see “Teach Me to Walk in the Light,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 304). I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.