# Chapter 5: Understanding and Influencing a Child's Heart

This chapter focuses on understanding and influencing a child's heart. The Influence Pyramid is introduced as a diagnostic tool for identifying the real problems in families and relationships. The pyramid consists of four levels: having a heart at peace, building relationships of influence, building relationships with the child, and correcting from the top of the pyramid. The chapter also explores connections between the influence pyramid and evidence-based theories such as family systems theory and bioecological systems theory. It emphasizes the importance of parents' hearts and attitudes in influencing their children's behavior and outcomes. The study guide questions include understanding the family systems theory, bioecological systems theory, and how they relate to the influence pyramid.

### Learning Outcomes

At the end of this chapter, you will be able to do the following:

* Evaluate connections between the influence pyramid and evidence-based theories.
* Recall communication skills that build relationships.
* Recall ways to work with and counsel with children.
* Evaluate ways to correct from the top of the pyramid.
* Evaluate a parenting situation and identify principles and applications that parents could utilize.

## The Influence Pyramid

### Back Where We Began

At the beginning ofThe Anatomy of Peace, Lou is frustrated and annoyed with the news that he and the other parents in the room are Yusuf and Avi's primary concern—not their children. Upon hearing this Lou thought, "Great, a waste of time" (Arbinger Institute, 2015).

Yusuf then goes on to draw the Influence Pyramid diagram on the whiteboard in front of the room. But he tells the group of parents that they’re not ready to learn about all the details yet. He says, “This overall structure will help us to discover a fundamental change that must occur in us if we are going to invite change in others.”

### Wanting the Consequences of What We Want

Now that you have finished the book, it is probably clear why the parents were not initially ready to consider the pyramid in detail. As current and future parents, and those who will work with parents, once we more readily recognize our blame, self-excusing, justification, and other signs of a hard heart, then what? First of all, if you have noticed any inner signs that something is off and you want to do something about it, you should consider this a critical first step worth applauding. Until we see ourselves—including our hearts and motives—as they really are, we will forever be stuck.

Hopefully, by now you've been able to see that merely equipping parents with large amounts of parenting knowledge and skills—even if it is evidence-based—is likely to only help parents change their behaviors rather than their attitudes. Without this attitudinal and inward self-reflection and change, neither parents nor children will truly change. As the French author Jacques Lusseryran so profoundly wrote the following: "Our fate is shaped from within ourselves outward, never from without inward" (Lusseyran, 2016).

This is why we (including Yusuf and Avi) have spent so much time trying to explore our inward selves - our hearts. Which leads us back to the importance of our desires found in the heart. When our hearts are not right, our only desire is to be right, to be justified, to blame, to defend our ego, and so forth. So if a child speaks disrespectfully, or doesn't do her chores, or stays out past curfew, then a parent may feel compelled to become hardened and self-focused. In reality, the condition of their heart and what they focus on is under their control. The parent may be right in their positions in these different scenarios, but if being right is all they care about, then they will get what they want: being right and being justified. But they had better also want the consequences of this heart condition. In other words, when a parent chooses a heart at war toward their child, they are also choosing the consequences of such a condition regardless of the rationalizations they are telling themselves. Latter-day Saint scripture also teaches this same principle: “For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, **according to the desire** of their hearts [emphasis added]” (D&C 137:9).

### True Success in Parenting

Returning to some of Elder Bednar's thoughts from earlier in the course, we cannot rely on external indicators for measuring our success. This means parents should not rely on external indicators—such as whether or not their son served a mission, if their daughter dresses modestly, or anything else—to measure how successful they are in their roles. So what, then, is a more healthy measurement of how well parents are doing?

Nate Mitchell—the clinical director for The Anasazi Foundation (the organization upon which Camp Moriah is based)—is a real-life Yusuf or Avi. When working with the teens and parents at Anasazi, he often asks parents to imagine how God will interview them about their children. Nate suggests that God won’t ask about whether or not all our children went to church, if they did drugs, and so on. What he believes God will ask parents is this important question: **“Did you learn to love them?**... That’s why I put that person in your life, in a very specific way, so that you could learn how to love the way that I love” (Mitchell, 2022).

What Nate suggests is something that is much more difficult than merely trying to get children to behave. This demands all of our heart, might, mind, and strength.

### Study Guide Question

What does Clinical Director Nate Mitchell believe God will ask parents?

### Master the Pyramid

Nate also claims that if parents allow anything (for example, drugs, obedience, serving a mission, and so on) to become more important than the relationship and the connection, then they "have it upside down." What is upside down? Perhaps it is a reference to the influence pyramid you learned about this week.

It is quite instructive that the vast majority of The Anatomy of Peacehas focused on the heart, or way of being. This is by design as any parenting principle or strategy without a change of heart would only invite resistance. This is also why this course has not delved into "how to raise and discipline children" (applications) just yet.

The influence pyramid is one of the most effective diagnostic tools for understanding where the real problems are in families and other relationships. This also means it is one of the most effective tools for prescribing the proper solutions. It is highly encouraged that you not only memorize the various pyramid levels and major lessons of the pyramid, but also that you understand what they mean and how to use them. If you can increase your mastery of employing this pyramid, you will be well on your way to being a top-notch clinician, educator, spouse, and parent.

## Connections to the Pyramid

Now that you are familiar with the pyramid, let’s discuss some important behavioral theories and concepts that relate to principles from the pyramid and how they can be applied to parenting. You have likely learned about these theories in previous courses, so we will only discuss each one briefly and how they relate to the influence pyramid. If you have not learned about any of these theories before, we encourage you to research them on your own—you can easily find more information online.

