

## THE FAMILY FORUM

## DISCIPLINE

by Michael Farnworth, Ed.D.

*Before we were sent to earth, were we warned never to do violence, but that we would inevitably be victims of it and very likely from the hands of our own family? Historically and statistically, our spiritual, emotional, and physical safety is most threatened by our family, the people who profess to love us the most.*

**Y**EARS AGO MY mother ran across the following piece of doggerel. She was tickled by its message and decided to share it with all six of her grown children.

## WHEN I'M A LITTLE OLD LADY

*Then I'll live with my children and bring  
them great joy  
to repay all I've had from each girl and boy.  
I shall draw on the walls and scuff up the floor;  
run in and out without closing the door.  
I'll hide frogs in the pantry, socks under my bed.  
Whenever they scold me, I'll just hang my head.  
I'll run and I'll romp, always fritter away  
the time to be spent doing chores every day.  
I'll pester my children when they're on the phone  
as long as they're busy, won't leave them alone.  
Hide candy in closets, rocks in a drawer,  
and never pick up my clothes from the floor.  
Dash off to the movies and not wash a dish  
I'll plead for allowance whenever I wish.  
I'll stuff up the plumbing and deluge the floor,  
as soon as they've fixed it, I'll flood it some more.  
When they correct me, I'll lie down and cry,  
kicking and screaming not a tear in my eye.  
I'll take all their pencils and flashlights and then,  
when they buy new ones, I'll take them again.  
I'll spill glasses of milk to complete every meal,  
eat my banana and just drop the peel.  
Put toys on the table, spill jam on the floor,  
I'll break lots of dishes as though I were four.  
What fun I shall have, what joy it will be*

*to live with my children like they lived with me.*

—AUTHOR UNKNOWN

It wasn't the most flattering thing I've received from my mother. It made me wonder how much resentment she bore toward my childhood self. That thought reminded me of the years I spent as a child under her rule, and I realized that the poem needed a response from a child's point of view. So I created the following reply.

A CONSIDERED RESPONSE TO  
THE LITTLE OLD LADY

*I'd be happy to have my mother come back  
and live with us, that mean old bat!  
I'd smack her around and pull on her ear:  
I'd spank her butt and yell till she feared!  
I'd do all the things she did to us;  
the things I could tell you would make her blush!  
I'd sit her in the corner when she didn't behave,  
I'd lecture her long, about an hour each day.  
I'd scold her for being inquisitive, then say,  
Mind your own business, you busy old bray!  
I'd ground her, I'd spank her; I'd shame her a lot.  
Then act as if she were being the mean little snot!  
I'd call her names like slow as a poke—  
maybe messy and dirty and you little old dope.  
I might even scream, "You make me crazy  
at times!  
Please, please go away, here's a nickel and dime!"*

*Yes, my good old mom would be in for a shock  
if she came back to live with me on my block!  
But fair is fair in this reversal of roles.  
What goes around comes around, everyone knows!  
So what of the moral? I'll give you a clue:  
The fun you felt would pass into the blues  
If you had to live with us like we lived with you!*

**E**XCEPT in cases of severe abuse that receive attention from authorities, parents are usually insulated from the consequences of their behavior toward their children. I knew a family with a young adult daughter who had the brain development of a five- or six-year-old. She could be loving and docile but could also throw terrible, violent tantrums. She would try to make her parents shut up and threaten to hit them if they didn't stop doing things she didn't like. I can't help but wonder if she was giving back to her parents what she'd received from them.

Since the family is the basic building block of our culture, the child's perception of right and wrong is shaped largely by the cultural values the family embraces. Mormon parents are in an especially interesting place. They are trying to be disciples of Christ, but they feel pressure to produce children who fit cultural expectations. So they turn to the tools most readily available to them: discipline and punishment.

Some research suggests that more than ninety percent of us receive corporal punishment as children. And because discipline patterns tend to get passed down, generation after generation of parents will continue to use violence to socialize their children.

