

TEACHING

Life Lessons

IN A HOME-CENTERED
CHURCH-SUPPORTED WAY



NORMAN C. HILL

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Chapter 1

Why Teaching at Home Matters

“Everybody knows how to raise children,” the humorist P. J. O’Rourke once said, “except the people who have them.” It’s often easier to see what other people’s children need than our own children. It’s even easier to see and harder to do anything about our grandchildren. Most unsolicited suggestions by grandparents are as unwanted and as they are unheeded.

So, what are parents (and maybe even grandparents) supposed to do? It can be tricky. But with patience and an openness to new ideas, it’s possible to raise responsible children and teach them those life lessons that can only be learned at home.

There is an old saying that if the student hasn’t learned, then the teacher hasn’t taught. While this may unnecessarily put all of the burden on the teacher, at least it provides an easy way for parents to figure out if their children are learning the life lessons needed to survive in this world and spiritually qualify to progress in the next one. When those life lessons don’t seem to be part of children’s daily life—from preschoolers to teens—then it is an invitation for parents to act differently and teach persuasively.

It is not enough for parents to simply proclaim the gospel to their children; they must persist until important messages are understood and incorporated by them. As the Doctrine and Covenants emphasizes:

Inasmuch as parents have children in Zion . . . that teach them not to understand the doctrine of repentance, faith in Christ the Son of the living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, when eight years old, the sin be on the heads of the parents. (D&C 68:25)

President Russell M. Nelson has stressed this responsibility even more emphatically:

That commandment places responsibility and accountability for the teaching of children squarely upon the shoulders of the parents. The proclamation to the world regarding the family warns that individuals “who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God.”²

In many ways, the Book of Mormon is a useful “lesson manual” in teaching children regardless of their age because this family saga shows how, where, and what life lessons parents can best teach and the consequences that can occur when not done sufficiently. It even begins with “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents . . .” and goes from there to talk about the trials and triumphs of extended family relations for a thousand years. There is much to be learned directly and indirectly about home-centered, church-supported teaching from its pages.

It is with some trepidation that anyone writes about how and what parents can best teach at home. I am no exception. I’m neither a perfect parent nor a transcendent teacher. Instead, I’m doing my best both learning from my (now) adult children and trying to avoid making too many mistakes along the way. My wife Raelene and I have been blessed with four children and 16 grandchildren. After she passed away in 2015, I married Stephanie in 2017 who also has four children with an additional 21 grandchildren. Our *bonus family* of eight children and 37 grandchildren is, if it is anything, quite an adventure. I hope to share what we and others have learned about home-centered teaching as we live, laugh, and love together.

DISCOVERY LEARNING

Traditional ways of teaching through lectures or even reading and discussion have limited use these days as electronic media and methods are increasingly replacing traditional methods. What parents haven't heard the familiar refrain from their children when having a family discussion: "This is boring." And even if you haven't heard it that doesn't mean it wasn't thought about! It's hard to compete with computer graphics and mesmerizing animation.

There is, however, an alternative to traditional methods that is effective and entertaining. Like any skill, it takes a little practice to learn, but once mastered can easily be used in a variety of different settings. Instead of just telling or even discussing gospel principles, let family members experience them together and enhance their own understanding and judgment by applying them in their daily lives. This "flips the narrative" by changing parents from mere learning enforcers to *designers, facilitators, guides, and leaders*.

It's often said that "experience is the best teacher." It's never been truer than today. In fact, it may be the only truly effective method available to help children learn the enduring life lessons that will enable them to grow socially and spiritually living "in the world" without becoming "of the world." It can be challenging to find or create the right experiences that develop fundamental life habits, but it is possible.

"Discovery learning" or learning by doing is how parents at home (and teachers at church) can teach children without resorting to lecturing, browbeating, or nagging. It involves a fundamental shift from how parents often think about their role and what methods they use to teach their children. Discovery learning is an active, participatory approach that is more about helping children learn life lessons for themselves than simply imparting information to them hoping that they will retain it. In fact, discovery learning is the single most effective way to enhance moral agency by changing attitudes, developing skills, and modifying behaviors in developing Christ-like attributes.

