

MERIDIAN MAGAZINE

Education Series, Part Five

Can Parents Counterbalance the Negative Influences in Public Schools? By Darla Isackson

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This is Part 5 in a series on education. Each part can be enjoyed separately, but all the series is found in Meridian's archives.

Thanks, dear readers, for your many responses! This article and the remaining articles in this series will primarily be taken from interviews and e-mails from parents. I have received dozens of responses from parents who are finding answers to the education dilemma. Most of the responses have been from those finding ways to circumvent traditional public schools, or combine elective classes in public schools with private, charter, online, co-op, or homeschool core curriculum. Articles will follow on each of these subjects. This particular article will focus on helping parents whose children are attending public schools now.

A few readers have expressed solid support for public education "as is." For example, a reader from Payson, Arizona, said, "I have spent 32 years working in the public schools. What imperfect public schools need is more involvement by LDS families, not a retreat to the way things were . . . In a recent conference talk, Pres. Thomas S. Monson urged us to support our public schools. . . . Let us be in the world, not of the world, but certainly in the world, not in retreat from it."

I personally believe the time will come when the Lord will tell us to retreat from the world--a time when we will find safety only in Zion cities of refuge. But what do we do in the meantime? The quote from Thomas S. Monson that this brother is likely referring to is one I have cited previously: *"The Church has always had a vital interest in public education and encourages its members to participate in parent-teacher activities and other events designed to improve the education of our youth."* [Precious Children, a Gift from God," *Ensign*, June 2000, p, 2). The Church does have an intense interest in public schools because that is where most LDS children are, and because the Church is vitally concerned with education itself--gaining knowledge. Wise parents will prayerfully consider major decisions in regard to their children's education. Perhaps you are a parent like me who has previously been unaware of the many educational options available--and you couldn't pray about what you didn't know about. Many new ideas are opening up to pray about. Or perhaps you *have been* aware, and after prayerful consideration have felt that the public school your child is attending is the best choice for now. We all need to honor each parent's position.

The reality is that the vast majority of LDS children still attend public schools, and every parent who has a child in public school would want to be involved and to support those schools in every way that could possibly benefit their children. I believe that part of Satan's plan is to get parents so busy that they don't even know what is going on in the schools.

We Need More Concerned Parents--Like You!

The need for parents to know what their children are learning and experiencing, has never been greater. The need for wise parental guidance has never been greater. Yet the trend is for frantically busy, over-extended parents to be less and less involved with their children and with the schools they attend.

A full-time mother in my neighborhood went back to teaching for a few months when another teacher was unable to complete her contract in 2003. She taught at a middle school and was appalled to learn that the school was considering dropping parent-teacher conferences because fewer than 40 percent of the parents were showing up!

It appears that many parents are relinquishing the responsibility for their children's education to a system that no longer sees teaching the most basic traditional values such as honesty and morality as part of its agenda. And by law the public school system can contribute nothing to our children in the way of a religious foundation.

It seems vital to look at specific ways parents can support and strengthen their children who are attending public schools and attempt to make up for the deficiencies in public education. We need to learn to deal with public schools in the most effective way possible, and do all we can to counterbalance the negative influences our children face daily.

Different Schools, Different Challenges

While they all share certain characteristics and limitations, the reality is that public schools can differ as much as the personalities and value systems of those who run them. Some school boards, principals, and teaching staffs are clinging tenaciously to solid values and doing the best they can to create a positive learning environment within the limitations of government guidelines. Other administrators and teachers have totally abandoned traditional values and are actively promoting humanism, situational ethics, and a tolerance for diversity which sometimes seems to mean giving up any solid standard of right and wrong. I received one e-mail from a woman in Canada who represents a group of parents who have suffered persecution, lawsuits, and threats for banding together to fight the overt infiltration of those openly promoting a gay lifestyle in the public schools. They were opposing the initiative to make schools "safe" for homosexuals to not only practice their sexuality openly, but encourage others to experiment and "find out" if they too have homosexual tendencies.

One mother told me that her oldest three children had attended a school with fine administrators and teachers who encouraged the students to hold high standards. However, when the family moved, her youngest three attended a high school where the principal believed in almost no rules. Students were free to "make out" in the halls instead of staying in classes; tobacco and drugs were used on the school grounds without consequences. This mother has deep regrets for leaving her children in that school. She was simply unaware of her options. All three made poor choices. One daughter and all five of her closest friends became pregnant out-of-wedlock, married early and subsequently divorced. While there were many contributing factors, the influence of the poor school environment can not be discounted.

