

TEACHING OUR CHILDREN TO Accept

BY GAYLE M. CLEGG

Second Counselor in the Primary General Presidency



We can help our children see beyond differences in others and recognize that we are all children of a loving Heavenly Father.

Every day at school four-year-old Brandon looked out for Jonathan, an autistic classmate. He helped Jonathan line up for recess. In the classroom, he would often find Jonathan's crayons and paper for him. One day the teacher told Brandon's mother about Brandon's unusual kindness. Later the mother shared the teacher's observations with her son and asked him why he was so kind. Brandon looked at his mom in disbelief that she would have to ask a question with such an obvious answer: "Why, Mom, Jonathan is my friend, and he would get lost if I didn't help." To Brandon, Jonathan was not a child who was different; he was a friend.

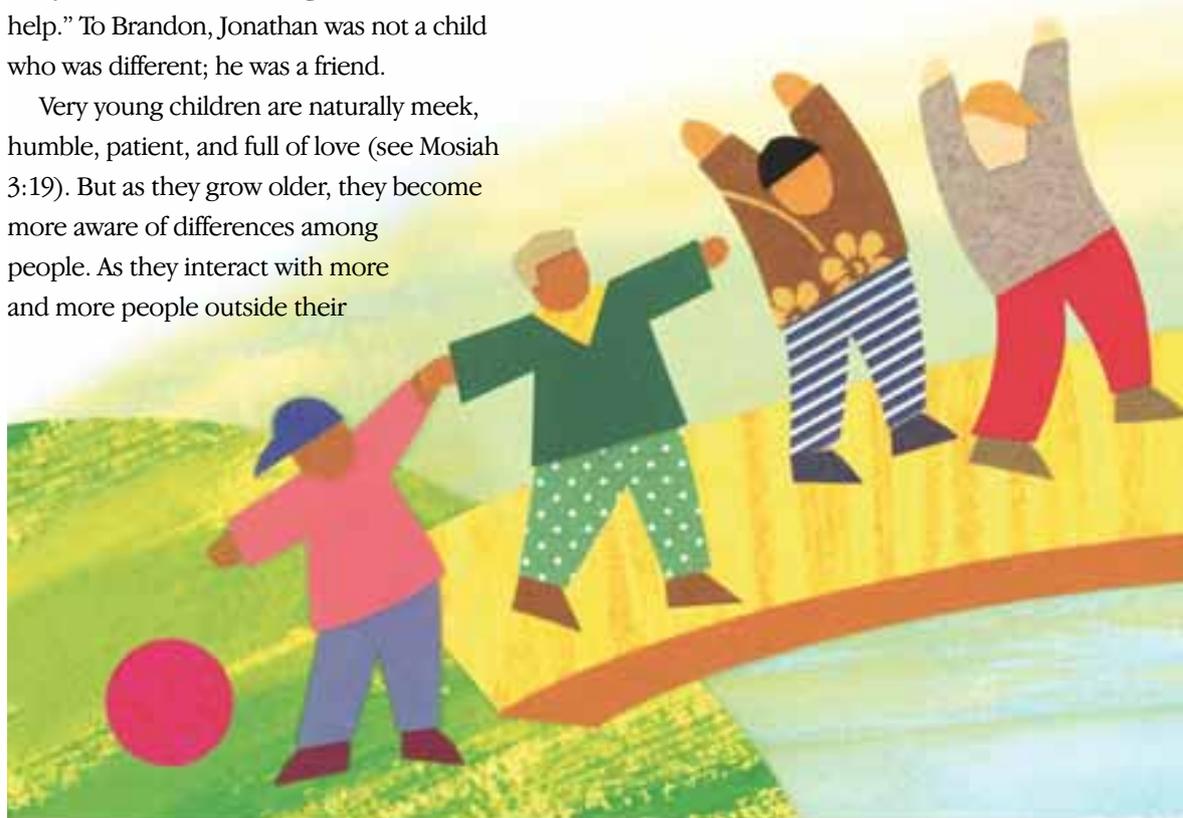
Very young children are naturally meek, humble, patient, and full of love (see Mosiah 3:19). But as they grow older, they become more aware of differences among people. As they interact with more and more people outside their

families, they encounter people who are different from themselves in language, skin color, religion, physical and mental abilities, and social standing. As parents we want to help our children retain the Christlike attributes of meekness, humility, and compassion. We want them to have hearts full of love for everyone. How can we help them do this?