As a parent, grandparent, and church leader; I found that children and others typically want to "do things for themselves." They don't want to be told what to do and often resist it—even when it seems like giving them "the answer" would simply be the most efficient way to go. It isn't. It never was. In fact, one time when my oldest son was a teenager, I overheard him say to a friend at church, "I ought to number my dad's lectures. He says the same thing so often I could just call out a number and save us both some time."

I was shocked. I didn't realize my advice to him was having so little impact. It certainly wasn't my intention to be dismissed, but that is what was occurring. Since then, I've tried to use a different approach by asking myself, "What do my children need to learn?" and then, "How can I create situations where that is most likely to happen?"

Whenever a learner accepts an invitation to act, it is, according to Elder Richard G. Scott, "an exercise in agency that permits the Holy Ghost to communicate a personalized message suited to their individual needs." Elder Scott then explained, "Creating an atmosphere of participation enhances the probability that the Spirit will teach more important lessons than you can communicate."¹⁰

Effective teachers create many different opportunities for learners to use their agency through open-ended case studies, real-life stories, gospel-themed games, and problematic situations that require problem-solving and decision-making. This can change the entire learning experience and outcome in both the classroom and in the home. Instead of a home or class of students, there is instead a cluster of learners, and all are teachers.

My friend Bill Dyer, former Dean of the Marriott School of Business at BYU, wrote a book years ago called *Insight to Impact*. In it, he describes the fundamental difference between our *intentions*—what we hope to achieve—and the *impact* which others may instead experience—what actually happens. There is often a large gap between the two, he notes, so it is vitally important to constantly ask:

Is what I intended to occur having the desired impact on others?¹¹

For instance, when I intend to give helpful advice is it interpreted instead as criticism? When I intend to point out ways to improve, is it viewed as telling someone they are not good enough? When I intend to praise or recognize positive effort, is it viewed as superfluous cheerleading?

The best way to determine if our intentions are having the desired impact is to observe the results. For example, are “teaching moments” dreaded or welcomed? When we discuss as a family being more kind to each other, are there fewer fights and disagreements? When we talk about forgiveness, are old grudges laid to rest?

Assessing our impact—and determining if it matches our intentions—requires keen observational skills. Without them, discovery learning methods are incomplete.

DEVELOPING OBSERVATIONAL SKILLS

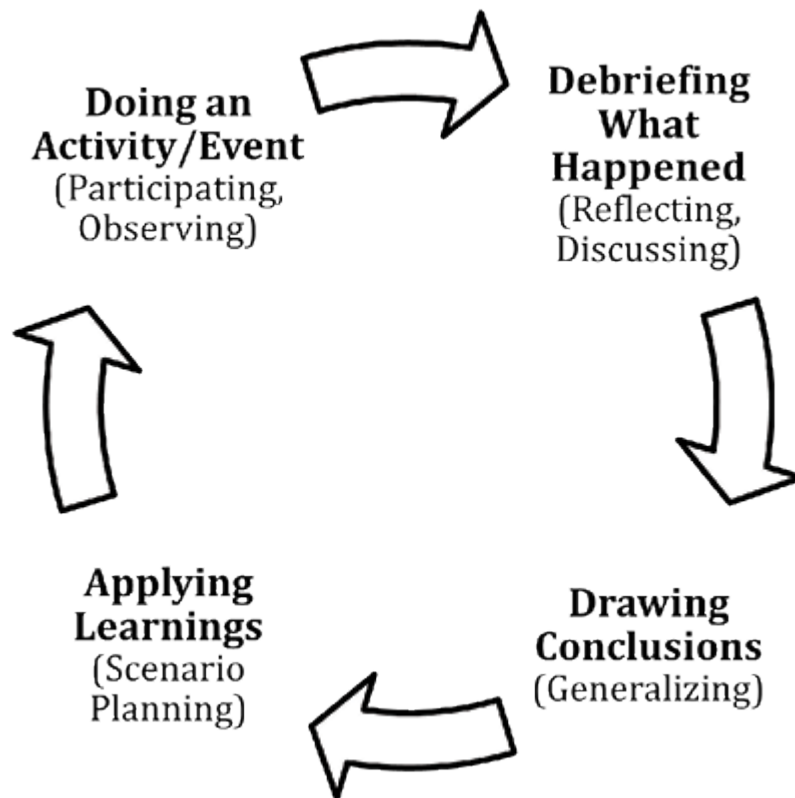
The prophet Mormon was selected by Ammaron to receive the plates of his people—and eventually abridge them as the Book of Mormon—because he was “quick to observe” (Mormon 1:2). Mormon even says that the record he makes comes from “the things which I have both seen and heard” (Mormon 1:1). In other words, firsthand observations. Developing good observational skills is essential in discovery teaching and learning.