The Importance of Parental Involvement

Here's some general suggestions from parents: "Don't miss PTA meetings --know what is going on. Get involved in classes, activities, anything that directly impacts your child. Help in the class-- be an aid or a room mother. If your children are excellent students, the teachers may wonder what you are doing there. However, having consistent parental contact with the teachers makes a difference in the way the teacher interacts with your child in the classroom. Teachers who know that parents are highly involved with their children and expecting accountability are more likely to give positive attention to those children. Never miss a parent-teacher conference--arrange a special meeting with the teachers if you can't be there."

Cydne Watterson, a mother from North Carolina, believes that parental involvement is extremely important. Her children are now in a large private school, but it is strictly secular and there are only a handful of LDS kids in the school. Consequently they face many of the same challenges as kids in public schools and have the same need for parental support. She suggested, "Don't be afraid to let teachers and administrators know where you are coming from. Show your commitment to the school--go to the school administrator and talk to him personally as an advocate for the school rather than create an adversarial relationship. One mother I know 'gathered the mob' when they found an inappropriate book in the library. Her actions created disharmony instead of making a difference. Making a positive difference usually occurs quietly, one on one. Don't put the administrator on the defensive, don't get labelled as trouble makers, but as concerned parents and willing workers who want to be involved." She admits that parents in her school have more clout than in public schools, because they are seen more as "customers."

I received e-mails from parents who have concluded that it is impossible to fight the public school system and win. One mother sat on a district board for curriculum for a solid year with a group of determined people who had to admit at the end that very little had changed. They said that when a person or an institution is acting on incorrect principles, you can't get good fruit off of bad trees. No matter how long you work you are not going to get the fruit you need and you may need to find other solutions. One mother in California was given the "Woman of the Year" award for her intense activism in education reform. However, discouraged at the lack of actual change, she retired from activism to put her total energy on helping and educating her own children. Some parents feel they literally saved their children by changing schools, locating a public charter school, a private school, or even homeschooling for a short time until a better school environment could be found for them. Only prayerful consideration will determine what course your "parental involvement" will take.

Parents Can't Afford to Be Passive

Loree Bennett is a mother who has been anything but passive when she was working with the "system as it is." She does not believe you have to throw up your hands and just accept whatever school or teacher your child happens to be assigned to. [She said she was aware of no options outside of public school at the time.] She has "gone to bat" for her children in numerous situations that she believes have made a great difference to them.

Find Out About the Teachers

One of the greatest variables in the public schools are the teachers. Some are dedicated, God-fearing, good people who are in the teaching profession because they love children. They spend long hours dedicated to their work in an environment that is sometimes increasingly difficult. Others are there strictly for a paycheck and are biding their time until retirement. Some may even have a hidden agenda to destroy faith or teach their own perspectives.

Loree Bennett said she has often asked parents which teachers their children are getting in a new school year and they have said, "Oh, I don't know. There's nothing I can do about it anyway." Loree knows different. She always found out who her children's prospective teachers were and gotten to know the principal. She investigated the reputation of each teacher, calling parents whose children had been in their classes, etc., and requested the teachers she thought would be best for her children--even when the school said you couldn't request. Several times she has taken her children out of classes where she felt the teacher was pulling down, instead of building. She said she called the principal and even the district to let them know how concerned she was about problem situations and only rarely did she fail to get the changes made that she requested. She said the key is to persevere and nicely let them know that you are determined to do what is

best for your children. In an effort to do this, she often met personally with both the school counsellor and the principal.

Sometimes a Change of School Is Necessary

Loree told of pulling her child out of a school where the environment was detrimental. She said, "One year my son was in such an unbearable situation I felt his self-esteem was being destroyed. With only two months left in the year, I moved him to a different school, where I had to drive him and pick him up each day. I prayed about it, and knew I should have moved him sooner, but realized those two months could make the difference between breaking him and not. He did much better in the new school."

A Utah mother moved her daughter to a different school, even after the principal said no. She said, "When she was in the fourth grade, my daughter's teacher admitted she hated her, and the other girls in the class were constantly being mean to her. I felt it was my responsibility to get her out of the situation when the negatives seemed too big to overcome. I myself had had a second grade teacher who made me feel absolutely worthless. My mother tried to get me moved, but just gave up when the principal said no. I wouldn't give up. I believe there are always options, and that you shouldn't take no for an answer."