### Family Systems Theory

When understanding the family, the family systems theory has proven to be very powerful. The family systems theory conceptualizes the family as a complex, dynamic, and changing collection of parts, subsystems, and family members. Each part of the system (each family member and each relationship) affects the other parts of the system and ultimately the entire family (Laff & Ruiz, 2019).

From the family systems perspective, we can see that when one family member changes, the entire family is impacted. This might remind you of Paul’s teachings in 1 Corinthians, that we are members of one body in Christ: “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26).

When one child misbehaves, it can negatively affect the whole family. On the other hand, if a parent chooses to have a heart at peace, that parent can have a positive impact on the family. Also, the family systems perspective helps us to see that the parents’ marriage relationship, and all other family relationships, can affect the parent-child relationship as well as the child.

In short, the bottom three levels of the Influence Pyramid—having a heart at peace, building relationships of influence, and building relationships with the child—are crucial to helping the family system run smoothly.

### Bioecological Systems Theory

One of the key theories that helps explain influences on children and families is Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory. A basic tenet of this theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is that child and youth development is influenced by many different “contexts,” “settings,” or “ecologies” (for example, family, peers, schools, communities, sociocultural belief systems, policy regimes, and the economy).

As an example, let’s imagine that you are a parent who has a daughter struggling in math. If you want to understand your daughter’s struggles in math, you can’t simply look at what challenges she faces directly with the subject. You have to look at her relationship with the teacher and other students. Maybe she thinks the teacher is too demanding or doesn’t explain the concepts very well. Maybe the other students are impatient with her or make fun of her because she takes a long time to do her work. Perhaps the teacher is responding to regulations made by the school, such as new expectations for students in math or constraints on time that interfere with the teacher’s ability to instruct (Paris et al., 2019). Do you see how it could help to build relationships with your daughter’s math teacher and also her classmates? Would it help to meet with the teacher and explain your concerns? Could you encourage your daughter to invite one or two of her classmates over to play so that they can become friends and be more understanding and compassionate toward her?

You can see that there are many influential relationships in a child’s life. Parents can seek to build relationships with those who have influence on the child (for example, friends, teachers, church leaders), which will in turn help their children reach their potential (Laff & Ruiz, 2019).

### Study Guide Questions

* What is the family systems theory?
* What is the bioecological systems theory?
* How do the family systems theory and bioecological theory relate to the influence Pyramid?

### Circumplex Model

The circumplex model of marital and family systems is evidence-based and helps us to better understand the important components of healthy family functioning. Over 200 concepts related to marriage and family were condensed into three main components: “cohesion, flexibility, and communication” (Olson et al., 2019). As these three components are described, see if you can find connections to all of the pyramid levels (Olson, 1986).

**Cohesion**is the emotional bonding within family relationships, and the level of cohesion is determined by family members’ perspectives on the amount of togetherness versus separateness in their relationships. At one end of the cohesion continuum is “disengaged” and at the other end is “enmeshed.” Theorists found that families who struggled were typically at one end or the other, so a balanced approach is recommended. The balanced levels can range from “somewhat connected” to “connected” to “very connected.” The level of cohesion is determined by each family’s dynamics and their cultural norms, not by an outsider’s perspective (Olson et al., 2019).

So, as we discuss building relationships and the importance of quality time together, that doesn’t mean that you should spend every free moment with your family. A healthy balance is key—some time together (being fully present and engaged) is important, but it’s also important to set boundaries for time away from each other. This can be hard, especially if you have young children! But, just as Christ found time to nourish His spirit away from the multitudes, we each need to make time to nourish our spirits (find out-of-the-box space), relying on the Spirit’s guidance and help from others. Let’s remember King Benjamin’s words of wisdom as he counseled the people to care for the poor and needy (which includes our children):

Mosiah 4:27

And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength. And again, it is expedient that he should be diligent, that thereby he might win the prize; therefore, all things must be done in order.

**Flexibility** is the adaptability to change in family relationships, leadership, and rules. At one end of the flexibility continuum is “chaotic” and at the other end is “rigid.” As with cohesion, families who struggle are often at either end of the continuum, and healthy functioning families are somewhere in between - at the “very flexible,” “flexible,” or “somewhat flexible” levels. Families need to find a balance between stability and change. As children grow and reach different developmental stages, family rules may need to change and parents may need to give their children more autonomy. If a parent goes back to school, the entire family system needs to readjust and adapt to this change (Olson et al., 2019).

Parents who are too rigid in their rules—who don’t include their children (as appropriate) in decision-making and problem-solving—might run into more problems in the family system and their relationships with their children. We can see how this relates to the authoritarian parenting style. On the other hand, parents who have a chaotic family environment (the permissive or uninvolved parenting styles) where anything goes, will also likely find that their family and their children struggle. Children and families need both flexibility and structure to feel safe and secure.

Notice that there is no one right level of cohesion or flexibility—there is a wide range of balanced approaches on the continuums. There’s no need to compare your family to how other families do things. The key is to find the level that helps your unique family feel balanced. The Holy Ghost can guide you and help you sense what feels right for your family and make changes when something comes up and your family gets thrown off balance. Every family will have times when their cohesion and/or flexibility are at one end of the continuum—when there’s a big move, a baby born, a job change, sickness, and so on. But if your family’s norm is a balanced approach, and communication is high, it can be easier to get back to balance when those circumstances arise.

