



Parents have a sacred duty to [teach] their children . . . to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live.¹

– The Family: A Proclamation to the World



Parents play a powerful role in orienting their children to government and establishing patterns of civic engagement. In this article we explore what scholars know about the role families and parents play in fostering active citizenship and also review what has been said on the topic in scripture and by Church leaders.

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Importance of Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Many people take their citizenship for granted. Citizenship is defined as the legal status of a citizen with its attendant rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Among the rights of citizenship may be freedoms to vote, of religion and speech, of peaceful assembly, to petition for a redress of grievances, and to travel throughout a country. The responsibilities of citizenship include obeying and sustaining the laws of the country in which we live, participating in the political process, and serving in the community.

For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, our responsibility as citizens is found in the twelfth article of faith: “We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in

REARING RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS

By David B. and Linda W. Magleby

This article is taken from Helping and Healing Our Families, published by the BYU School of Family Life and Deseret Book

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obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.” Elder James E. Talmage commented on this teaching: “Among other virtues the Church in its teachings should impress the duty of a law-abiding course; and the people should show forth the effect of such precepts in their probity as citizens of the nation and in the community of which they are part.”²

Being a good citizen means learning to love and serve others, first in families, then in our communities, our countries, and the world. Because of the restored gospel, we understand that being a good citizen means “that when [we] are in the service of [our] fellow beings [we] are only in the service of [our] God” (Mosiah 2:17). Members of the Church are encouraged to participate as active members of the community by prayerfully studying the issues and exercising their privilege to vote. A First Presidency letter stated:

*We urge Church members to register to vote, to study the issues and candidates carefully and prayerfully, and then vote for those they believe will most nearly carry out their ideas of good government. . . . While affirming its constitutional right of expression on political and social issues, the Church reaffirms its long-standing policy of neutrality regarding political parties, political platforms, and candidates for political office.*³

Social scientists describe the sense of social engagement and confidence in dealing with others in public activities as *social capital*. Political scientist Robert Putnam defines social capital as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”⁴ Measures of social capital include political, civic, and religious participation, connections in the workplace, informal social connections, altruism, volunteering, philanthropy, reciprocity, honesty, and trust.⁵ Putnam, among others, has documented that over time we have seen diminishing social capital. People are less involved in community groups and have not developed the communication and cooperation skills necessary for civic engagement. The concept of social capital is useful because it conveys the sense that individuals can acquire social capital out of their experi-

ences and education. Among the most important transmitters of social capital is the family.

Research has demonstrated that Latter-day Saints are not only more likely to volunteer within their church but are also more likely to have “given a speech or presentation” and to have taken “part in making decisions” in the church.⁶ These same data also show that the more involved Latter-day Saints are in their church, the more likely they are to be involved in politics.⁷ Latter-day Saints who are religiously active are more engaged in politics than religiously active Catholics or Southern Baptists. Obversely, Latter-day Saints with the lowest level of religious participation have a slightly lower rate of political participation than Southern Baptists and Catholics who have the same level of religious involvement.⁸ The more social capital people have, the more effective citizens they are.

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How Children Learn about Citizenship and Civic Responsibility

The most powerful influence on how children view citizenship and civic engagement is their families.⁹ In his classic study, *Political Socialization*, Kenneth P. Langton observed that “within the family the individual learns his first set of social roles. . . . how he should relate to other people.”¹⁰ Children learn from their parents’ knowledge about citizenship and government.¹¹ The orientation of the parents towards political participation “is shared by the children in many cases.”¹²

The role of parents in raising children is clearly stated in scripture: “But ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another” (Mosiah 4:15). “And they shall also teach their children to pray, and to walk uprightly before the Lord” (D&C 68:28). Modern prophets and apostles have also emphasized the central teaching role of parents. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” states, “Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God and to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live.”¹³