Discovery learning relies on five different methods for home-centered teaching: structured experiences, role plays, case studies, simulations, and games. They stress acting or doing and then reflecting or debriefing, generalizing, and applying what was learned. They aim to let participants experience something—an activity or event—then reflect on what happened, what seemed to work and not work, and how certain “learnings” can then be applied in other real-life settings.

In creating, adapting, applying, and facilitating such discovery learning activities, parents and teachers need a way of seeing and thinking about them so that results from planned activities get translated into character-building attitudes and skills. It can be easy to draw the wrong conclusion from various activities (“my brother’s never helpful”) or only see the activity as a game with no real-life application (“I’m not really that way with others, just here”). Guided discussion after any discovery activity is essential to consider options and decide on ways to act in daily life.

Almost any activity—planned or unplanned—can be used as the “doing” part of discovery learning. The two key components of this “activity stage” are participating and observing.

There can be a lot of excitement and fun in any discovery learning activity but, unless some facilitated discussion occurs afterward, there will be little actual learning. Or worse. Due to inexperience or a single incident, family members may actually draw inaccurate conclusions based on a one-time experience.



We draw erroneous conclusions all the time. We backtrack from what happened and assign motives to other family members that may not be what they intended at all.

“She’s mad because I won.”

“He’s pouting because he didn’t get what he wanted.”

“She did that just to sabotage me.”

It can be challenging to resist the natural temptation to jump to a quick conclusion and instead slow down and discuss what may have actually happened and how our observations and interpretations match up with others. Recognizing our interpretations can either be spot on or way off is a fundamental aspect of discovery learning. We can “overthink” things disconnected from what was either intended or what may have occurred. Or we can fail to notice something when we are distracted or caught up in a game or activity.

REALIZATION AND TRANSFORMATIONAL QUESTIONS

The purpose of the gospel is to bring us to Christ. The programs of the Church and the various ways that we teach each other are all intended to help achieve that divine purpose.

The Savior taught by using questions that both provoked a re-examination among His listeners as well as a call to action. In some cases, He asked questions to help listeners *realize* how they could *think* about situations differently. At other times, He asked questions for them to *picture* how they could *act* differently.

Both are important. Realization is something of an awakening by a person to new possibilities, seeing themselves and others in a new light. While transformation is helping someone enhance their ability, actions, or understanding. They work together to change how we see the world, our

place in it, and how we go about bringing ourselves and our neighbors closer to our Heavenly Father.

Here are some questions the New Testament records the Savior asking others to help His listeners think differently, to come to a different realization about themselves, and see their place in the world differently:

REALIZATION

- “But whom say ye that I am?” (Matthew 16:15)
- “The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?” (Matthew 21:25)
- “Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? . . . Whose is this image and superscription?” (Matthew 22:18, 20)
- “Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your hearts yet hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember?” (Mark 8:17–18)
- “Who touched me?” (Mark 5:33)

These questions help us change our point of view, our mindset, and see the world differently. The Savior also asked questions to help us change the way that we act and our reasons and motives behind those actions, to act out of love and in faith.