**Communication**is the component that helps families find the optimal level of cohesion and flexibility for their unique circumstances and needs. Communication includes respect, empathy, active listening, speaking, clarity, staying on topic, and self-disclosure. Studies have shown that families with balanced levels of cohesion and flexibility are likely to have high levels of communication (Olson, 1986). Parents and children need to communicate their boundaries, needs, and messages of love in order to have peace in their hearts and to build strong relationships. They need to communicate and counsel together on expectations and rules and how to solve issues that arise. You can see how vital it is for parents and children to learn effective communication skills.

### Study Guide Questions

* What are the three components of the circumplex model of marital and family systems?
* How can understanding the circumplex model help you to apply the pyramid levels effectively?

### Treat Your Child As a Guest

Dr. Haim Ginott was a renowned child psychologist from the 1950s and 1960s. His ideas in his book,Between Parent and Child, were groundbreaking and very non-behavioral.

Dr. Ginott challenges parents to consider how they treat their guests. When you have a guest over and she spills a glass of milk, do you scold her or threaten her, or do you say, “Here, let me help you clean it up”? If your guest forgets his umbrella, do you lecture him about his forgetfulness or compare him to another guest, or do you say, “No problem, you can use mine”?

What if we were to treat our children as guests, considerate of their feelings and their needs, even when—or especially when—things go wrong?

### Give the “Most Generous Interpretation”

This is a principle taught by Dr. Becky Kennedy in her book, Good Inside (2022), and it goes along with Ginott’s principle of treating our children as guests. When a guest makes a mistake or something goes wrong, don’t we tend to make the most generous interpretation of our guest’s actions or of the situation? If he spills milk, we probably don’t think, “He’s so clumsy and messy!” If he’s running late for an activity, we likely don’t say to ourselves, “He’s so inconsiderate and slow!” We see our guest as a good person who might have made an error or got caught in a bad situation.

We can also give the most generous interpretations of our children and circumstances, just as we do with guests. We can see our children as good people—children of God—who might have made mistakes or gotten stuck in tricky situations. We can separate our children’s worth from their behaviors, loving our children no matter what their behaviors might be. Before we correct our children, let’s give the most generous interpretation of them and of the situation. This will help us to have the Spirit with us—to have a heart at peace—and correct with love.

### The Five Love Languages

In The Anatomy of Peace, Yusuf teaches about the importance of building relationships, and he challenges the parents to consider what their children enjoy doing and what they could do to spend more time with them. Quality time is an important element in building relationships. But what are some other ways to get the message of love across as we seek to “help things go right”? (Arbinger Institute, 2015)

According to marriage counselor Gary Chapman, there are five types of love languages—ways that people (adults and children alike) receive the message that someone else loves them. The five love languages are “physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, and acts of service (Chapman, 1992).” (Al-Mohtadi et al., 2019)

First, consider how you have received messages of love from your perfect parent, Heavenly Father. You have likely felt His love through the power of the Holy Ghost—it might have felt like a warm blanket surrounding you or a feeling of peace inside your heart (physical touch). You may have even heard or felt Him speak to you and express His love to you, and your patriarchal blessing (Heavenly Father’s words directly to you) and in the scriptures may have affirmed His love for you (words of affirmation). As you have prayed to Him, studied His words in the scriptures and from the prophets, and worshipped in Sacrament meeting and in the temple, you may have sensed His love for you (quality time). You have likely received many blessings and seen miracles in your life that you know came from your loving Heavenly Father (gifts and acts of service). In each of these different ways, you have likely been filled and strengthened with His divine love for you.

While we can feel loved through all of these languages, there might be one or two that help us to receive the message of love most strongly. What language helps you to feel the most loved by Heavenly Father and by others? As we discuss each of these, consider what your love languages are, and if you have children, what theirs might be. Also, it’s likely that the way you show love to others is your main love language, and the same may be true for your children (Chapman, 2015).

**Physical touch** might include a hug, a kiss, a pat on the back, or maybe a tickle. It can differ depending on the family’s culture and individual preferences. Physical affection can help children feel safe and loved, and a mother’s loving touch can calm anxiety and strengthen a child’s self-esteem (Maximo & Carranza, 2016). One mother would often rub her son’s back when she was on the phone with her friends. He looked forward to those phone calls, and it was an easy, but effective, way for the mom to show love to her son.

**Words of affirmation** send the message of love with the words, “I love you” or words of encouragement, compliments, and gratitude. A parent’s words greatly impact children, and parents need to affirm their children’s divine worth, efforts, and strengths. A mother was struggling to heal her relationship with her teenage son, and she found that sending him simple, heartfelt text messages of love gradually helped to soften his heart and repair their relationship. A father’s letters to his children helped him to send messages of love in an impactful way. Words are powerful and can affirm to children that their parents love them and that they are safe in that love. Refer back to Chapter 1 for examples of growth-minded praise—these can also be words of affirmation to your child.

**Quality time**. Studies indicate that quality time from both parents may be the most important love language in building a child’s resilience (Maximo & Carranza, 2016). Research also highlights the importance of quality time in father-son relationships in particular, especially roughhousing and other physically stimulating activities (Maximo & Carranza, 2016). Not only do these playful activities build relationships, but they also teach boys to regulate their emotions and behaviors and can strengthen their resilience. A father and his children loved playing the Get Past game. He would sit in the middle of the hallway, and his children would run down the hallway, trying to get past him. As they would get close to him, he would playfully tackle them and wrestle them down. They would play the game over and over again. They loved these wrestling sessions—it was their way of feeling loved by their dad.