She gave the following advice, "Pray long and hard and be willing to make sacrifices. My daughter was being destroyed by that school environment. With both "friends" and teachers ripping her up every day, she even lost her academic desire to do well. She hated everything and was so down on herself, was so depressed, felt so worthless because she was getting beaten up emotionally. She started going with friends who were not good, and was feeling like a lowlife. I simply could not leave her in that destructive situation. I can't go with the flow when I feel I really need to stand up for my child's right to have a decent environment. I got a lot of criticism from other parents and the school authorities when I insisted on moving her, but I knew I had to find a situation where the people around her would nurture her spirit and help her get back on track. And I did!"

A mother suggested, "In the few cases where you can't get away from a teacher you don't feel good about, make friends with them. Look for the positive and give them positive feedback; so often grouchy teachers don't get *any*, and a little goes a long way for positive relationships." This mother told of one teacher who seemed to feel it was her mission to make the students fail, yet she was unable to get her child out of that class. She said, "Sometimes you have to find a way to make it work. In this case we tried to make this teacher realize that we really cared about her. I made sure that my daughter was polite and respectful to her. We both talked to her often, took her treats, and gave her special attention". Because they made friends with the teacher instead of creating an adversarial relationship, they ended up having a good experience. The teacher told the mother, "I just love your daughter. She's so sweet!" A teacher is only human--and they are sure to treat students better who treat *them* well.

Establish Accountability

By encouraging parental involvement, I am not suggesting that the parent take over in areas that the child should assume most of the responsibility. Homework may be one those areas. Cydne Watterson, said that she believes accountability for actions needs to include accountability for homework, and she thinks parents do too much rescuing in this regard. Beginning in first grade Cydne established the idea that "this is your homework, not mine. She made it clear that if they didn't want to do it that was their choice, but they would feel the consequences. (She said only one time did she run into the problem of no consequence at school where the teacher didn't care

if the homework wasn't done and that became a different story.) She tried not to think, "how will this look? What will the teacher think of me? How will it reflect on me?" But rather "what is the most important thing my child can learn in this situation"?

Once her children "got it" and realized it was their own responsibility, they took such pride in their work, and get great satisfaction in doing their own work well. She doesn't believe children will ever feel that satisfaction if they are pushed or coerced, or if a parent is doing any of the work for them. [Another set of parents removed themselves from the constant hassle of taking responsibility for their child's homework and the child did *not* choose to take hold and find satisfaction in doing well academically. However, he is doing well in his life in general because his relationship with his parents was salvaged. His parents have concluded that those things are more important than academic excellence.]

Encourage Them to Stand Up and Be Counted--But Let It Be Their Choice

Cydne said, "You can't underestimate the influence of a child who stands up for his standards at school--and I found out my oldest son wanted to make that choice himself--that I didn't need to intercede for him." Cydne's oldest son Neal was scheduled to go on a field trip in the 10th grade where they would be watching an R-rated movie. Cydne told his teacher that Neal would not be watching that movie and Neal was upset--He felt it was his own responsibility and he wanted to make the stand himself. He had actually done so at an earlier time (which is the reason Cydne thought it was all right for her to "state his position.") Neal had got up and left an inappropriate movie at an earlier date and some friends left with him. One of these friends had told his younger brother about that event. This younger kid, named Ben, walked with Neal from the gym to his car one night and said, "Why don't you go to R-rated movies?" and Neal was able to explain. This led to another discussion when Ben asked seriously, "Neal, tell me. Do you think there's a God?" and Neal was able to share his conviction. The ripples of right decisions are expansive.

Who Do You Want to Be Known As?

Cydne said that in North Carolina you are set apart by being a Mormon and that you have to take a stand. Paul and Cydne Watterson asked their kids, "Who do you want to be known as at school?" The question helped them to determine who they were--that they each wanted to set the example and be known as the Mormon kid who lives what he believes. She said her kids feel they can let all the non-Mormons wear the weird clothes and crazy hairstyles, and do the bad things. They want to be "known as" something different in a good way.