Elder M. Russell Ballard said, “Sooner, perhaps, than we realize, the fate of nations will be in the hands of today’s children.”¹⁴ The family is the first community in which children learn to love and serve one another. In the family, children can learn about the blessings of belonging, of being loved, protected, and nurtured. They can learn to contribute to the family by their attitudes, their work, and their obedience. They can learn to be grateful for the contributions of others. With these family-centered principles as a foundation, children are prepared to love and serve in the community. President James E. Faust said, “Among the other values children should be taught are respect for others, beginning with the child’s own parents and family; respect for the symbols of faith and patriotic beliefs of others; respect for law and order; respect for the property of others; respect for authority.”¹⁵



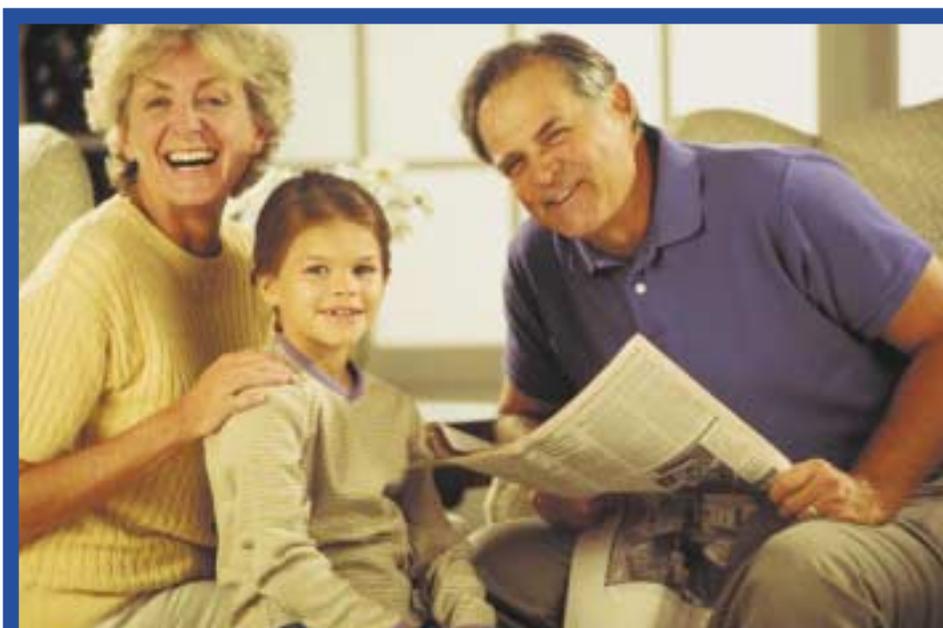
Challenges in Rearing Responsible Citizens

There are challenges to rearing responsible citizens. One of the most formidable challenges is cynicism, a scorn for the motives or virtue of others. In the government setting, cynics believe that politicians are only interested in themselves and are not sincere. They believe that their votes cannot make a difference and that public officials don’t care what “people like us” think. Cynicism is corrosive

of citizenship and civic involvement because it fosters the myths that people don’t matter, votes don’t count, and the government doesn’t listen to citizens. Statements such as “My vote doesn’t make a difference,” or “Politics is a lose-lose situation,” or “Voting is just choosing the lesser of the two evils,” when uttered in the presence of children, help to make them cynical. Children are also exposed to cynicism in the community and in the media.

A challenge related to cynicism is distrust. The view that “all politicians are corrupt” is an example of expressing distrust. Consider the impact of such a statement on a child who might later consider running for community office. Most politicians are not corrupt. They mirror the broader culture and are no more or less corrupt than business leaders, sports heroes, or others. And yet we do not express the view that all sports heroes cheat or take drugs. This increasing sense of distrust is one of the main causes of the decrease in social capital discussed above.

A common obstacle that parents can help their children overcome is a lack of self-confidence in dealing with government, bureaucracy, and complexity when facing community problems. The obverse of low self-confidence in dealing with these challenges is what social scientists call *efficacy*. Efficacy is the belief that one’s actions within the political community can produce



Talk about the news, especially examples of people who sacrifice to be able to live in a democracy.



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desired results. Families that foster civic engagement have children with more efficacy.¹⁶ Rather than perpetuate the attitude that people cannot influence their surroundings, demonstrate the opposite to your children through your actions. Identify a local problem and then set about to solve it.