Young children especially need their parents’ attention often. Mindful quality time together (being fully present, nonjudgmental, and compassionate) can help children feel special and can also help parents to better understand their child’s interests and needs. One mother was so frustrated with her son who was misbehaving frequently. A friend suggested that she carve out five minutes a day to spend one-on-one with him. The mother decided to try it—she and her son would spend five minutes a day, right after she put her toddler down for a nap, doing something they both agreed on. The activity was often something as simple as hunting for rocks in the backyard. Even though it was only five minutes a day of quality time (that was what she could manage), the mother started seeing a big improvement in her son’s behavior. He felt loved and special, secure in his relationship with his mom and his place in the family, so he didn’t feel the need to act out.

**Receiving gifts** is another way children can feel loved. The gift doesn’t need to be expensive or unique, but a thoughtful gift can strengthen relationships. A mother knew that her son liked a particular kind of Goldfish crackers (a kind that she usually didn’t buy because it wasn’t as healthy), so occasionally she would buy a box just for him as a surprise gift. Even though receiving gifts wasn’t her love language, she could tell that it was her son’s love language because he gave gifts to others when he wanted to show love, and he always seemed to appreciate receiving gifts more than the other love languages. The parents also felt impressed to create a photo book for him, filled with pictures of happy times together, to send him a message of love that he could hold onto.

**Acts of Service**. Parents might prepare their child’s breakfast before she leaves for school or help her with her homework when she’s struggling. A father helped his daughter who was feeling sick—he gave her medicine, rubbed ointment on her feet, and saw to her needs, even though he himself was sick. These simple acts sent a strong message to his daughter that he loved her, even though the words, “I love you” weren’t spoken.

If parents learn their children’s love languages, they can effectively help their children feel loved. Remember, from our discussion about unconditional parenting, what’s important is how the children perceivetheir parents’ love, not just how much parents actually love their children. Parents need to recognize how their children feel loved—what love languages resonate with them—and speak those languages. And, as you can see from some of the examples above, when we build the relationship, often the top level of the pyramid—correction—is no longer needed, or at least is needed much less frequently.

Dr. Becky Kennedy (2022) teaches that you might think of each moment of connection as a deposit into the child’s emotional bank account. Each time you connect with and send a message of love to your child, you’re making deposits into their account. When children’s account balances are high, they tend to feel safe, loved, significant, and confident. And when they feel good inside, they tend to do better on the outside. Each time we make a request, direction, or correction, we make a withdrawal from their account. So we need to make sure their account balances stay high with lots of messages of love and moments of connection. Otherwise, when we do make a request, direction, or correction, we’re trying to draw from our children’s empty emotional accounts, and they are more likely to resent us and resist whatever we ask or tell them to do.

### Study Guide Questions

* What does Dr. Ginott challenge parents to do?
* What principle does Dr. Kennedy teach parents that relates to Dr. Ginott's principle?
* What are the five love languages?
* What love language(s) could you use to strengthen your relationship with the child/teen from your term project?
* What could you do to regularly fill the child/teen's emotional bank account?

### Active Listening

Active listening, or we might say listening with mindfulness (being fully present, nonjudgmental, and compassionate) will help us to build relationships and prepare to teach and correct, if necessary.

Active listening involves three basic steps: acknowledge, restate, and clarify. Underlying the words that are said and the body language shown is the mindful attitude of complete acceptance toward your child.

**Acknowledge**. Acknowledge your child—acknowledge how she is feeling and seek to feel what she feels. Show interest in what she is saying, even if you might not agree. Avoid jumping in and taking over the conversation—just listen with Christlike love and curiosity.

**Restate**. Restate, or reflect back, what your child is telling you while paying attention to both her words and her body language. If your daughter says, “I can’t believe my teacher is so mean—I got in trouble just for saying hi to my friend!”, you might restate what she said with empathy and understanding like this: “You got in trouble just for saying hi—I can see how frustrated you are with your teacher.”

**Clarify**. You can seek to understand your child even more by asking clarifying questions, such as, “So what did your teacher do?” and “What did you do?”

You can see how this simple, but powerful, listening technique can build your relationship with your child, helping her to feel heard, understood, and accepted no matter what. As Yusuf teaches, if we are to be effective teachers, we need to first be effective listeners and learners. We need to understand children’s underlying needs, desires, and capabilities before we know what they need to be taught or if correction is needed.

### Emotion Coaching

Emotion coaching is a concept that was introduced by Dr. John Gottman, a well-known relationship researcher. Parents who coach their children through their emotions are aware of moments of low-intensity emotions (both in themselves and in their children), see negative emotions as teaching and connection opportunities, name emotions, validate emotions, and coach their children on appropriate ways to deal with emotions and emotional situations. Emotion coaching can strengthen parent-child relationships and help both parents and children increase their emotion regulation skills.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, emotions—both the parents' and the child's—are one of the most difficult things to navigate. Depending on the condition of our hearts and our associated emotions, we can see the exact same situation in very different ways. One lens might see a child refusing to complete their chores and throwing a tantrum as something that needs to be stamped out. Another lens might see this as an opportunity to connect, teach, and empathize to help the child process emotions effectively and understand the why of doing their part to take care of the home.