Their "different" positive influence started early. Jane Morgan was Neal's third grade teacher. On the first parent-teacher night Jane said to Paul and Cydne, "There's something different about this boy. What is it?" They told her they were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Jane had been raised around Mormons and had attended some Young Women meetings. Jane frequently commented to her husband about her positive impression of the Watterson family and their connection to the Church. One day some missionaries came by their house and Jane's husband was in the yard. He said to them, "You might as well go in and finish Jane off; she's already 3/4 Mormon"! She and her husband both joined the Church and have been active in the same ward as the Wattersons for several years now.

The Importance of Living the Basics in the Home

Many families have found ways to successfully ford the deep waters of education that is devoid of spiritual roots and bring their children safely through to the other side. Many "children of promise"

have managed to cling to the iron rod, avoid the filthy waters, and come through strong and clean. How are these families doing it?

The parents I talked to bought up the same ideas over and over. It shouldn't surprise us that the families that are doing well in spite of the negatives they face in the public school environment are those who follow the counsel of the prophets. They are holding family home evening, having daily family scripture reading and family prayer. But *how* they are managing to do this in our fast-paced world, and how they supplement these basic activities with other value-based, family-strengthening activities is worthy of note. The Bennett and Watterson family's experiences summarize what parents suggested.

Loree Bennett said, "Sometimes my friends ask me questions like "How come your kids tell you everything? How come you are so close to your kids? Why are your kids turning out so well?" The following things are the only answers I can give.

1. Family Home Evening

"No matter how busy my kids got at school or outside activities--no matter what--home evening had to happen. Even when we had the teeniest home evenings that I thought were pathetic, I could not believe the spirit of peace and unity that came into our home. We renewed our commitment to do what we needed to do by having home evening. [Families reported a wide variety of approaches to family home evening. For instance, in one family the father consistently taught the lessons because the children tended to give a "two-minute summary" if they were assigned. In another family older children were assigned to read and report on an *Ensign* article of their choice and the parents thought they were learning a lot and doing a fine job.]

2. Family Fun Time

"Our Monday family home evening is always the "teaching the gospel" part. Saturday afternoon or evening is family fun time. Even when the kids were in high school they didn't want to miss it. [Many families have the gospel lesson on Sunday evening and the fun activity on Monday evening.]

3. Date Nights

"We also had regular one on one dates with kids to keep a super close relationship. Wednesday night is date night. The parent who goes out takes just one child. Although we didn't push it, the child we were with often brought up important concerns they wanted to share and we were able to listen and given counsel."

4. PPI at Home

"My husband Bill does PPI--individual personal priesthood interviews with each child. Sometimes formal, sometimes more informal on a walk or on a drive. The ideal is weekly, but it happens for sure at least once a month. Sometimes I am in on the interviews, but most of them Bill does one-on-one. He talks to each child about his or her life, goals, problems, and possible solutions."

5. Family Vacations

"We are also family vacation fanatics--no matter what else is going on we go on family vacations. We have found that every family vacation solidifies our family. The magic and the memories and the bonding sets the stage for family closeness throughout the year. We kind of ignore the limitations of time or money and go anyway; for instance, right now we are getting ready to move and simply didn't have the time, but we went! The talking the laughing, the pictures we take and enjoy later, help carry us through the year. The kind of vacations we choose has something to do with it. We define our purpose--time to relax and just be together--where we are not scheduled. (We are so highly scheduled the rest of the time, we especially need a break from that!) Some of our favorite memories are staying up late watching funny wholesome videos (draped all across each other), being on the beach together, playing in the pool, listening, talking, laughing, bike riding--different things happen. One year, walking along the beach, out of the corner of my eye I saw my son Bryan pick up this big piece of seaweed, and come running towards me. My natural inclination was to crossly say, "Don't even think about it!" but the Spirit spoke and said, "put everything aside and enjoy it. Let it go." He threw this sticky slimy seaweed on me, and instead of getting mad, I picked up the seaweed and ran after him. Instantly, the whole family joined in and we had the biggest, funniest seaweed fight ever. No one will ever forget the magic, the laughter and joking, the fun, the spontaneous bonding. Memories like that stay with us during the year to help over the rough spots when we are uptight about rules, school, etc. Because the relationship is strong, because of the bonding, we find that the children are willing to live the family rules.

