Forever Families
Forever Families (www.foreverfamilies.net), a website sponsored by Brigham Young University’s School of Family Life, is a resource for parents and individuals who want to strengthen familial bonds in their own families and their communities.

The website contains numerous articles all hinging on The Family: A Proclamation to the World. The Proclamation was issued in 1995 by the leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a guide to the structure and function of families in today’s world. The publication Helping and Healing Our Families, which was highlighted in the summer 2005 issue of Marriage & Families, is similar to Forever Families in that it contains articles that expound upon the Proclamation.

Divided into several different categories, the articles found on the website cater to every stage of life, including preparing for marriage, marriage, parenting, step-families, and issues facing families today. The articles are written by BYU students who work as interns to professors in the School of Family Life, specifically with Professor Stephen Duncan. They are mentored in writing family science information and the articles are monitored and edited by their professors.

Accompanying the articles are lists of sources for further research, and many of the articles also have references for more information. Use of information on the site is not restricted, but readers are asked to reference the author and site if they use it in their own newsletters or publications.
OVERCOMING MYTHS ABOUT MARRIAGE
By Jeffry H. Larson

HELPING THOSE WITH EATING DISORDERS
By Marleen S. Williams

BLENDED FAMILIES
By S. Brent and Janet S. Scharman

SINGLE-PARENT DATING AND PARENTING
By Kerri L. and Brent W. Robinson

NEWS:
• MEAN GIRLS START IN PRESCHOOL
• GUIDANCE FOR FAMILIES STRUGGLING WITH CANCER
Most couples have never participated in marriage education of any kind except what they read in newspapers and magazines. No one told them what adjustments they would need to make in the early years of marriage nor did they realize the myths about marriage that they would likely come to believe. Few of us know on our wedding day that our relationship will go through predictable stages as we adjust to being husband and wife. Even for those who have lived together for some time, being married is cognitively, emotionally, legally, spiritually, and socially different. Our expectations of each other change some when we assume the husband and wife roles. For example, one of you is now expected to manage “the” checkbook effectively. Now you expect to discuss large purchases with each other rather than unilaterally making expenditure decisions as you did when you were single. As we try to make adjustments we are, unfortunately, vulnerable to developing myths about each other and how to make these changes. But first, let’s look at the inevitable changes that occur over time.

Not only do we now expect more of each other but we fail to understand that our love for each other is going to change too, from more romantic love to more companionate love (friendship). I call these changes the three stages of marriage. All couples experience these three stages in some
form or another. Some couples go through these relationship stages faster than others. Some get stuck in one for significant periods of time. Let’s look at how the problem of marital malaise gets started and solutions to not getting stuck.

The Three Stages of Marriage

Most marriages develop through three stages, in this order:
1. Romantic love
2. Disillusionment and distraction
3. Dissolution or adjustment with resignation or contentment.

Stage 1: Romantic Love Stage

Most couples get married in a state of romantic love that many describe as ecstasy. Ecstasy comes from a Greek word meaning “deranged.” That is, our love at this stage in our marriage is primarily sexual, passionate, irrational, and based on physical attraction. It’s all the more ecstatic because communication at this stage is relatively easy with much rapport. At this stage you have not had to make any big sacrifices; you have experienced no major crises yet. You intentionally, although somewhat unconsciously, show your partner only your good side—for example, watching your physical appearance and dress so that you continue to dazzle your partner and make him think he’s the luckiest guy in the world.

Our expectations of our partner and the relationship are also irrational during this honeymoon period. We may expect our partner to meet all of our needs for acceptance and love. You may see him as the ultimate protector or her as the ultimate nurturer, your fountain of affection and caring. You finally found the person who will heal your inner wound from the past and meet all your emotional needs. Romantic love like this is mother nature’s way of attracting men and women to each other long enough for a more stable and meaningful relationship to take seed and begin to grow. In this stage of marriage, couples report, “Oh, I love him so much—he’s perfect for me!” “I want to make you the happiest woman in the world!” “You have made me the happiest guy in the world!” It’s like whirling around in a tornado of romance. Great fun! Mother nature has done her job well! But after a while it’s time to settle in to being really married and experiencing both the highs and the lows of married life. Couples then move into stage 2.

Stage 2: Disillusionment and Distraction.