He Gave His Love to Everyone

One of the best ways we can help our children accept those who are different is to teach them that Jesus wants us to be kind to

ILLUSTRATIONS ELECTRONICALLY COMPOSED



Differences

everyone. Five-year-old Jodi and her family held a special family home evening at a care center to entertain and sing for the people living there. Jodi was nervous as she walked into the care center and sat next to a girl who wore a helmet on her head and a towel around her neck and sat in a wheelchair. The girl could use only one side of her body. She couldn't talk but did make happy sounding noises when she heard the music of Jodi's family.

Later that night Jodi's mother said, "It was wonderful that we could sing for them, but we probably should have taken the time to give each one of them a hug. There are some people who don't have anyone to give them hugs."

Jodi admitted, "I don't think I could have hugged that girl I sat by." Jodi's mother took her daughter to the piano and played as she sang:

*If you don't walk as most people do, . . .
Some people talk and laugh at you,
But I won't! I won't!
I'll walk with you. I'll talk with you.
That's how I'll show my love for you.
Jesus walked away from none.
He gave his love to ev'ryone.
So I will! I will!*



The words “He gave his love to ev’ryone” caused Jodi to think. Later she told her mother that in her dreams she gave the girl in the wheelchair a hug and that she hoped the family would be able to go to the care center again. A mother’s gentle teaching through a Primary song opened understanding for a young girl.

The words “He gave his love to ev’ryone” caused Jodi to think. Later she told her mother that in her dreams she gave the girl in the wheelchair a hug and that she hoped the family would be able to go to the care center again. A mother’s gentle teaching through a Primary song opened understanding for a young girl.

The words *empathy* and *compassion* have roots in Latin and Greek words meaning “to suffer with.” *Empathy* means getting behind the eyes of another person, identifying with that person, and understanding why he or she feels and acts the way he or she does. Having *compassion* causes you to help someone feel better because you understand when the person is suffering.

What better example to use in teaching our children how we should treat others than the parable of the good Samaritan? “A certain Samaritan, . . . when he saw [the wounded man,] had compassion on him, and went to him, . . . and took care of him. . . . Go, and do thou likewise” (Luke 10:33–34, 37).

Guiding Them As They Grow

As our children grow older and become more aware of differences in people around them, we can ask them questions to help them clarify their thinking:

Who is our neighbor? Do you think Jesus meant us to love only the people who live close to us? How can we follow Jesus’ teachings and show love for other people? How should we treat someone

who needs our help? How should we treat someone who is different from us?

Parental attitudes are like a template parents begin to hold up to their children from their children’s infancy. An attitude, like a language, is learned, not inherited. And it is critical that children learn correct attitudes when they are very young. When children learn a language after age eight, they often speak it with an accent. Attitude errors can be changed when children are older, but the older they become the greater the effort it takes to correct “the accent.”²

When a child notices something different about a person and brings it to your attention, turn it into a teaching moment. Suppose you are in the supermarket with your daughter and she says, “That man has only one leg.” Instead of hushing her up and telling her not to stare, acknowledge what she has seen and share some insight. “Yes, I see, and he uses a wheelchair to get around. I suppose that makes shopping difficult when he has a lot of groceries to buy.” You can normalize awkward situations and teach your child important values about acceptance and empathy. Children need to learn that people with disabilities are like the rest of us (they go shopping too) but they do have challenges to face (being in a wheelchair).