Emotions were given to us by the Lord. Some parents try to dismiss or even criticize the emotional expressions of their children. However, this only teaches children to mistrust their feelings and not know how to handle negative emotions in the future. In short, we want our children to be responsible for their emotions and the actions that can accompany such emotions.

In the process of disciplining (in other words, patiently teaching) our children, we should see our emotional children as matter unorganized—remember, their brains are still under construction. If we want to avoid whining and complaining at all time while producing responsible, hard-working children, we are going to be sorely disappointed.

Remember the house analogy from the previous chapter? When we let our emotions take over, the staircase to our upstairs brain (our thinking brain that manages our emotions) gets disconnected. For most of us, our upstairs brain is fully developed and functioning, but for children, their upstairs brain is still under construction until their mid-20s. Let’s keep that in mind the next time a child throws a tantrum, or when a teen gets angry. Let’s give our children and teens grace—their brains are still developing.

Here’s a simple way to remember how to coach children through their emotions (or, in other words, strengthen their staircases to the upstairs brain) and correct them effectively when needed: **Awareness, Acceptance, and Action**. This three-step process is an emotion coaching method adapted from Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Childby Dr. John Gottman and Joan DeClaire and Positive Discipline instructors Steven Foster and Arlene Raphael (Foster et al., 2011; Gottman & DeClaire, 1998). You might find it is similar to the Getting-out-of-the-box process in The Anatomy of Peace, but this emotion coaching approach can be used for all undesirable emotions, whether in-the-box or out-of-the-box, and to help you connect with and correct your child. Also, you might notice similarities between emotion coaching and active listening—you definitely want to use active listening skills to coach your children through their emotions, but active listening can also be used in non-emotional moments (such as listening to your child talk about his day), while emotion coaching is focused on those moments when you notice your child is experiencing emotions.

1. **Awareness**: Notice when your child’s staircase is getting disconnected—when her emotions and feelings are starting to take over. The earlier you notice these emotions and start these steps, the easier it will be for her staircase to reconnect.

Help her label her feelings (describing each feeling with one word) by saying things like:

* It looks like you’re feeling frustrated.
* You’re feeling overwhelmed.
* You seem angry.

If you’re sincerely trying to understand your child and her emotions, she will correct you if you guess incorrectly. Notice how this step is a practice in mindfulness, mentalization, and active listening. In this step, you’re not only gaining awareness of your child’s feelings, but you’re also aware that this is an opportunity to teach her important emotion management skills.

2. **Acceptance**: As you develop awareness of how your child is feeling, listen with empathy and validate her feelings. You want her to see that you’re taking off your shoes for her—you’re trying to understand her feelings, why she’s experiencing those emotions, and what her needs and desires are. All emotions are valid, and the child needs to know that you accept her no matter how she is feeling. Dr. Ginott teaches the “You wish” technique as a way to help your child feel felt.

You might say something like:

* You’re feeling frustrated because your brother took your toy away. You wish he would give it back.
* You’re feeling overwhelmed because you’re tired and hungry from a long day at school. You wish you could rest instead of doing your chores.
* You’re feeling angry because I asked you to turn off the TV and you want to keep watching. I love watching shows too, and it can be hard to stop watching when the show is really good.

3. **Action**: Help your child find an appropriate way to solve or deal with the issue. If your child’s staircase is still disconnected from her upstairs thinking brain, you’ll want to take action to help her staircase reconnect. With your heart at peace, let the Holy Ghost guide you to know what your child needs and if you need to take further action. Sometimes, all that’s needed are the first two steps—Awareness and Acceptance—for the child to feel safe, loved, and ready to move past the big emotions and on to the daily activities. If correction is needed (if the child’s misbehavior needs to be addressed), counsel with your child and decide on a solution together. We’ll discuss this more in the next section.

Here are some examples of how to take action:

* **Use positive time-out**:It’s okay to feel frustrated. Let’s listen to music [or read a book or snuggle on the bed, whatever your child has decided **beforehand**is her way of calming down—more on that below] in your room until you feel better, and then let’s talk about what we can do when he takes your toys.
* **Meet your child’s needs**:Let me get you a snack so you can feel better. Then we’ll talk about the chores.
* **If your child’s behavior was inappropriate**:It’s okay to feel angry. It’s not okay to throw the TV remote at me. After you’re calm, we can talk about what we can do differently next time so nobody gets hurt.

In her book,Positive Discipline, Dr. Nelsen talks about creating a Wheel of Choice with young children. Parents can draw a circle on a piece of paper and draw lines to create four or five pie-shaped segments. In each segment, the child can draw a picture or write down what he can do to calm down the next time he’s experiencing big emotions (like anger, sadness, or frustration). Then, in the middle of an emotional moment, the parent can show the child the Wheel of Choice or refer to it and ask, “Would you like to \_\_\_\_?” pointing to one of the choices.

Here are some ideas for the Wheel of Choice (that you might want to try too!), many of which are evidence-based ways to deactivate the fight-flight alarm in the downstairs brain so your child feels safe and calm:

* Two-hand calming: One hand on your stomach, the other hand over your heart.
* Deep breathing (you can model this for your child by doing this yourself and saying something like, “I’m going to take a deep breath so I can calm myself”):
	+ Lie down, put a stuffed animal on your tummy, and watch it move up and down.
	+ Pretend you have a cup of hot chocolate. Breathe in deeply to smell the hot chocolate and breathe out through your mouth to blow the steam away.
	+ Put your hand on your tummy and watch your hand slowly move in and out.
* Prayer (you might ask your child if she wants you to say a prayer, asking for Heavenly Father’s help)
* Positive time-out: Make a cool-down spot with your favorite toys, books, music, or pictures
* A scripture, quote, or mantra: A scripture like “I can do all things through Christ” or a mantra like “I am loved” can tell your downstairs brain that you are safe
* Imagine your favorite place or vacation
* Drink a glass of water
* Do 10 jumping jacks or high knees

Once the child is calm, parents can take the opportunity to teach and communicate appropriate behavior and, if needed, counsel with the child on how to solve the problem.