TRANSFORMATION

- “Wilt thou be made whole?” (John 5:6)
- “Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?” (Matthew 8:26)
- “Wherefore didst thou doubt?” (Matthew 14:31)
- “Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?” (John 6:67)
- “What is written in the law? how readest thou?” (Luke 10:26)
- “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?” (John 21:15)

As we strive to submit our will to God’s—to think and act more like Him—we change our character, we are no longer the same person, we are, as the apostle Peter said, “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). The questions that we ask ourselves and others can help us achieve that ultimate goal.

The activity book the Church distributed some years ago gave examples of games or activities for Church groups and families that could be played outdoors including discussion questions to assist in debriefing what happened and what could be learned from such activities about physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual abilities. Many of these were revised and others added when the Church created the Children and Youth website (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/youth/childrenandyouth/youth>).

In discovery learning, debriefing can occur either with all family members or one-to-one with individual family members. It can be used following a planned or unplanned activity. It involves getting everyone to process or discuss what really happened and what actions led to others’ reactions.

The best way to debrief an event or activity is to stick to asking *what* and *how* questions and avoid getting into *why* things may have happened in a certain way. Jumping to conclusions too soon often leads to inaccurate perspectives. Assigning motives to others is never a good idea, either. It leads to backbiting and gossip.

So, don't allow "incriminating questions" among family members when debriefing such as:

"Why did you do that?"

"Why didn't you help me?"

"Why are you always against me?"

So, instead help family members look at *actions* and *reactions* by using questions "what" and "how" like these:

"*What* happened when Josh grabbed the ball?"

"*How* did you feel when Judy put her arm around you and brought you back into the circle?"

"*What* did Alyssa do when Scott yelled at Jesse?"

Rather than drawing conclusions at this stage, debriefing focuses on being very clear about actions and reactions so that everyone looks at an activity in the same way. If possible, try to encourage family members to identify as many "if/then" situations and outcomes as possible. In other words, "if this happens, then what is the likely outcome?"

A good way to begin is by asking the question:

What surprised you about someone's reaction during this activity?

After asking this question, it's then possible to dig a little deeper together about each surprise or unexpected response. A good follow up question might be:

If that surprised you, then what does it say about the way people can react in such situations?

In today's world, there is a heavy focus on individual satisfaction and personal fulfillment. Sometimes it is difficult to see things as others see them, to have the kind of God-like empathy that Enoch witnessed as he saw the "heavens weep."

And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?

And Enoch said unto the Lord: How is it thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity? (Moses 7:28–29)

Empathy is an essential God-like characteristic that allows us not only to understand the world better but also to make our own sphere of influence better. It's how family members really help each other, teach each other, and support each other. Not by lecturing or telling them what they "should" do, but by digging into what happened in various situations and recognizing what actions lead to positive or negative reactions. By unpacking events or activities in this way, debriefing leads to better generalizations about everyday events, Christ-like attributes, and gospel living.

A valid generalization is a broad statement about common reactions and their impact on others. They are supported by observation, facts, and discussion. For instance, "wickedness never was happiness" is a well-known generalization about gospel living from the scriptures.

Discovery learning can help us make valid generalizations from either structured activities or life experiences. Rather than relying only on authority figures, we can learn from our own experience to choose good over evil—which is exactly what the Lord told Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is our primary purpose on earth.

Deeper understanding and better generalizations come from close observation coupled with confirmation from others. Who better than other family members are as interested and committed to helping us test and assess what we conclude from an experience? They are in the best position to give ongoing support in a safe and loving way. They can also help us avoid

jumping too quickly to conclusions without considering alternatives.

Asking ourselves, “What other ways could this situation be viewed?” helps us slow down and draw better conclusions. For instance, when Captain Moroni wrote to Pahoran asking for more support for his army, he erroneously accused him of neglect and sitting “upon your throne in a state of thoughtless stupor” (Alma 60:7). As it turns out, Captain Moroni jumped to a wrong conclusion. Paharon was doing his best to fight off dissenters himself, which he told Captain Moroni about in a subsequent letter.