Children might be fearful or hesitant in talking to or helping someone with a disability. We need to listen carefully to our children’s concerns and allay their fears. Children readily accept differences in people when parents teach that while human beings may look different on the outside, we are basically the same on the inside. Teach your child that people with disabilities are people first. They



are more similar to people without disabilities than they are different from them.

Teaching by Example

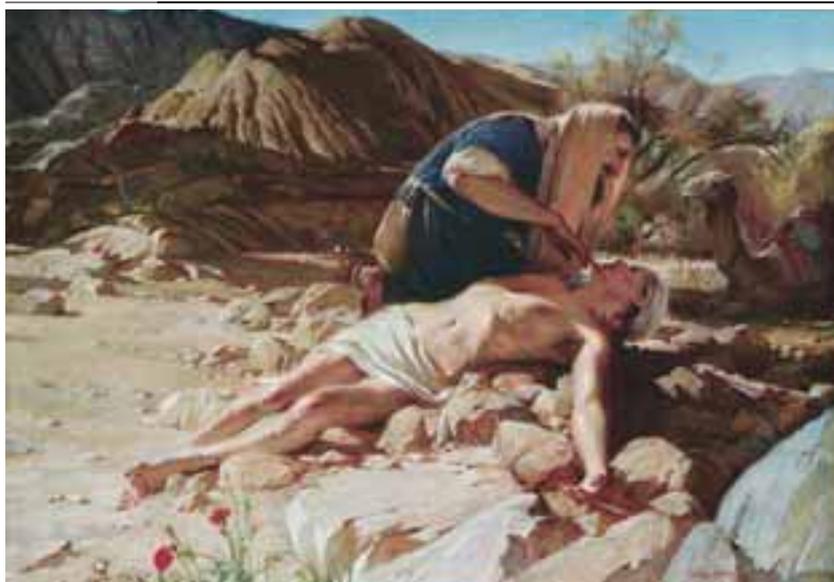
If we want to teach our children the Christlike attributes of tolerance and compassion, our own example will speak loudest. Showing is more powerful than telling.

As children are treated with kindness and compassion, they will know how that feels, and then they can begin to treat others the same. If you get behind the eyes of your child, he or she will learn to get behind the eyes of others.

A woman wondered how a friend living in a foreign country had helped her young children adjust so well to a different culture. She commented that she and her husband had been trying to teach their children to be tolerant and to value differences in others by inviting children from the community to play in their home. But their children were still judgmental and critical of the other children. "What more can we do to teach our children tolerance?" she asked her friend. The friend answered that she and her husband invited not only children into their home but also the parents of the children.

We can encourage our children to play with a variety of children, hoping the experience will enlarge their circles of friendships. But if in our own socialization we friendship only those similar to ourselves, all the encouraging and teaching we do will fall on deaf ears. The children will hear what is being said but will not be sure of what it means.

Our daughter Emily often takes her one-year-old daughter, Ella, to the park to play. As they stroll the six blocks, Ella smiles and says "Hi" to folks on the street. If Ella can catch



THE GOOD SAMARITAN, BY WALTER RANE, COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF CHURCH HISTORY AND ART

someone's attention, she immediately begins to babble. A foreign accent, the color of skin, or a wheelchair doesn't deter Ella's friendly smile. Ella's smile is as spontaneous as her mother's smile.