### Study Guide Questions

* What is active listening, and what are the three basic steps?
* What is the three-step process that can be used to coach a child through their emotions?

### Working With and Counseling With Children

Research has shown that when children are brought into the decision-making process they are less likely to complain about the implementation of the decision, more likely to stay committed to the decision, and more likely to comply with other requests. At the base of councils is seeing our children as people. Otherwise, if they are merely vehicles, then we may hold onto all the decision-making power because we are the parents.

In the April 2016 General Conference, Elder M. Russell Ballard taught the why, what, and how of family councils in his talk, "Family Councils." You are welcome to study the talk, but for this lesson, you will only be required to study this short article by Celeste Davis.

Study "[The Beginner’s Guide to Family Councils](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/inspiration/the-beginners-guide-to-family-councils?lang=eng)". As you read the article, ponder on how family councils can help you effectively implement all the levels of the pyramid.

### Study Guide Question

What insights did you gain from studying "The Beginner's Guide to Family Councils"?

Family councils are also terrific opportunities to bring children in on the rule-making process. This doesn't mean that children should have the final say about family rules, but they can at least have the first word. Parents might have their family councils on Sunday nights or some other time when the whole family is home. At the beginning of each school year, parents can prepare an agenda to elicit ideas from children about family rules for the school year. Parents would be more effective if they drew boundaries about what is permissible and what is not.

For example, parents could have a list of non-negotiables such as that the house needs to be cleaned daily and more deep cleaned on Saturdays; that screen time should be limited each day; and that family prayer and scripture study needs to occur each day (of course, parents would want to teach the why behind each of these). Then the children can be brought in on helping to determine the when, where, what, who, and how of each of the non-negotiables. After setting rules for the home as a family, they will need to be revisited from time to time to determine how things are going and if any alterations need to be made.

In the next section, you’ll learn more about the principle of counseling together and how it can be applied to the Correction level of the pyramid.

## Correction

We have finally come to our discussion of the top level of the pyramid, perhaps the hardest level to implement effectively—correction. Let’s discuss a few principles that can help you correct in a Christlike way.

### Connect Before You Correct

When correction is needed, an important principle taught by Dr. Jane Nelsen is to **connect before you correct**(Nelsen, 2013).

Of course, sometimes there are moments when immediate correction is necessary. If your young child is about to run into a busy street or throw a rock at a friend, you will need to step in right away to keep everyone safe. You might need to grab his hand, carry him away from danger, or take the rock away to keep him from hurting his friend. But as you’re doing it, or immediately after, it’s important to “[show forth] an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy” (D&C 121:43).

As much as possible, make sure you put your child’s worth and your relationship first, by connecting before **and** after you give any corrections. You can do this by validating your child’s emotions with Christlike love in your heart. We’ll discuss this more in the section about emotion coaching.

### Consider Your Options

There are several ways of correcting and dealing with misbehavior and poor decisions, and the choice depends on the root of the problem. Here are some suggestions (all of these should be applied by using doctrinally-based principles such as Christlike love, relying on guidance from the Holy Ghost, and the principles just introduced).

**Ignore the misbehavior**. Parents can simply ignore a child or teen’s undesirable behavior, **especially when they don’t have control over it and/or it’s expected for that child’s stage of development**—for example, a child’s messy bedroom, bad table manners, fighting over toys (as long as nobody is in danger of getting hurt), or a teen’s eye-rolling.

Parents of teens might struggle to get their teen to go to church or school, or participate in family home evening or family scripture study. As hard it as may be, they may need to learn to let go and honor their teen’s agency, trusting that what they have been taught may someday sink into their teen’s heart, while continuing to build the relationship. A mother and father were struggling with their 16-year-old son, who had stopped attending church and school. As the mother prayed for guidance (ready to implement some kind of consequence system), she felt a strong impression—“Love him.” It was not the time or the circumstance to implement consequences (while still allowing for natural consequences). The role that she and her husband needed to play was simple but crucial—to love him—no matter what decisions he made or what the natural consequences were. It was incredibly hard to honor their son’s agency, but they put their trust in the Lord and in their son.

We can ignore the misbehavior, but we should not ignore or withhold love from the child. To show our love, we might simply put our hand over our heart (a nonverbal signal taught by Dr. Jane Nelsen) (Nelsen, 2013). If the behavior continues, we might choose to leave the room. If we feel that the Listen & Learn and Teach & Communicate principles will help, we can find opportunities to counsel with our children about these undesirable behaviors, but in the moment, we may find that most misbehaviors should be ignored. As with all misbehavior, we want to work hard on strengthening the lowest levels of the pyramid—having a heart at peace and building relationships.