Some ways to avoid jumping too quickly to conclusions and instead drawing better conclusions based on observation and collaboration is by asking questions like the following:

- What would Jesus do?
- How might someone very different than me view this situation?
- How can I check if what seems to me to be occurring, is what seems to be occurring for others?
- Am I assuming “good intent” by others or assuming the worst?
- Is there a similar situation from the scriptures that I can use as a guide?

Drawing valid conclusions helps us make better choices in daily living and enables us to apply gospel principles in our everyday lives. It’s not enough to know how to live the gospel, it is also necessary for us to apply what we know. This *transference* is what all gospel teaching aims to achieve.

Transfer of learning occurs when family members recognize how methods for handling various situations at home can lead to better results outside the home as well. It’s about “connecting the dots” everywhere and all of the time by using the discovery learning cycle and its methods in everyday living.

The last step in the discovery learning cycle is to apply “learnings” in everyday life. Without applying newfound insights or skills, family members may have had a great experience, but they’ve missed the benefit of getting better together. Some ways to invite family members to act in better ways are to consider some questions like these:

- What do you know now that you didn’t know before?
- Now what? What does this mean for our family?
- How can we help each other remember what we’ve learned without nagging?

If families make the discovery learning process a habit, then they will have more shared experiences together that allow personal growth and development. It is a very active coaching role for parents who will find there is less lecturing and more sharing insights together. Teachers at Church can apply the same methods and expect to get similar results. Instead of standard lectures or routine class discussions with obvious answers to leading or rhetorical questions, discovery learning promotes moral agency and deep learning. In fact, children in the family or students in a class can become the “teachers” by planning and leading their own discovery learning activities by creating experiences together or posing problems that family members address together.

This transformational learning and teaching process focuses on conversion to gospel principles, not merely classroom compliance. It can be intimidating at first because there is less overt control by the teacher or parent and more unpredictability about the outcomes from an activity. But with a few tips and a little practice, this shift towards a more effective teaching and learning method will become second nature. It is teaching in the Savior’s way by using real life experiences to live and love as He did.

GETTING STARTED TOGETHER

So, let's get started. Teaching and learning together in a home-centered, church-supported way starts with *joining up*. We choose to enlist, to get started, to go together. Like early pioneer scouting expeditions, the terrain can be uncertain and maybe a little or a lot different than expected. Yet, despite having a general idea of the needed direction, it still takes common consent to make regular progress each day. Even wagon trains rely on shared agreement, not merely giving and receiving orders as many pioneer histories and records show.

John the Revelator offered a similar perspective when he told us the Savior waits to be invited in and never forces Himself to be heard.

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man will hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20)

THE CHALLENGE TO BECOME

Elder Dallin H. Oaks, First Counselor in the First Presidency, has said that our ultimate goal is “far more than acquiring knowledge. It is not enough for us to be *convinced* of the gospel; we must act and think so that we are *converted* by it. In contrast to the institutions of the world, which teach us to *know* something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to *become* something.”¹²

When we gather together in the restored gospel, we have a chance to process, decode, analyze, and apply gospel principles. Like amphibians, we live in two different worlds and must learn to navigate each of them effectively. Amphibians come by such things as gills and webbed feet naturally to help them survive either on land or in the water. We must acquire the dexterity to live in the world but not become overwhelmed by it through trial and error, experience and observation, study and prayer.

UNLEARNING

Learning requires judgment without becoming judgmental, not simply of others but also of ideas, practices, and aspirations. As we gain new knowledge and insights, we may need to discard some things we've “learned” in the past. The new *For the Strength of Youth Guide* emphasizes that “Heavenly Father wants His daughters and sons to always be learning. . . . Look for opportunities to expand your mind and your skills. These opportunities can include formal education at school or vocational training as well as informal learning from sources you trust. . . . The more you learn, the more you can build God's kingdom and influence the world for good.”¹³

Learning involves acquiring new knowledge and skills as well as new insights about the world around us. It can also require re-examining old habits or beliefs. Learning is being open-minded enough to recognize that as we grow some things we've learned in the past may need to be discarded. For instance, we know that we are divine daughters and sons of Eternal Parents with our own eternal possibilities. Anything which limits or contradicts this divine perspective about us or others is inconsistent with this eternal truth.