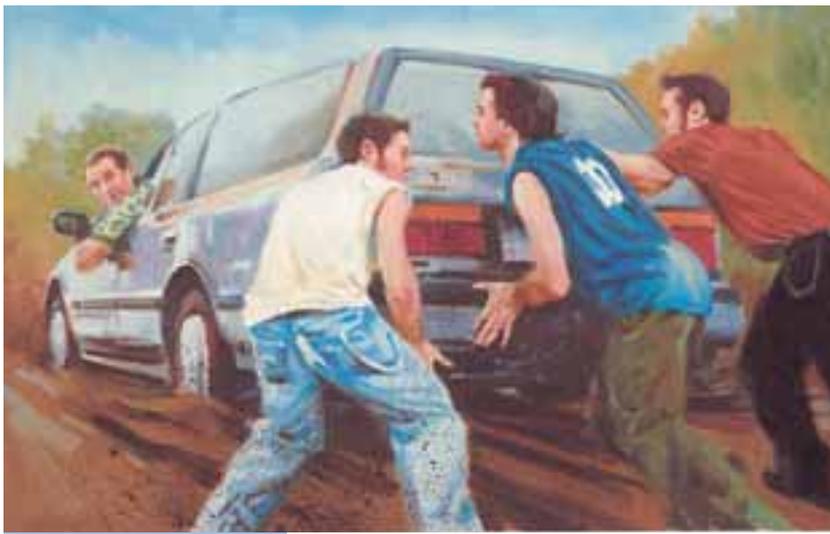
Looking to the Heart

Some years ago our family was taking a drive into the countryside after a week of being confined to our home due to excessive rainfall. As we pulled off to the side of the road to take a look at the cherry blossoms, we felt the car's tires sink into the wet, soft mud. All of our attempts to drive back onto the center of the road only pushed us farther down until the quicksand-like mud was above the car's hubcaps. We were hopelessly stuck and hadn't seen another car for some time.

Suddenly we noticed a large dilapidated truck with six boisterous teenagers coming to a stop behind our car. As they jumped out of the truck, we noticed tattoos, chewing tobacco, and extreme hairstyles. My husband became fearful for our family's safety and told us all to get into the car and lock the doors. The young men asked my husband if we needed help. My husband said no, we could easily handle the problem.

The boys' appearance looked more ominous than the car stuck in the mud up to the axle.

"A certain Samaritan, . . . when he saw [the wounded man,] had compassion on him, and went to him, . . . and took care of him. . . . Go, and do thou likewise."



The boys' appearance looked more ominous than the car stuck in the mud, yet they were happy to help someone in need. The wheels spun sheets of mud in every direction, covering the boys from head to toe while they pushed the car onto the pavement.

The boys noticed the five small children and wife in the car as the “we” my husband was referring to and suggested that he get back into the car and start driving while they pushed. The wheels spun sheets of mud in every direction, covering the boys from head to toe while they pushed the car onto the pavement.

My husband pulled money out of his wallet to pay the teenagers, but they refused and jumped back into the truck, saying they were happy to help a brother. They were gone before we could even thank them properly. My husband, who had expected the worst at the outset, was overcome with gratitude. Physical coverings can impede seeing into the heart.

Our family has often retold the story of being stuck in the mud and rescued when we have temporarily forgotten the basic goodness of people and judged needlessly. Jesus

saw beyond the temporal coverings to the heart as He reached out to the tax collectors, forgave the debtors, and healed the sinners.

A Compassionate Community

As our children learn to be tolerant and accepting, they will feel the joy of loving others in a Christlike way. A 10-year-old child with Down syndrome and limited speech attempted to give a short scripture during a children’s sacrament meeting presentation. As she struggled, her 4-year-old sister instantly came to her side and whispered the words into her ear. The Primary leaders were sensitive enough to not assist and to allow the growth and learning to occur naturally with both girls. As the 10-year-old returned to her seat on the stand, many children complimented her quietly with touches and nodding eyes.

A whole community of compassionate children had experienced the joy described in the Primary song:

*Jesus said love ev’ryone;
Treat them kindly, too.
When your heart is filled with love,
Others will love you.³ ■*

NOTES

1. “I’ll Walk with You,” *Children’s Songbook*, 140–41.
2. From an interview with Dr. Richard Ferre, a specialist in child and adolescent psychiatry at Primary Children’s Medical Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, 16 Nov. 2002.
3. “Jesus Said Love Everyone,” *Children’s Songbook*, 61.