**Allow natural consequences**. As discussed in the previous chapter, we might ignore misbehavior or decisions we don’t agree with, but we should allow the natural consequences of our children’s choices to occur. Natural consequences can teach children important lessons, as long as we’re not piggybacking on them or rescuing them from those consequences. If a child forgets her homework, we don’t need to take her homework to the school. If a teen gets into a car accident and damages the car, he can figure out how to fix it or pay for the repairs.

**Gesture or cue a child nonverbally**. The nonverbal signal—your hand over your heart—was already mentioned. Another example is if your children are arguing during Sacrament meeting, you might gently touch their shoulders and put your finger to your lips to signal quiet. If you are a parent, you probably already naturally use nonverbal signals to correct your child. Just make sure your body language is still sending a message of love and that your child’s emotional bank account balance stays high.

**Redirect** the child to a different activity or environment. Distraction and redirection work well with young children—if a child is pushing other children, maybe he just needs to be taken outside and given a chance to run around. You might take time later to teach him how to treat others with respect and kindness, explaining and even role-playing appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

**Implement emotion coaching and conflict management strategies**—the conflict management process will be discussed later in this section.

**Implement logical consequences**. A logical consequence is a consequence that the parent implements based on the child's behavior. For example, if a child spills milk, the logical consequence would be to have the child clean it up (with the parent's help, if necessary). While this approach seems logical, parents may be tempted to overuse it or stretch the bounds of "logic". For example, when a child is disobedient, the parent might tell the child that he can't have any screen time that day, stating that playing video games must be the reason the child disobeyed. It's recommended (except for very straightforward situations such as spilled milk) that logical consequences be used only when the issue is important enough to risk your relationship and when no other solutions stop the undesirable behavior (you’ll see how this process can work when we discuss conflict management strategies). You will want to make extra efforts to strengthen the lower levels of the pyramid if you need to implement consequences, as this strategy might take big withdrawals out of your child’s emotional bank account.

Whatever applications the parent uses, keep in mind their ultimate purpose: to help children reach their divine potential.

**Optional Resources**: You may have noticed many references to Dr. Jane Nelsen’s book, Positive Discipline, throughout the course. Dr. Nelsen’s discipline philosophy is similar to what you are learning in this course. If you’re interested in more ideas (principle-based applications) of how to solve common parenting issues and implement correction effectively, you might want to read Positive Discipline A-Z: 1001 Solutions to Everyday Parenting Problems. Another recommended book that has been referenced in this chapter is Good Insideby Dr. Becky Kennedy. It is based on truths and principles that align well with this course. It also contains many examples and scripts that can help you to know how to communicate and correct your children in a way that encourages connection, emotion regulation, and resilience.

Just remember, all applications should be implemented with a doctrinally based approach, with the Spirit’s guidance, and with sensitivity to your child’s unique temperament, personality, needs, desires, and capabilities.

### Study Guide Questions

* What is an important principle taught by Dr. Jane Nelsen about correction?
* What are some of the applications parents can use (with a doctrinally and principle-based approach) to correct?

### Counsel Together to Manage Conflict

No matter how proactive we are and how many family councils we have, it is inevitable that we will still have conflicts and misbehaviors that need to be addressed and corrected. Let’s go into more detail on how to effectively counsel together to resolve issues, with these four steps:

**Step 1: Clarifying and Focusing: Problem Ownership**

As part of identifying the problem, the parent and child(ren) need to identify whose problem it really is. As Seifert and Sutton (2009) say:

The “owner” of the problem is the primary person who is troubled or bothered by it. The owner can be the child committing the behavior, the parent, or a sibling who just happens to see the behavior. Since the owner of a problem needs to take primary responsibility for solving it, identifying ownership makes a difference in how to deal with the behavior or problem effectively.

Let’s say, for example, that your son David makes a remark about his brother Sean that you find offensive (like “Sean is fat”). Is this remark David's problem or yours? If David made the comment privately to you and is unlikely to repeat it, then maybe it is only your problem. If he is likely to repeat it to other children or to Sean himself, however, then maybe the problem is really David's.

On the other hand, a problem may sometimes affect several people at once. David, who criticized Sean, may discover that he offended not only you, but also his siblings, who then avoid playing with him. At that point, the whole family begins to share in some aspect of “the” problem: not only is David prevented from playing with his siblings, but also you and his siblings begin dealing with bad feelings about David.

**Step 2: Active, Empathetic Listening**

To diagnose the problem and who "owns" it, you can use the active listening and emotion coaching strategies we discussed earlier. It is important not to move too fast toward solving the problem with advice, instructions, or scolding, even if these are responses that you might, as a parent, feel responsible for making.

**Step 3: Assertive Discipline and I-Messages**

Once you have listened well to your child’s point of view, it helps to frame your responses and comments in terms of how his behavior affects you in particular, especially in your role as the parent. The comments should have several features:

* They should be assertive—neither passive and apologetic, nor unnecessarily hostile and aggressive (Cantor, 1996). State the problem as matter-of-factly as possible: “David, what you said was not respectful”, instead of either “David, can you please not say that?” or “David, don’t say that!”
* The comments should emphasize I-messages (Gordon, 1981), which are comments that focus on how the problem behavior is affecting you and how you feel. They are distinct from you-messages, which focus on evaluating the mistake or problem that the child has created. An I-message might be, “I’m feeling upset about what you said.” A you-message might be, “Your talking is rude.”
* The comments should encourage the child to think about the effects of his actions on others—a strategy that in effect encourages the child to consider the ethical implications of the actions (Gibbs, 2003). Instead of simply saying: “What you said was not respectful”, you can try saying, “How do you think your brother might feel if he heard you say that?”

