I looked up, Brent’s arm around me, as we watched a football game. His 12-year-old daughter, whom I had not met, and who was supposed to be gone, was standing at the doorway of the dimmed room. Her dark, wide eyes were staring intently. I instinctively waved and smiled. Brent said, “Sweetheart, this is my friend Kerri.” She said, “Mind if I turn on some more lights?” The lights quickly brightened and she disappeared. Brent and I looked at each other and awkwardly laughed.

Later, she said, “I was coming home to grab a sleeping bag. My dad was snuggly with a strange lady with blonde hair. My dad said, ‘This is my friend.’ Yeah, right, just a friend. That’s why I kind of had a freak out. I wasn’t going to stay there for 25 minutes to talk to my dad’s so-called ‘friend.’”

This “freak out” reaction, our feelings of helplessness, and the sensitivity of this experience are not uncommon to single parents who date. Brent had told his daughter that he was dating and she had heard him talking with someone on the phone. But she wasn’t ready to actually see her daddy with that person. And she wasn’t sure that she liked it. She emotionally needed space after setting some boundaries (turning on more lights). She was certainly not interested in getting to...
know me that night. My heart ached for what I imagined this daughter’s confusion to be. That night we realized the need to choreograph our developing relationship with the emotional needs of nine children. We had been caught off guard in spite of careful planning.

Dating as a single parent is complicated and often hard. Sometimes it’s a struggle to just survive, with little time, money, or energy to even think about dating. The most carefully laid plans are inevitably unraveled by unpredictable children. There are myriad individual circumstances and questions. When should I start dating? How can I find time to date with all of the heavy demands? Is it okay not to date? How do I balance my needs and the needs of my children? Am I being selfish? When and what do I tell my kids as a relationship develops? What are the messages and values that I am communicating to my children?

As parents, nurturing our children and teaching them values is our stewardship from the Lord, no matter our circumstances. Sometimes when caught up in a new romantic relationship, single parents unknowingly may lose perspective. When dating Brent, there were moments I caught myself feeling off balance. My 11-year-old daughter said, “I was in your bathroom and you were all nervous getting ready and you asked, ‘What should I wear?’ Just like a teenager.” She noticed much more than I realized. Though my feelings were normal, it was important to evaluate the messages I sent and to be consistent and available. How Brent and I spent time and what we chose to do clearly communicated our priorities, values, and commitment to our kids, each other, and the Lord.

We found answers concerning dating and our relationship in frequent, honest discussions with each other; in counseling with bishops and professionals; in books; and especially through tutoring from the Holy Spirit. The things we learned were simple in concept but sometimes difficult to implement. First, choose actions that communicate that each child is a precious gift. Second, identify and address your own physical, social, emotional, and spiritual needs, modeling healthy living and relationships. Third, allow your romantic relationship and new relationships among prospective family members to grow at the appropriate time, in natural ways, and at a natural pace.

CHILDMEN ARE A PRECIOUS GIFT

“Children are an heritage of the Lord” (Psalm 127:3). As children feel how precious they are to their parent and understand their valued place in the family—especially in single-parent homes, where there has been some trauma or loss—they feel more secure and have the resources physically and emotionally to grow and develop. In single-parent homes there can be harmful role reversals that are confusing to children. Sometimes, because parents are in pain, they may look to children to fill emotional needs in ways that are inappropriate. For example, it took conscious effort for me not to put too much responsibility on my oldest son and to avoid interacting with him as a peer or confidant.
Parents need to clearly communicate, “I am the parent. It is my job to be the parent. You do not need to worry about taking care of me.”

A parent can communicate how precious an individual child is by being involved in the seemingly small but important events of his or her life. When Brent and I began dating, I told him immediately that I didn’t go out on Friday nights because of my son’s football games. In return he told me he would not date on the nights when his children were with him. As our relationship became more serious, we continually assessed the circumstances, responses, and needs of each child, searching for how to best communicate our interest, love, and commitment.

**MODEL HEALTHY LIVING**
Our children’s health and healing mirrored our own. We tried to be examples of physical and emotional health by paying attention to our own wellbeing. Healthy people attract others who are healthy, and they have healthier relationships. It’s perfectly acceptable not to date because of individual or family circumstances. Brent and I both devoted a lot of time, before we met, in working individually to make sure we were ready for dating and a romantic relationship.

After my divorce, there were several things that helped me to heal and meet my individual needs. Through inspiration, my path included exercising with friends, working with a competent counselor, and completing graduate studies while trying to balance the demands of my schooling with the needs of my five young children. I would occasionally date, but it was just too hard and not a priority. It was my season to fulfill my responsibilities as a mother. When I was introduced to Brent, I had been divorced ten years. I was content in my life, but the Spirit was nudging me to grow in new directions.

After his divorce, Brent focused on his children’s needs and worked extensively with a trusted counselor to heal and to prepare for a new life. We each realized our dependence on the Lord and gained strength and direction through searching the scriptures and attending the temple regularly.

**NATURAL PROGRESSION AND PACE**
Though we knew that we were really interested in and attracted to one another, we consciously limited the involvement of our children (beyond just meeting briefly at the door or when we were in transit). It was important to us to protect them. Children should not be exposed too early in relationships because they may become emotionally involved, only to potentially experience additional heartache and loss. After considerable time, there came a point when our relationship had deepened and it spiritually felt natural to involve the children in the process.

We carefully worked together to plan more formal introductions and experiences for our children. We often asked, “What is the message that we should be communicating to our children now?” Those messages varied according to the individual needs and developmental stage of each child. When we introduced our two daughters, ages 11 and 12, we planned a “safe” activity of noncompetitive fun and lots of laughing. The older teenagers needed more casual interactions that felt unplanned and like “hanging out.”

We talked with the children about our growing feelings for each other. We allowed them to ask questions: “What does this mean to me?” “Do I have to move? Change schools?” We found it most effective to support the children as they found answers and observed and accepted our relationship and resulting changes on their own terms and in their own time.

Shortly after our wedding, one son commented, “Your
After considerable time, there came a point when our relationship had deepened and it spiritually felt natural to involve the children in the process.

getting married was kind of expected. We saw it coming and could be ready.” When Brent told his once-startled daughter that he was in love with me and that he was going to ask me to marry him, her response was, “Duh, do ya think?” We considered these comments wonderful compliments.

CONCLUSION
Our experiences are not uncommon to single parents who are devoted to their family and the Lord. A valuable tool for us is found in Proverbs: “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (3:5). Just as we tried to learn what to do for each of our children at particular times, we found that the Lord knew what we needed and when. There are still many things to figure out, but Brent and I have been given the gift of each other and want to share that joy with our children.

Kerri L. Robinson, LCSW, MSW, is a licensed clinical social worker, most-of-the-time mom, and part-time therapist with the Family Support and Treatment Center. Brent W. Robinson, MBA, is a dad and principal in the Durian Group, an information technology consulting company. They are blending a family of nine children and one grandchild.

Additional Reading
A. Dean Byrd (1997), Finding Wholeness and Happiness After Divorce (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book).

Frances E. Warden (2000, July), Time and the single parent, Ensign, 30(7), 30–34.

Robert E. Wells (1997, August), Uniting blended families, Ensign, 27(8), 24–29.