

“Essential Conversations with Your Teen”

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Sisters, I’m so excited to be here—in person, with all of you. I love being involved with Women’s Conference and what a wonderful opportunity to share some of my thoughts and feelings. I am passionate about the topic of how to have essential conversations with our teens. My husband, Jason and I have three children—our youngest graduates from high school this month, we also have a beautiful grandson who turns two on Saturday and another grandbaby due next month. We love the closeness, and connection we have with our children. As a young missionary in Guatemala, I realized that I have a passion for helping people learn and grow and to become the best version of themselves. I have found over the past twenty-three plus years in my career as a clinical social worker that I really enjoy helping teens and their families. I like to help them discover who they are, build from their strengths, and launch into being successful adults. I’ve also seen the pains and struggles that people experience and my heart aches for them, but I’m also so grateful for the trust they have in sharing their story and I’m so glad that I can give them tools to help them find joy in their journey. So today, I want to share some of the insights I’ve gained through my experiences.

Today I’ve decided to start by sharing a quote by Julie B. Beck from October 2007 that sums up our divine gift and responsibility as mothers today. She states, "Who will prepare this righteous generation of sons and daughters? Latter-day Saint women will do this—women who know and love the Lord and bear testimony of Him, women who are strong and immovable and who do not give up during difficult and discouraging times. We are led by an inspired prophet of God who has called upon the women of the Church to ‘stand strong and immovable for that which is correct and proper under the plan of the Lord.’ He has asked us to ‘begin in [our] own homes’ to teach children the ways of truth. Latter-day Saint women should be the very best in the world at upholding, nurturing, and protecting families. I have every confidence that our women will do this and will come to be known as mothers who ‘knew’.”¹

I don't know about you, but as a mother I frequently feel inspired and overwhelmed at the same time. I remember when my kids were little, and I would get so nervous when I would imagine their teenage years. What comes to your mind when you think of teens? For me, I would think of rebelliousness, sassiness, pushing limits, friends, peer pressure, moodiness, and comparisons just to name a few. Over the years, I have discovered that those things are expected and needed as part of their healthy development. If you tell a teen to 'stop there', their job developmentally is to see what happens if you go past that limit. I also discovered that besides pushing boundaries, they are also insightful, capable, resilient, talented, and stronger than I knew possible. Heavenly Father created them this way as they find their own identity, skills, and talents.

When our kids are younger, they are almost an extension of us—we provide everything for them, but as they develop into their teen years, they need to test boundaries, to feel successful, and to have emotional connection to grow into the contributing adults we want them to be. I view it as a funnel. At the bottom we have complete control, we provide their food, shelter, clothing, soothing, everything. And as your child grows, you move up the funnel, we have less control and become a support as they learn to be more independent and capable. As your teen begins to make choices that you don't agree with or they make mistakes, there is a temptation to change the funnel direction and exercise more control. Naturally your teens will push back because developmentally they are seeking autonomy and independence. I've seen this cycle happen so many times where the parent tries to control and the teen pushes back even further, creating disengagement and conflict.

As I contemplated this topic and what I could share, I realized that to have essential conversations with our teens and to be prepared to listen, and understand without lecturing, as well as recognize the important daily teaching moments; I need to focus on the process, not the content of those discussions. Content can be any topic from chores, clothes, spending money, to curfew. These subjects change hundreds of times. But the process is the way we have those conversations. So, today I will focus on what we can do to create a stronger attachment or relationship that allows us to have those conversations.