Another important lesson to teach children about government and civic engagement is that people do not always get their way. A remarkable feature of a constitutional democracy is the peaceful transfer of power from one party or candidate to another. In many a young democracy, the incumbent candidate behind in public opinion will either rig the election or disregard the election and hold power through force. The norm of accepting the outcome of free and fair elections is a mark of a mature democracy and responsible citizens. This attitude can be fostered in families by discussing that reasonable people can disagree on many topics and that government and politics often reflect these differences.

A useful additional step in this discussion of winners and losers in democratic decision making is to encourage children to consider why some people might not see things the same way they do. What about this individual or group influences how they think and what they support? Questions like this help foster the kind of tolerance we need to retain freedom and democracy. Note that this question and discussion does not diminish the view of the parent or child, but seeks to understand how reasonable people can disagree on a topic or policy.

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Opportunities to Teach Children about Citizenship and Civic Responsibility

The opportunities to teach our children about citizenship and civic responsibility are plentiful and include formal teaching moments like family home evening or talks we give on these topics, and informal settings like holiday celebrations, conversations, and personal examples of civic engagement. Below are some possible teaching opportunities:

1. Show respect for the law by obeying traffic and other laws. We can teach children that obedi-



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...encourage children to consider why some people might not see things the same way they do.



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ence is the best choice, whether anyone else is there to see us wait for the red light to change or not. Our own integrity requires that we obey the laws. We can also show respect for the law by the way we talk about and address police officers or other officers of the law.

2. Vote. If you are blessed to live in a democracy, take the time to vote. Include your children in discussions about upcoming elections and take them with you to the polls when you vote. Explain the process, the election volunteers, the secret ballot, and so forth. Seeing how seriously you take voting will instill respect for the voting franchise.

3. Election campaigns provide opportunities to discuss elections and voting. You might watch a candidates' debate as a family and then discuss the process, the issues, and the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate. The purpose of the discussion is broader than just to see who the better candidate is. The discussion should foster



Teach children that each of us has a responsibility to contribute to our society and government.



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gratitude that we have a process with choices, people who are willing to run, and that we have a voice in important issues to be decided. Perhaps take the discussion one step farther by considering the opportunity to run for office or become more involved in school and community efforts.

4. Talk about the news, especially examples of people who sacrifice to be able to live in a democracy. The news of nations frequently includes stories of people working to achieve freedom or to free themselves from a dictator. Use these current events as a contrast to the freedom your family experiences. Talk about why people yearn for freedom and are willing to sacrifice a great deal for it.

5. Provide community service as a family. While volunteering to pick up litter, help at a homeless shelter, or assist a candidate or party, explain how the service is linked to citizenship. Teach children that each of us has a responsibility to contribute to our society and government.

6. Volunteer in a campaign or attend a political event or rally. Encourage your children to become participants in democracy by meeting local candidates and volunteering to help in a campaign.

7. As you pay your taxes, take the opportunity to explain why we have taxes, that the American Revolutionary War was waged over taxation without representation, and that all governments are dependent on raising revenue through taxes. An

important link between taxes and civic responsibility is that we all benefit from such services as national defense, streets, police protection, and public education.

8. Make patriotic holidays teaching moments and integrate patriotic symbols where appropriate. National holidays provide an opportunity to reflect on the rights and privileges you enjoy as well as the responsibilities of citizenship. A family home evening lesson could focus on founders or others who have secured and defended your country.

9. Be positive when talking about elected officials. We can disagree with a policy or position an official takes without belittling motives or intelligence. If you live in a country where many ideas are tolerated, you have reason to celebrate. Better still, if you live in a country where you have the freedom to express your opinions, work to convince others of your ideas. Pray for elected officials, even if they are not from your political party. These officials are in need of our prayers and including them in family prayers is a powerful teaching moment.

10. Consider taking family vacations that provide opportunities to teach children about history or visit a historical site. Visiting Washington, D.C.; the battlefield at Gettysburg; Colonial Williamsburg; or the Statue of Liberty can provide

unforgettable memories for children. Before these trips, spend time talking about the significance of what you will be seeing. Allow time during and after the visit to answer questions and discuss the experience.