The problem with our culture's form of discipline is its preoccupation with control and power. We sometimes immerse our children in a discipline based on punishment: hitting, spanking, threats, punitive manipulation, and shame. Our culture justifies these actions by preaching that whatever we parents do is for children's own good; that we need to prepare our children for the "real world"; that our success as parents is determined by our children's obedience; and that the honoring of parents is more important than the honoring of children.

Instead of examining our real selves, of trying to discover our true identity as we journey through life, we are distracted by the outer demands of society. We rely on the gauges of worldly appearance and pretence. We embrace the cultural values of control and power even though they are corrosive to our souls and displace the



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things of God. Parents who place obedience above all else often are willing to sacrifice the child's inner sense of value for the approval of others.

Most of us know that *disciple* is the root word of *discipline*. A disciple learns and practices the teachings of a master teacher and then helps to spread those teachings. So parents should be the master teachers while the children are disciples. But most young Mormon parents, usually in their 20's and 30's, aren't ready to be master teachers. At a stage in life when they're barely starting to figure themselves out, they're certainly not ready to mentor other people.

Parenting and discipline are meant to be part of the spiritual journey toward wholeness—not toward culturally prescribed behaviors. Both parent and child should be involved in the journey—parents learning of life's lessons from the Master (Christ) while children absorb a curriculum of compassion and understanding. This journey is fundamentally different if we follow the culture instead of Christ.

Before we were sent to earth, were we warned never to do violence, even though we would inevitably be victims of it and very likely from the hands of our own family? Historically and statistically, our spiritual, emotional, and physical safety is most threatened by our family, the people who profess to love us the most. Sociology professor Murray A. Straus wrote: "The group to which most people look for love and gentleness is also the most violent civilian group in our society."

Consider Mary's job as the mother of Jesus. Was her firstborn a sweet-tempered thing, always willing to help, continually thinking of others, never rambunctious, never making a mess, and never expressing an opinion different from his mother's or father's? I doubt it. Likely, Jesus sometimes wore his mother down, sometimes behaved in socially unacceptable ways, leaving her to figure out how to respond to him. How did she parent the world's Savior when he



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became exasperating? Did she sometimes spank him?

As a young father, I spanked and hit my own children and felt justified in doing so. Then I concluded that it was immoral to hit people in order to control a situation or make myself feel better, especially if I were hitting the children who were supposed to be under my care. My younger self probably would have thought that spanking the Christ child was acceptable, but now I would be too apprehensive of what might happen if I, as his parent, hit him. I wouldn't be afraid that he would zap me with heavenly power; rather, I would worry that my action was morally reprehensible and indefensible. And when I read the scripture that says: Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these . . . ye have done it unto me. I again worry about how I parented my own children.

**I**N *The Biology of Transcendence*, Joseph Chilton Pearce writes that children begin with an exuberance towards life which

Jean Piaget spoke of as "an unquestioned acceptance of the given." Everything is exciting, wonderful, and crying out to be experienced—that is, until fear or shame becomes part of the child's world. When I engaged in violent parenting, I instilled pockets of fear and shame into my children. When children begin to doubt themselves and fear their world, everything changes. They feel stressed and inadequate; they hesitate to attempt new things; they become spiritually anemic. In fact, when parents are never satisfied and continually harass their children to be better, the child's neurological functions become skewed.

According to neuroscientist Paul MacLean, the lower brain is responsible for survival action, the middle part is responsible for emotions, and the upper area is responsible for thinking. From Harville Hendrix's book, *Getting the Love You Want*, I use two terms—"old brain," which includes the stem and limbic areas of the brain, and "new brain," which includes the neo-cortex, or thinking area,

of the brain

Our old brain was fully functional at birth. We were breathing, our organs were functioning, and we could express fear, discomfort, and contentment. Instead of language, our old brain dealt with images and feelings. We were reactionary, instinctual, survival-oriented creatures. Our new brain—our sensory, motor, thinking, and language center—had been installed, but it was very immature. Not until we were seven or eight years old did the new brain begin to dominate, and not until our mid-twenties did it develop to full maturity.