With Attachment Theory, there is a pattern or cycle that creates a secure attachment; a need arises, the baby makes a bid for help (crying), the parent notices, then the parent responds (picks up the baby), the child is soothed, and trust develops. That cycle continues and continues, hundreds and thousands of times through the child's life. In other words, the child learns that their parent or caregiver is safe, reliable, and responsive in meeting their needs, so they feel secure in that relationship. When a child feels secure in a relationship, they know that they can go to their parent for help and the parent will respond, more often than not in a compassionate/caring way. Secure attachment creates many positive traits necessary for healthy child development. It is never too late to develop a secure attachment. With each developmental stage, we use the same strategies, but the application for each stage looks different. The three things that are necessary to create a safe place to have those critical conversations are: autonomy, competence, and connection. The problem is that during the teen years, most parents focus on compliance which engages control and disengagement. Control and disengagement do not promote healthy attachment or development and growth. So instead, we want to focus on the

things that do create healthy attachment and development. Which are, *autonomy, competence, and connection*.

Autonomy

Autonomy is allowing your teen the freedom and trust to make their own choices, within safe boundaries. Communication is key to allowing the teen the opportunity to share their worries, concerns, or successes. Developmentally, during the teen years, it is normal and an important part of growth for our youth to exercise their agency.

Our Heavenly Father demonstrates this type of autonomy supported parenting as He gives us guidance and assistance, but ultimately allows us to use our agency. I love the new *For the Strength of Youth: A Guide for Making Choices*. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf in October 2022 introduced the new *For the Strength of Youth* by saying, "At the heart of God's plan for your happiness is your power to choose. Of course, your Heavenly Father wants you to choose eternal joy with Him, and He will help you to achieve it, but He would never force it upon you... To be very clear, the best guide you can possibly have for making choices is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the strength of youth. So, the purpose of *For the Strength of Youth* is to point you to Him. It teaches you eternal truths of His restored gospel—truths about who you are, who He is, and what you can accomplish with His strength. It teaches you how to make righteous choices based on those eternal truths. It's also important to know what *For the Strength of Youth* does not do. It doesn't make decisions for you. It doesn't give you a 'yes' or 'no' about every choice you might ever face. *For the Strength of Youth* focuses on the foundation for your choices. It focuses on values, principles, and doctrine instead of every specific behavior."²

I was listening to a podcast called *Follow Him* by John Bytheway and Hank Smith for the week of March 13-19, and their guest was Dr. John Hilton III. You can find their podcast transcripts at www.followhim.co. He was talking about the scribes and Pharisees and how they got so focused on strict rules, that they lost sight of the eternal truths. He called those strict rules fence laws. He shared an analogy of a cliff with a beautiful view, but you don't want people to fall off the cliff, so you build fences around it, however, the fences get so tall that they block the view. In this analogy the cliff is sin, and the fences are rules to keep us from falling into sin. Because I had this presentation on my mind, I listened to that podcast through the lens of parenting. I started to think about how we as parents create limits and boundaries for our teens, that are often important and needed, but we only focus on the rule and compliance with the rule, and we forget to share the why about it. Teens are much more internally motivated when they understand the why of doing something. The example that came to mind for me was curfew. Do we share why we want them home at a certain time, is it flexible, is it negotiated, or is it seen as controlling? Do our kids understand why we feel it's important for them to be home by a specific time? Curfews aren't bad, they are often needed, but it's easier to comply with something like being home by 10, if we understand why it's important.

I have an example of this regarding sleepovers. When our oldest daughter was a preteen, we lived in Twin Falls, Idaho. She was being invited to a lot of birthday party sleepovers. We just consistently said no that she couldn't sleep over. We didn't give any more thought or conversation about it other than we didn't want her to do it. It always made our daughter sad, and

she really wanted to be involved and enjoy her friends, and of course we wanted that for her too. This bothered my husband and I to the point that we talked about why we didn't want her to go to sleepovers. We had to really reflect on our reasoning about it. We are both mental health therapists and I treat a lot of kids that have been sexually abused, so we realized that our answer was based on our fear of abuse that might happen if we allowed her to sleep away from us. We decided we needed to talk to her about our reasoning and help her make decisions, not just give black and white, yes or no answers.