11. When a child makes a poor choice and breaks a law, teach responsibility and accountability. One of the most important things we can teach children is that choices have consequences. We are commanded to teach about repentance (D&C 68:25). When a civil law is broken, repentance includes confession to civil authorities, restitution where possible, and accepting the penalties or punishment that may be imposed.

Family traditions that include these elements reinforce children's sense of citizenship and encourage civic engagement.



Conclusion

Over the course of human history it is a relatively rare occurrence for people to live in freedom and govern themselves. Countries sometimes experiment with democracy, but it rarely lasts more than a couple of generations before a depression, war, or dictator replaces it with authoritarian rule. Historically people have tended to live more under totalitarian rule, monarchy, or in anarchy than to have governed themselves. To experience freedom and be able to retain it is remarkable and worth preserving. For that to happen, parents and other role models need to transmit the values and attitudes that foster active citizenship and civic engagement.

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Additional Reading

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Alexander B. Morrison (1999, February), A caring community: Goodness in action, *Ensign*, 29(2), 13-19.

Dallin H. Oaks (1992, October), Religious values and public policy, *Ensign*, 22(10), 60-64.

NOTES

We express appreciation to Dustin N. Slade and Chad Pugh for their assistance in preparing this chapter.

1 First Presidency and Council of Twelve Apostles (1995, November), The family: A proclamation to the world, *Ensign*, 25(11), 102.

2 James E. Talmage (1965), *Articles of Faith*, 46th ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), 413.

3 First Presidency letter (2004, July 31), *LDS Church News*, Z05.

4 R. D. Putnam (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), 19.

5 Putnam (2000), 27.

6 D. E. Campbell and J. Q. Monson (2002, October 4), Dry kindling: A political profile of American Mormons; paper presented at the Conference on Religion and American Political Behavior, Southern Methodist University; available at <http://www.nd.edu/~dcampbe4/dry%20kindling.pdf>, 18-19. Campbell and Monson find that Mormons are more likely to volunteer within their church—60 percent report doing so over the past twelve months compared to 36 percent of Southern Baptists and 27 percent of Catholics. Fifty-three percent of Mormons “report having given a speech or presentation at church within the previous six months,” while 14 percent of Southern Baptists and 4 percent of Catholics report the same. Mormons are also more likely to be trained in decision making, with 48 percent reporting attending a meeting where they had a role in the decision making process within the last six months, compared to 28 percent of Southern Baptists and 8 percent of Catholics.

7 Campbell and Monson (2002), 21.

8 Campbell and Monson (2002), 22.

9 H. H. Hyman (1959), *Political Socialization: A Study in the Psychology of Political Behavior* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press), 85.

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11 R. G. Niemi and J. Junn (1998), *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

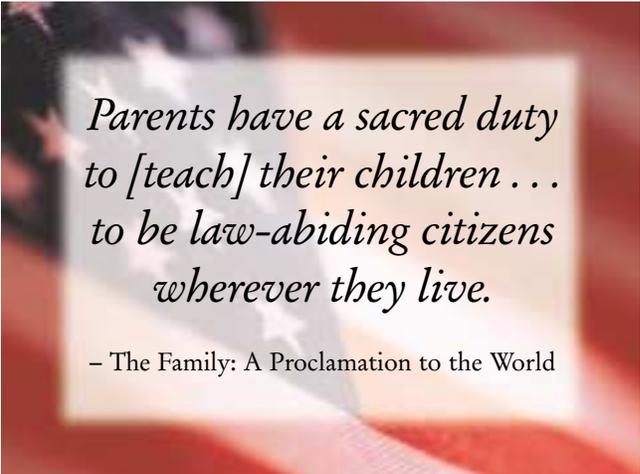
12 L. E. Thomas (1971, May), Political attitude congruence between politically active parents and college-age children: An inquiry into family political socialization, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 33, 376.

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14 M. Russell Ballard (1991, May), Teach the children, *Ensign*, 21(5), 78.

15 James E. Faust (1990, November), The greatest challenge in the world—good parenting, *Ensign*, 20(11), 34.

16 Langton (1969), 144, 155.



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