The old brain does not recognize linear time, so fears and feelings that developed in early childhood can still live on in our adult brain. Accessing and working with these old, embedded feelings is very difficult, as they are powerful and resistant to change. As William Faulkner wrote, “The past isn’t dead; it isn’t even past.” A look, a tone of voice, a smell, or a memory can trigger old brain energies from childhood that set off a sequence of behavior beyond the conscious control of the new brain.

Shame, stress, threat, and fear activate the reflexive old brain into survival mode, and the higher cognitive functions of the new brain are put on hold. Professor of neurology Robert Sapolsky describes the effects chronic stress has on adults: “It suppresses the immune system—causing sickness; it slows and disrupts growth; it

erodes memory; it disrupts the ability to learn; it blocks the formation of new neurons in the brain; it can permanently damage the memory function of the hippocampus; it slowly kills.” As frightening as these effects are on adults, imagine how much more powerful their consequences are upon children.

When parents create a discipline environment of shame and fear to enforce obedience, their children will spend much time in “old brain” survival strategies of fight, flight, or freeze, stunting their higher neurological development. Parents’ verbal and physical acts of violence, done in the name of meeting the demands of our culture, may end up squelching the higher brain development we desire for our children. When children’s obedience is motivated out of fear, or when children believe that obedience is the only way to receive love, children can get stuck in lower brain development. Obedience becomes survival behavior.

There are spiritual consequences to this transformation. Children unable to meet their parents’ high expectations blame themselves. They grow up marinating in a stew of failure, which generates vanity. The Hebrew word for vanity denotes a sense of emptiness, falsehood, and worthlessness. These children defend themselves against this deep-seated sense of inadequacy by fantasizing about being an unattainable

self; they compare themselves unfavorably with others, thus breeding even more insecurity. This feeling of worthlessness causes people to hide from themselves and others, an act dishonest to themselves, to others, and ultimately to God.

Vanity likely undergirds much of our good and bad parental behaviors. We displace our own sense of childhood failures with exaggerated feelings of both adult superiority and inferiority. We start the process all over again in our children by setting impossible expectations for them, hoping to obtain the approval of the society at large and thus feel better about our children and ourselves.

Certainly each generation of children deserves better discipline than that their parents were served. A discipline of compassion and Christ-consciousness tastes much different than our culture’s often violent agenda of control and power. We parents can improve, but we must awaken from our cultural slumber to do so, and that is a difficult thing to do. We are usually only willing to change paradigms in response to crisis situations. Voluntary conversion is much easier, but often we don’t see the unintended consequences of our parenting tactics until they have already rooted themselves in our children. The next column will introduce ideas for expanding and understanding our interactions with our offspring.

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## MY SISTER WANTS ME TO COME AND READ THROUGH THIRTY YEARS OF DIARIES

in the house overlooking  
rainbent pines,  
in the life others  
would envy she loses her  
self in fragments. *How  
could we have changed so*  
she asks over the  
phone. *How could I not  
still be eleven in front  
of the old Plymouth  
on Main street,  
Mother Younger there  
than I am now.* Beginnings.  
What might go, pressed  
flat as a daisy from

someone she tries to  
remember like a deaf  
man remembers an  
opera he heard  
eleven years ago.  
My sister, fragile, as  
in demand as those flowers  
has found her days  
losing color, turning thin,  
breakable as those nearly  
transparent brittle leaves.  
Nothing bends  
like the pines. Her  
days are a shelf of  
blown glass buds

a heart beat could shatter. Come  
she says We can laugh  
at what seemed so  
serious then. Maybe from  
what happened in the  
apartment when the  
roof fell in or  
at Nanny’s as Herbert  
was dying we can  
know something about  
the stories we  
haven’t begun yet.

LYN LIFSHIN