So, we sat down with her and talked about our fears and worries regarding sleepovers. Her answer was so eye opening to me. She said, "that's why you don't want me to do sleepovers? I thought you believed I couldn't handle sleeping away from home". She never asked again, and it was never an issue after that. She was motivated to obey and listen because she understood the reasoning behind it. Going back to the analogy made by Dr. Hilton, our rule of no sleepovers was a fence meant to protect her from the cliff, but we had focused so much on the fence that she couldn't see the cliff or the view. Talking with our children and helping them understand the why's of doing things, helps them to be autonomous and make good decisions for themselves.

Parents who use autonomy supported parenting might find that they are often stricter because they've negotiated with their teens about privileges and consequences. Parents can be consistent as they guide their children and help the teen make decisions rather than trying to control them and ending up being disengaged due to conflict. The teens can internalize their parents' rules and values, resulting in higher motivation. Because of the increased "buy in", autonomy support is more successful than control in producing desired behaviors.

Craig Hart in an article from the *Y Magazine* in 2003 said, "Research backs up the need to allow children latitude. Children who experience an appropriate amount of autonomy tend to be better at sharing power and understanding others' viewpoints. They have fewer disputes with their parents and are more respectful of adults in general. They better manage their activities. And in peer relationships they place more emphasis on persuasion and negotiation to get their way."³

It is important that we allow our teens to experience the consequences of their decisions. We need to step back and let them know that if they fail, we are a safe place to land. If teens don't have a healthy attachment, and they fail, or they just see their parents as authoritative, they will feel shame, withdraw, and never share their struggles and trials with their parents. I see teens all the time that don't feel like they can talk to their parents because they are worried about judgment or criticism. They're afraid to make mistakes and afraid to let their parents know if they do make a mistake. I know the parents are confused and unaware of why their teen won't talk to them. I was thumbing through a book the other day because of its funny title—"50 Dangerous Things You Should Let Your Children Do" by Gever Tulley. It made me laugh and the book refers to things like climbing a tree or burning something with a magnifying glass. What I got from it is that kids need the opportunity to try things and experience autonomy and encourage creativity. Our teens need to experience things to feel successful.

Competence

Competence encourages your teen to use their talents and spiritual gifts to build their self-confidence. It is effectiveness and mastery. It's teaching our teens to have a flexible mindset, that mistakes are learning opportunities. Parents can help their youth to recognize and use their divine gifts and talents as well as the Atonement as they continue to progress in this life to become like our Savior.

I remember when President Nelson spoke with the youth in June of 2018. The title of his talk is the Hope of Israel, he said, "Our Heavenly Father has reserved many of His most noble spirits—perhaps, I might say, His finest team—for this final phase. Those noble spirits—those finest players, those heroes—are you! My beloved younger brothers and sisters, you are among the best the Lord has ever sent to this world. You have the capacity to be smarter and wiser and have more impact on the world than any previous generation!"⁴

If our teens embraced who they are, how would they think, feel, and behave? We as parents have such an important role in raising and guiding our children. They truly are such amazing and beautiful spirits, and we are given the stewardship to be their mothers/parents. They have each been given talents and spiritual gifts to help them through this mortal existence and we can help recognize and nurture those gifts.

Often, I encounter people in my practice who are afraid to try new things because they are so afraid to make mistakes. I think all too often in our perfectionistic culture we believe we have to be perfect to have worth and value. Those beliefs can definitely create a misunderstanding of the scripture, "be ye therefore perfect"⁵. With this fixed mindset, it can cause crippling anxiety and distress to feel that we might fall short of perfection. In those moments we forget to focus on the Savior and His teachings. I love the Savior's teaching of the talents and his expectation to multiply them and use them to bless others. We are taught that if we hide our talents, they are taken from us. This is an opportunity for us to challenge our children to find their talents and their gifts and to use them. We can encourage them to try different things, find what fits for them and know that they have their own unique gifts and strengths different from their siblings or even friends. We help our children by being their cheerleaders and support as we encourage them without judgment or criticism.