In the well-known song “You've Got to be Carefully Taught” from the Broadway play *South Pacific*, the lyrics include these lines:

You've got to be taught to be afraid

Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a different shade—
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight
To hate all the people your relatives hate—
You've got to be carefully taught!¹⁴

Unlearning can be difficult and awkward at any age. Galileo found it so difficult for people to unlearn that even after he demonstrated that the sun did not revolve around the earth, many did not accept it. Columbus, too, had many doubters who would not unlearn that the earth was flat. Even today there is a serious “flat earth society” that is gaining popularity around the globe. And, of course, the Prophet Joseph Smith had many who would not unlearn what they had been taught and were unwilling to accept that the heavens, in fact, are still open and the Bible does not contain the last and final revelation from God.

An acquaintance likes to say that unlearning is like pouring water out of a glass and replacing it with something else—say, a smoothie or a milkshake, for example. While perhaps it is a helpful example, it skims over the difficulty that is often involved in replacing something we *know* with something brand new to us. Missionaries often see investigators struggle with new concepts and strive to bring them closer to true doctrine so the Holy Ghost can testify to them. Yet, laden with their own accumulated truisms and artifacts from their everyday life, letting go can be hard to do.

Learning at any age broadens our perspective, introduces us to new ways of experiencing the world, and helps us acquire new abilities as well as tools to see things the way the Savior sees them, experience things the way He experiences them, know things the way He knows them. Like learning a foreign language and living in an unfamiliar place, if we are to be more than tourists in the Kingdom of God, then we must both learn the culture and customs of the place He invites us to call home and successfully share that invitation with others.

IMMERSIVE STUDY

Reading the scriptures introduces us to the “vocabulary” of this new language of God-like living but, as anyone who has tried to learn a language knows, what is spoken on the street can be very different from what is included in a textbook. Studying the grammar is essential in learning a new language (what is sometimes referred to as “*knowing that*”) but interacting with others is actually required to communicate (what is often called “*knowing how*”).

Dil Parkinson, a BYU linguistic professor, noted in a devotional address that direct teaching can be structured, but the kind of real learning that is required to speak a new language comes mostly from indirect experience. This realization often dawns on students slowly, and at first it can even anger them. It is much harder to teach and learn a language indirectly through experience than directly through vocabulary cards and repetitively conjugating verbs in the proper tense. Direct teaching is necessary to get started but it must largely give way to indirect learning to acquire fluency in a new language.¹⁵

Indirect learning does not always have an immediate payoff. But those who throw themselves into many different activities, working around and through their frustration until a breakthrough finally comes, eventually win the day. They know it when it occurs. The difference is astonishing.

There is a kind of mystery involved here in moving from a theoretical knowledge to a practical one, figuring out how to develop those habits of tongue, mind, and heart that allow us to function as native speakers. It is hard to describe but easy to notice when it happens.

Gospel learning may similarly be a dual process of directly gaining important information—what is sometimes called additive knowledge—about the scriptures, Church history, and General Conference messages—while immersive study enables the Holy Ghost to testify of divine truths which enhance our divine nature.

SUMMARY

While I was serving as a mission president, Elder David A. Bednar visited our mission and was asked during several zone meetings about teaching methods. He often emphasized the importance of *showing* more than *telling* and then urged missionaries to “get out of the way and let the Holy Ghost do the rest.” For good reason, the scriptures say that if we don’t have the Spirit, we shouldn’t teach. Discovery learning relies on showing and then relying on the Holy Ghost for guidance in observing, generalizing, and applying gospel principles to everyday life.

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