

Handbook for Families

Teaching Children to Use Agency Wisely

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We have all been given the right to choose between good and evil. This agency is eternal and is as vital to our progression as are faith and repentance. The late President Marion G. Romney said, "Free agency means the freedom and power to choose and act. Next to life itself, it is man's most precious inheritance." (In *Ensign*, May 1976, p. 120.)

So important is the principle of agency that a great struggle occurred in our premortal existence to preserve it. Our Father in Heaven and Jesus Christ wanted us to be able to choose whether we would live according to their commandments. Lucifer would have denied us that opportunity to choose. (See **D&C 29:36; Moses 4:1–4; Abr. 3:22–28.**)

Parents have a responsibility, therefore, to teach their children the importance of agency and how to use it responsibly.

Explaining Agency

The scriptures make it clear that in order for moral agency to exist, four things are essential: laws, opposites, knowledge, and freedom to choose. (The entire second chapter of 2 Nephi explains the relationships of these four elements. [**2 Ne. 2**])

Laws. Before agency can be used, there must be certain rules or commandments given for us to follow. This is one reason our Father in Heaven and Jesus Christ have given us laws. Obeying these laws brings certain blessings; disobeying them results in negative consequences. (See **D&C 130:20–21.**)

Opposites. As the prophet Lehi taught, agency cannot exist unless there are choices to be made between opposites. (See **2 Ne. 2:11.**) Though not every choice we make in life is necessarily between right and wrong, we ultimately have to make the choice between good and evil. There are opposing forces that entice us to choose their way, but *we* make the decision.

Knowledge. In order to make wise choices, we must have a knowledge of what the choices are and of the consequences that attend them. Our ability to choose well improves as we learn which consequences come with which choices.

A simple object lesson may help young children understand this principle. Write various tasks on slips of paper, large enough to be easily read. Place these in a box or bowl and have the children choose a slip of paper while blindfolded. Then let them choose with their eyes open. Ask them which is the surer way of getting what they want. Point out

that while they *may* get what they want without looking, the chances of satisfaction are much greater when they can see the choices and know what they are choosing.

Freedom to Choose. There can be no agency without the freedom to make decisions. Agency, however, doesn't mean that we have unlimited choices. We are all limited to some extent by our situations and circumstances. We cannot choose, for instance, to be born in a different place, or to be born as a different person.

Similarly, we cannot be dishonest and expect to enter the kingdom of God. That blessing comes only to the honest. True freedom has always presupposed responsibility. As freedom to choose increases, so must responsibility.

On the other hand, we can lose freedom by making irresponsible choices. A student, for example, who chooses not to study and receives poor grades in high school cannot enter certain universities. Someone who chooses to break the Word of Wisdom may become addicted to alcohol, drugs, or tobacco. Those who choose to break civil laws lose their freedom and are put in prison. Likewise, those who break God's laws lose certain freedoms.

Whatever we choose to do—or not do—leads inevitably to a consequence. So, though we are free to choose, we are *not* free of consequences. As we use our agency, therefore, we cannot ignore consequences. Some consequences are more easily seen than others. This is one of the reasons the scriptures, prophets, and personal prayer are so important. “When we have the scriptures in our heart and our mind and our soul, then we have a means of measuring all things; we have a means of judging everything else.” (Arthur Henry King, *The Abundance of the Heart*, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986, p. 129.)

At times we must choose to be obedient to what the Lord has asked us even without knowing what may result, trusting that the consequences will be for our good.

Nurturing Agency

Foremost among the ways we parents teach our children the proper use of agency is our example. When we choose to live the gospel, we give our children powerful training in how to use their agency. They will learn even more from our example if we take time to talk to them about the choices we have made, how we feel about these choices, and the blessings we have received.

But example is often not enough. We also need to guide our children's use of agency. This must be done gently—with love, not force. Three-year-old Michael was getting ready for bed when he announced to his father, “I don't want to say my prayers tonight.” His father did not scold or shame him or try to force him to pray. He gently lifted Michael to his lap and said, “Michael, I would like to tell you why I say my prayers.” He then told of the blessings for which he wanted to thank Heavenly Father and of the good feeling he had when he asked our Heavenly Father to watch over him. Soon Michael was

naming his own blessings. After a while, he jumped down from his father's lap saying, "Now I want to say my prayers."

Without manipulating his son, the father simply and sincerely shared his own feelings about the importance of prayer—it could have been any worthy thing—and the child could sense his father's love, both for him and for Heavenly Father.

When a child has made a good choice, an earnest compliment will encourage future good choices. As we respond attentively, our children will then understand that we are concerned with their use of agency and that we have confidence that they can choose wisely. And the more specific the praise, the more guiding it will be: "Buying those sandals with your money instead of spending it on candy was a wise choice." Or "I admired how you were willing to help with the service project even when that ball game was on TV."

As with any training we do with our children, the positive encouragement and nurturing love we give them is more potent for good than any correction. But when correction is necessary, we should point out just why a choice was not a good one—without overdoing it. It is detrimental, even destructive, to go over and over the results of a poor choice or to use those devastating words: "I told you that would happen!" It is very easy to undermine a child's confidence, making him fearful about using his agency.

The earlier we can begin to teach the proper use of agency, the better. Even young children can begin to understand how to evaluate choices and consequences. Sometimes exploring ideas as a game can help get children thinking. One such game is called "What would happen if ... ?" It is played by suggesting a possible course of action and then having either a child or the whole family discuss the probable outcome. For example:

—What would happen if John consistently ran into the road without looking both ways?

—What would happen if Mary decided that she didn't want to go to Sunday School class any more?

Or take a question from both sides, such as:

—What would happen if Larry made up his mind never to break the Word of Wisdom?

—What would happen if Larry decided to try just a few drinks with his friends?

You also might ask questions about choosing between two things which may be neither wrong nor bad, like:

—What would happen if Marsha went to stay in the country with her cousin rather than staying home and attending summer camp with the other girls in the ward?

Allowing our children to come up with as much of the consequence as they can provides an effective learning experience. This should not be seen as a time for a sermon but as an important time for us to see how alert our children are regarding consequences and to kindly help them see consequences.

Aside from games, formal lessons, and talks together, children learn much about agency as they actually experience the consequences of their own choices. Of course, we would never allow anything to happen that would harm them either physically or spiritually. But if we constantly protect them from the consequences of poor choices, they will come to expect that kind of protection as a part of life. There are many ways we can allow our children to experience the consequences of their choices without being hurt physically or spiritually.

For example, if a son has saved enough money to attend Scout camp but then spends most of that money with his friends, it may be better to have him miss the camp than to give him the necessary money. Or if a daughter who has procrastinated doing a history report for several weeks suddenly bursts into tears the night before it is due and asks us to help her write it, we should try to help her understand why it is even too late for us to help. We can also explain to her why we feel it is right that she experience the consequences of her procrastination.

Though it is hard for many parents, letting children suffer the consequences of their own mistakes will help them become strong. Letting children off the hook—for even well-meant reasons—will only warp childrens' notions of reality. Letting them suffer the consequences will teach them that they are responsible for their choices and will be held accountable for them. It is a clear message of trust and respect.

Finally, we may wish to discuss family rules to help our children see how they are allowed the use of agency within the bounds of their age, maturity, and sense of responsibility.

The ability to use agency wisely is necessary to achieve our eternal potential as individuals and as families. As we teach and exemplify this principle to our children, we prepare them for the challenges they will face in mortality and train them to use their agency to make choices that will allow them to return one day to our Father in Heaven.

Gospel topics: agency, teaching

[illustrations] Illustrated by Ted Heninger