When we moved back to Utah in 2012, our son really wanted to learn to fly fish. He said he would work all summer long mowing our lawn if we would buy him a fly rod. We as his parents didn't know how to fly fish, but he has always loved fishing and it was something he was willing to work for. His dad bought the rod, but neither were very good and didn't know how to do it. So, he also signed them both up for a Community ED fly fishing class. They really enjoyed it and learned all about casting, reading the river, what flies to use, and even how to tie their own flies. Our son worked hard to continue to practice and improve. Today he still loves to fly fish and even uses his skills to help when he's stressed or upset. When my husband took an interest in what our son wanted to do and went beyond encouraging to participating, it not only helped our son to feel successful, but also created an even stronger bond between them.

The way we communicate with our teens is essential in building their resilience and flexibility. Teaching our kids to have a flexible mindset means that mistakes are learning opportunities, and that there isn't shame associated with mistakes. Can you imagine if your child got a math test

back that was all covered in red, and they unabashedly shared it with you, and you were both able to say that now you know what things they need to work on? With no judgment or criticism but hope and understanding. This type of communication with our youth about mistakes creates a safe environment for conversing, problem solving, and encouragement. They aren't afraid to come to you with mistakes or questions if they know that you also see mistakes as a learning opportunity.

Each of us sins and makes mistakes. It is part of our mortal journey. The Savior atoned for our sins and repentance should be a daily process. When we came to earth, we knew that we would make mistakes and through repentance we would improve and become clean and more like Jesus Christ. This is plan A. Plan B is never making mistakes, which in this life is impossible. Almost every day, I see people trying to live Plan B and save themselves. That was never part of Heavenly Father's plan. The Savior makes up for our shortcomings. He never meant for us to obtain perfection in this life. We become perfected through Him. With that in mind, we can teach our teens to feel more competent and willing to try.

In April 2020, President Nelson said, "When God wanted to give the Ten Commandments to Moses, where did He tell Moses to go? Up on top of a mountain, on the top of Mount Sinai. So, Moses had to walk all the way up to the top of that mountain to get the Ten Commandments. Now, Heavenly Father could have said, 'Moses, you start there, and I'll start here, and I'll meet you halfway.' No, the Lord loves effort, because effort brings rewards that can't come without it."⁶ We can teach our teens that we also love effort and that we are available to help them when they fall.

Connection

Connection helps our teens feel loved and accepted. Parent and child relationships can be tricky or difficult to navigate during the teenage years. We need to build relationships of openness and love. As our children become teens, more than ever before, they crave our approval and acceptance. We were born needing attachment and connection. If we can look past some of their negative behaviors during the teenage years, we can see that emotion is an opportunity for connection.

Many times when counseling parents, they will bring their teen for anger management about some issue in the home. As the parents learn to tune in and build connection with their child, they come to understand and see their child's pain or hurt or feelings of powerlessness in their lives. Anger is an emotion that easily hides a lot of other things underneath it like, hurt, scared, sad, lonely, or rejected. If we take the anger at face value, we might react to the anger and become angry ourselves. If we do that, we completely miss what's really going on with our teens.

In 1 Samuel 16:7, the Lord is teaching Samuel how he sees us and how we should see each other. "But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart."

If we take this scripture and use the principle of looking past our teens' behaviors, but to truly see them for who they are, we can emotionally connect with them. I have always felt such a strong responsibility in seeing my kids the way our Heavenly Father sees them and not forget that they are sons and daughters of God.

I really loved the guidance we received from General Conference last month. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf gave the talk entitled, "Jesus Christ is the Strength of Parents". I would encourage everyone to go and reread it. It has so much insight for us as we strive to parent our beautiful children. He said, "As you are prayerful and sensitive to the Spirit, He will warn you of hidden dangers. He will reveal your children's gifts, their strengths, and their unspoken concerns. God will help you see your children as He sees them—beyond their outward appearance and into their hearts. With God's help, you can learn to know your children in a pure and heavenly way. I invite you to accept God's offer to guide your family by personal revelation. Seek His guidance in your prayers."