6. Positives at Home to Counter the Negatives at School

"My oldest two sons went to regular public schools where they daily confronted bad language, kids on drugs, some teachers who were overburdened and ineffective. It was a time of many challenges But they felt loved at home, felt the Spirit at home, had the values established and reinforced at home. My husband and I always wanted to send them off with a hot breakfast, scripture reading, prayer and hugs. We've had bad times during hard pregnancies and new babies, and when he was away on business or at a meeting when we simply couldn't do our part of it. I know it was much harder for the kids when they weren't getting a steady dose of positives at home. I could see a magnificent difference when we did it--they did so much better at school. They felt solid, secure, knew they were loved/ I think a good night's rest for both mother and children is very important--it's much harder to give them a loving sendoff if you are too tired and if they are not well fed and well rested or feeling depleted, they are bound to be more vulnerable to the negative influences. A positive sendoff is super helpful--they faced so much negative junk and criticism at school. Positive reinforcement at home is doubly important. [Positive notes can be a big boost too] We try to practice positive affirmations as a family often. We take turns saying positive things about each other--not just at birthdays, but whenever we can remember--mealtimes, prayer times, bedtime. So as each child leaves for school they are feeling built up and strong inside. Then when they get ripped up by teachers or peers, they are strong, can face the negatives and come out on top.

Suggestions from other parents include:

Seminary Training and EFY

On mother said, "The impact of good seminary teachers was huge in the teen years. In Seminary they could feel the Spirit on a daily basis and rub shoulders with other young people who had similar goals. Having a close relationship with seminary teachers who were positive spiritual role models definitely strengthened them." Especially for Youth and ward and stake youth conference were also noted as important strengthening experiences for teens.

Family Council

Several families mentioned that their family council was an important part of keeping close to their children, knowing what was going on in school, and keeping the family machinery running smoothly. Most held it on Sunday, and used the time to coordinate school and family activities, make certain the children were prepared for the school week ahead, had rides where they needed to go, and to assess what support might be needed with their school projects and assignments.

More Ideas

Cydne Watterson added several good ideas:

1. The Importance of Sunday

“Observing the Sabbath day has made my children’s life so much better. They never argued that they couldn’t play sports, go to parties or other recreational activities. On Sunday they truly have a day to rest, get organized, get themselves in order. Sunday slows the whole family down a notch, we spend more time together, we don’t go anywhere. We stay home together except to go to our church meetings. Sundays are not abused here. [In North Carolina] Church leaders make a point not to have other meetings on Sunday. Keeping the Sabbath puts everything on a higher notch for the rest of the week.

2. Scripture Reading

“Daily scripture reading began to work for us [the Wattersons] when we bought extra inexpensive Book of Mormons strictly for family scripture reading so we didn’t have to send everyone to find their personal scriptures. Our routine is to have dinner, cleanup, and an hour of homework and then family scripture reading. However, one child could never settle into homework until *after* family scripture reading. Our routine helped the kids in their schooling--consistently.”

[many families have their scripture reading first thing in the morning or at mealtimes.]

3. Parental Harmony

“I think parent’s willingness to say they’re sorry and working to have a peace in the home is important to children’s education. It eliminates the chaos of worrying how the parents are doing. As the relationship between husband and wife grew more peaceful over the years created a better atmosphere for them to settle in and do their own learning. Parents can provide the atmosphere of learning by the spirit of peace that is there. Parents should ask ‘what are we contributing to this environment?’ A reasonably orderly home seems more peaceful. Is your home a home of learning? Do they have a designated place to study if they can’t have their own desk? In the battle with electronic monsters--TV and video games--I see a need to set family guidelines. It often worked for our family to say that no one could do “screens” until they had finished chores or homework or both.

4. Save Primary Energies for Family

Cydne concluded, “Your children know how much you are emotionally available, how much energy you have left for them. If I have to take a nap, or cut back on my commitments, I do it so I can be there for them. I don’t want to be exhausted when they need me. I see them as my job--my primary concern. All my errands and phone calls I try to have finished before they come in the

door so I can focus on them--and they feel the difference.”

Conclusion

These suggestions are applicable and important regardless of the type of education our child might be receiving. What all our children need is our time, our attention, our love, our prayers, our guidance, and our solid example of gospel commitment.

Coming up Next

The options of dual enrollment--partly in public school, partly elsewhere, will be evaluated in the next article, along with the interesting option of Publicly Funded Charter Schools. E-mail me at darla2@xmission.com if you have ideas to contribute on these subjects.

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