**Step 4: Negotiation**

The first three steps focus on the Listen & Learn and Teach & Communicate levels of the pyramid, and they may be enough to influence your child to correct the undesirable behavior on their own. But sometimes, when conflict persists over time and develops a number of complications or confusing features, you may need to go further by negotiating a solution. Your child may persist in being late for school, for example, in spite of your efforts to focus on the lower levels of the pyramid. Or your children may repeatedly speak rudely to each other, even though you have counseled together about this in the past. Or your teen might get failing grades, time after time.

Because these problems develop over time, and because they may involve repeated disagreements, they can eventually become stressful for the parent, the child, and any family member who may be affected. Their persistence can tempt a parent simply to dictate a resolution—a decision that can leave everyone feeling defeated, including the parent. Often in these situations, it is better to negotiate a solution, which means systematically discussing options and compromising on one if possible. Although negotiation always requires time and effort, it is often less time or effort than continuing to cope with the original problem, and the results can be beneficial to everyone.

A number of experts on conflict resolution have suggested strategies for negotiating with students about persistent problems (Davidson & Wood, 2004). We can also use these strategies with our children at home. The suggestions vary in detail, but usually include some combination of the steps we have already discussed above, along with a few others:

* Brainstorm possible solutions, and then consider their effectiveness. Remember to include your child(ren) in this step—include all those who should take ownership of the problem; otherwise you end up simply imposing a solution on others, which is not what negotiation is supposed to achieve. Make sure you focus on solutions, not consequences, and try to address the root of the problem .
	+ In this case, if David only said “Sean is fat” to you and nobody else heard, you can counsel one-on-one with him and find out what the underlying need or reason is. Maybe David is feeling left out and is seeking attention. Instead of suggesting a consequence—“I think you should have to clean Sean’s room every time you say something mean about him”—you might suggest, “I could take both of you out to our favorite park. Maybe we need to spend more time together.” It’s possible that David just needs to learn about appropriate language use. It could be an opportunity to teach him about what to do when he has judgmental thoughts.
	+ If Sean heard what David said, you will want to counsel with Sean as well, making sure he knows that he is accepted no matter what, and brainstorming solutions to what he can do the next time someone criticizes him. In this case, it may be best to meet with David and Sean separately to brainstorm solutions, and you could help David come up with a solution on how he will apologize and make it up to his brother. It will also be important to make it clear that bullying is not allowed and that immediate action needs to be taken if it happens again - ideally, you and David would agree on what that immediate action would be (e.g., David would need to be separated from Sean and do something nice for him).
* If possible, choose a solution by consensus. Complete agreement on the choice may not be possible, but strive for it as best you can. Remember that taking a vote may be a democratic, acceptable way to settle differences in some situations, but if feelings are running high, voting does not work as well. In that case, voting may simply allow the majority to impose its will on the minority, leaving the underlying conflict unresolved. If you can’t agree on a choice, you as the parent may need to decide what solution to implement.
* Pay attention to how well the solution works after it is underway. For many reasons, things may not work out the way you or your children hope or expect. You may need to renegotiate the solution in a future family council meeting. If the solutions don’t work, it may be time to brainstorm a logical consequence together, keeping in mind what you have control over.

Hopefully, now you have a better idea of possible applications for the “Correction” level of the pyramid. There is no parenting manual that could give you all the possible ways of correcting a child or solving parenting issues, but remember to focus on the doctrinally based principles related to correction.

Lastly, keep in mind the advice given by Sister Tamara W. Runia (2023):

Our job is not to teach someone who’s going through a rough patch that they are bad or disappointing. On rare occasions we may feel prompted to correct, but most often let’s tell our loved ones in spoken and unspoken ways the messages they long to hear: “Our family feels whole and complete because you are in it.” “You will be loved for the rest of your life—no matter what.”

### Study Guide Questions

What are the four steps to managing conflict by counseling together?

## Ponder on the Principles

Take some time now to formulate doctrinally-based principles from what you learned this week and add them to your list.

Here are some suggestions:

* Send the message of love to your child.
* Spend quality time together.
* Take time to nourish your spirit.
* Listen and learn from your child.
* Teach and communicate with your child.
* Counsel with your child and family.
* Correct with love and with the Spirit’s guidance.

### Parenting Practice: Doctrinally-Based Applications

Now it’s your turn to brainstorm ideas of what principles and related applications you could use in these common parenting scenarios (be prepared to share ideas with your study group):

* Your child comes home from school crying because her teacher yelled at her for talking during class. What could you say and do?
* Your kids start fighting over a toy. What could you say and do?
* Your child gets mad when you tell him it’s time to stop playing video games. He yells at you and says, “I hate you!” What could you say and do?
* Your teen thinks her curfew is too early, and she complains that all her friends get to stay out later than her. What could you say and do?

### Study Guide Question

What principles and applications could you use (or, as a professional, counsel a parent to use) in the common parenting scenarios described above?

### Review of Learning Outcomes

Now that you have come to the end of Chapter 5, you should be able to:

* Evaluate connections between the influence pyramid and evidence-based theories.
* Recall communication skills that build relationships.
* Recall ways to work with and counsel with children.
* Evaluate ways to correct from the top of the pyramid.
* Evaluate a parenting situation and identify principles and applications that parents could utilize.

### Invitation to Act

If you are a parent, how will you apply the doctrinally based principles to help your children develop Christlike characteristics and achieve their divine potential?

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