**Raising Peacemakers in a Polarized World**

President Russell Nelson has emphasized the importance of peacemaking, explaining that all of us need to learn to “disagree better”. This is a special challenge for children growing up in a world divided by constant polarization and division. And yet, they are now being called upon to help a world in desperate need of peacemakers and healers. How do we help kids learn to negotiate the opposing winds that would pull them towards “othering” and attacking those with a different belief?

I believe there are four peacemaking ‘superpowers’ kids need to to help themselves and those around them. First, they need to learn self- discipline and problem solving skills, best nurtured through **Collaborative Parenting**. Secondly, they learn to approach others with **Intentional** **Curiosity**. Third, they grow in their critical thinking as they balance **Comfortable Contraries**. Finally, they engage those around them as they master the art of **Constructive Conversations** at critical moments.

Let us now take each of these in order.

**Collaborative Parenting**

If you are a parent, I would ask: what would you say is parenting job #1? Outside of keeping them safe, clothed and properly fed, what is your major responsibility? And while there are many good answers, most of us would agree that the main goal of most any parent is to see their kids grow into productive, problem-solving adults—all the while doing it with kindness and compassion for those around them.

It almost goes without saying, then, that the best place to learn those important life skills is by seeing them modeled at home. Parenting that teaches kids self-discipline and problem solving is called Collaborative Parenting (CP).

Put simply, collaboration involves working with children to establish both house rules and goals, as well as the consequences implemented when rules are broken. These rules are the result of discussions between parents and child about why a particular rule is needed and finding the best way to respond when a rule is broken. Rules and consequences need to be individual in nature, based on the age and personality of each child. Someone once said that if we were to punish three teens the exact same way, we are probably abusing two of them! For this reason, they may need to be individually adapted. They also need to be dynamic, open to change as parents and children learn what is working and what is not.

Generally, house rules are best discussed in regular family meetings where everyone has input. Keeping these meetings short and uncomplicated is critical. Attention spans are short—and this is just the parents!

A sample framework would be:

1. What is the problem?
2. What would help solve it?
3. Who is going to be responsible for what?
4. What should happen when that doesn’t happen?
5. When do we come back and see if it working?

The purposes for CP go far beyond simply making sure the dishes get done. At its core, you are 1) modeling ways to involve everyone’s input, 2) having children take ownership of the problem as well as the solution and 3) teaching them how to negotiate with those who see the problem differently—all core elements of peace building. They will also learn that solutions can be fluid, requiring regular alterations as they are implimented.

**Intentional Curiosity**

Ever wonder why people do the things they do? Especially when they do something we disagree with? Or do form an immediate assumption that WE know why THEY are doing it. The first rule of basic peacebuilding seeks first to understand before acting. In a vacuum of information, one group is often too quick to assign motive in another, then act on that assumption.

I believe that one benefit of Collaborative Parenting is that it creates a forum for children to ask questions of one another—mediated by parents—searching for “why” a sibling wants something different from them. Parents can model a genuine curiosity about someone’s differing opinion or choice. Asking sincere questions, with an attitude of warmth and kindness sets the stage for different viewpoints to be part of a decision process. They show children how it feels to be heard and then work out a possible solution.

Condemnation, on the other hand, is curiosity’s destructive cousin. It tends towards a quick assumption, boiling down any difference to a simple right or wrong, good or bad. It leaves little room for compromise when there appears to be only one morally superior option. In addition, condemning rarely springs up without a strong emotional response in its wake. Anger and hatred thrive when we move to judgement without full understanding.

It should also be noted that one other form of question, interrogation, is simply phony curiosity. An prominent attorney once famously stated that he never asks a question he doesn’t already know the answer to. With interrogation, you only ask questions that lead someone to answer the way you want them to. You put them on their heels and then fire away. *“And so, Mike, do you remember just what you said to the store clerk last night? And then what did I say!? And then what did you do, hmmm*?” No curiosity intended here, only a desire to make an emotional attack and score points to win the argument.

Again, kind and intentional curiousity honestly seeks to understand the thinking and motives of others. It has, at its core, as desire to find real solutions everybody can live with.

**Comfortable Contraries**

An old martial arts idea states: Peace is not the absence of conflict; Peace is the acceptance of conflict. Jared Halverson, professor at BYU, has written eloquently about the need we have to balance eternal contraries. Contraries are two truths that appear to be at odds with one another. Bro Halverson quotes Joseph Smith, who taught: By proving contraries, truth is made manifest. Examples of eternal contraries include:

***Tree of Life vs Tree of Knowledge***

***Faith vs Works***

***Mind vs Heart***

***Institutional Revelation vs Personal Revelation***

***Justice vs Mercy***

***Agency vs Commandments***

***Trust vs Verify***

Without going into great detail in this article, the demands of two contrary truths pull us into a place, a messy middle, where we must take into consideration elements of both truths as we negotiate each current situation. Of a necessity, we will then lean more to one side while leaning away from the other. Working inside that messy middle requires good critical thinking but also careful collaboration with those around us.

Budding peacemakers must learn how to balance the demands of competing truths. They keep respect for both even while favoring one over the other. This respectful balance stands in stark contrast to a world shouting out its competing ideas and then choosing clear winners and losers. For this reason, peacemakers are critical thinkers who understand that peace is management of constant conflict, carefully balancing both at the same time. It is for this reason that parents who simply collaborate with children on the establishment of house rules help model a loving respect for different opinions without condemnation and and form a single path forward.

**Critical Conversations**

Finally, peacemaking requires an ability to have difficult conversations at critical moments. Joseph Grenny et al, have framed this discussion well in their book Crucial Conversations (Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High: 2023, McGraw Hill).

Critical conversations consist of three essential elements: difference of opinions, high emotion and high stakes. These dynamics lie at the very core of any and all peacemaking efforts. These discussions are also the ones avoided most often because of the potential for conflict and misunderstanding.

When parents consider starting family meetings to set the rules of the house, it is these conversations they might dread the most! (*Isn’t just easier to set all the rules and decide the punishments? This seems so messy!)* And yet, for a child to see the problem and then have a productive exchange they need to feel heard and were part of the plan moving forward. Those discussions are often the best training they can receive growing up.

It is for this reason, that productive dialogues are the sturdy foundation of healthy relationships!

The illustration below explains the process leading to these healthy interactions.



As seen above, we all act emotionally to the stories we are telling ourselves about what we heard and saw. Whether we act those emotions out externally or stuffed them back down inside, our reaction rarely turns out well. Poor responses can quickly destroy good relationships and make peace impossible. Alternatively, ongoing productive discussions can promote closer connections as they build trust and openness.

For peace to exist in presence of disagreement and opposing ideas, it must first take place where there is mutual trust. In the home, kids that are able to collaborate with their parents in the formation of house rules and consequences tend to be more trusting and more open.