To better connect with our teens, we need to look for the little things they do right. Our mind focuses on where we put our attention. Sometimes parents tell me they can't praise their teens because there isn't anything to praise. That just can't be true, because there is always something good if we are looking, sometimes we just have to look really hard! John Gottman, who I believe is a guru on relationships, said there is a magic ratio of 5:1. For every single critical statement, there needs to be five positive statements to maintain a healthy relationship. I like to think of it as a piggy bank. If you are continually putting money in the bank, when you make a withdrawal, you will still have money in the bank. With our teens, if there is a negative interaction or a consequence, if we are continually praising and connecting, we still have a healthy/positive relationship with them.

Another way to connect is listening to our children. If we see emotion as an opportunity for connection, we don't need to be afraid of our teens' emotions. Sometimes we think we know the facts, and our own emotions take over. It happens to all of us, however, in those moments when we really stop and listen to them, we can see their perspective and what is happening in their life. One example of this is several years ago my daughters were arguing and getting so upset at each other. I really dislike conflict, so I got frustrated and just yelled at them to stop. They were both so angry, but I paused for a minute and looked in their eyes. I had to look past their anger and frustration with each other and see that they were really just sad and hurt about other things that were going on. When I took them in my arms and said that I was sorry they were hurting, they both stopped arguing and just cried. They needed me to really see them and listen to what was going on for them. That was a special moment I won't forget because it allowed us to connect at a deeper level of love and understanding. Emotion is an opportunity for connection.

I know for myself; I am never motivated by someone threatening or manipulating me to do what they want. However, I am motivated by people who love me and understand me and see my potential. The same is true for our teens. We sometimes confuse motivation with manipulation and consequences with punishment. That doesn't work and often does more harm than good. Truly loving our teens helps us connect with them, which helps them to become more intrinsically motivated and strive to become better versions of themselves. We do that through charity.

In Moroni 7:47-48, Moroni is quoting his father Mormon, as he teaches us how to obtain eternal life. He said, “But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ;” We are our Heavenly Father’s children, and he can see our potential. He has established the pattern for us to follow in helping His children reach their potential.

As parents we can pray to see our teens the way the Savior sees each of us. Jesus Christ loves us and sees our heart and our intent. We likewise love our children and want the best for them, and as we strive to see them the way the Lord sees them, we can look past their behavior and have charity and pure love for our children. The Atonement is necessary for all of us. The Plan of Happiness is for us to learn and make mistakes and to repent.⁷ Our children benefit as they learn this pattern. Let's not rob them of that opportunity.

Sisters, if you are struggling to see your teens in positive ways, I challenge you to pray to be filled with charity, so that you can see them the way the Savior sees them.

My favorite scripture is 2 Nephi 25:26 where Nephi is admonishing us to teach our children about the enabling power of Jesus Christ. I have loved this scripture for as long as I can remember. It reminds us that Christ should be the center of all we do and especially our parenting. “And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins.” We can use His perfect example as we parent by allowing our teens to use their agency, find and use their divine gifts and talents, and nurture loving relationships through charity.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ Julie B. Beck, “Mothers Who Know,” October 2007.

² See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Jesus Christ Is the Strength of Youth,” October 2022.

³ See Craig H. Hart, “Three Essential Parenting Principles,” BYU Magazine, Spring 2003.

⁴ Russell M. Neilson, “Hope of Israel,” Worldwide Youth Devotional, June 2018.

⁵ Matthew 5:48.

⁶ Russell M. Neilson, “I Love You,” A Message From the Prophet, January 2021.

⁷ See Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service “Lesson 2: The Plan of Salvation.”