The problem with romantic love is that inevitably, sooner or later, it slips away. “The honeymoon always ends. The bloom of romance always fades.” As romantic love diminishes, other challenges begin to appear in our personal and couple lives. Daily life is stressful by itself. Learning to share the bathroom, working out marital roles (who cleans the toilet or takes out the garage, who initiates sex, who manages the checkbook, and so on) and the stress associated with balancing two careers and still making time for each other all take a toll on us physically and emotionally, and the vitality of our relationship suffers. These occurrences are not inherently bad—they are an unavoidable part of life. But they are more difficult transitions than we thought they would be. In addition, some of our fantasies just do not come true; for example, we are surprised and even shocked at realizations like these:

Romantic love like this is mother nature’s way of attracting men and women to each other long enough for a more stable and meaningful relationship to take seed and begin to grow.
• He isn’t always thinking of me.
• She doesn’t call me every day at work to say, “I love you.”
• He is a bit more overweight than I originally thought. How did I miss that?
• I thought she was going to work too. Now I have to make all the money, and there isn’t enough.
• Wow, does he have a temper when he doesn’t get enough rest! Where did that come from?

In short, marriage ultimately disappoints you as well as fulfills you. This natural but painful difference between fantasy and reality (discovered months after the wedding) commonly leads to disillusionment.

It’s also disillusioning to discover that meshing two distinct personalities is more challenging than you thought it would be. Personality traits not revealed during courtship or the honeymoon start to appear when you’re under stress—anger not seen before, depression on certain days of the month, or irritability that sometimes goes on for days.

Perhaps most shocking, now your partner shows you his dark or more basic side: he “forgets” to shave while on vacation, throws his clothes directly on your path to the bathroom, and scratches where it itches! In other words, having won over our partner by showing her our most positive behaviors (this used to be called the courtship) and then marrying her, we now relax (sometimes too much) and show her the other side. This other side does not stimulate romantic love! We’re caught in a situation where we want to change our partner and may even regret marrying him. All this is normal—Marriage Adjustment 101! (Does that make you feel any better? I hope so!)

Add to these changes in the relationship and your circumstances a stressful event or a crisis (buying a home, the arrival of children and the stresses of parenting, a chronic illness, a miscarriage, loss of a valued job) and the resultant sacrifices you have to make to get along with your partner, and it’s enough to send many couples into a tailspin! Life also holds out many natural distractions that cause us to focus away from our marriage and onto other life necessities, such as raising children; working and paying the bills; advancing in our careers; engaging in hobbies, sports, recreation, television, the internet; and PTA or other community meetings.

None of these distractions are inherently harmful—they just rob of us of time together as a couple, unless we can arrange to do some of them together (hobbies, sports, children). We become too busy for our marriages. And dating activities as a couple cease entirely, especially after children have come into the picture.

This combination of disillusionment and distractions also hurts your sex life. Two of the most common causes of sexual problems in marriage—stress and fatigue—are the result of many of the distractions I’ve listed. We become “spread too thin” emotionally and physically, leaving too little time and energy for our relationship, let alone our sex life. And sexual boredom may occur as a result of not being more creative and playful in our private moments.

Now some good news! Most couples make it past this stage and end up with a vital, satisfying marriage. You can, too. Let’s look at what happens in the next stage to determine where you will eventually settle.

Stage 3: Dissolution or Adjustment with Resignation or Contentment

By the time couples get to the end of stage 2, they know there is something wrong with their marriage. Feeling disappointed and discontent, the
question is, “What should we do?” You have three options.

1. You can give up, dissolving the relationship through separation or divorce.

2. You can just keep on trying to survive, day to day, in an unsatisfying marriage—I call this adjusting with resignation. There is little love in such a marriage. Couples in resigned marriages progressively grow apart, and their lives end up on parallel tracks—much like living with a roommate who has her own life and rarely shares it with you. They stay together because they are afraid or feel too guilty to divorce, fear the effects of divorce on their children, cannot afford to split. They lead lives of marital mediocrity and think there are no good solutions out there for them except to keep plodding along.

3. You can decide to be more content. Adjusting with contentment occurs when you still love each other but your love has become more like a good friendship with some passion thrown in. Altruistic love may have developed by now too. This is the self-giving kind of love that is kind and patient, not demanding. It’s the kind of love defined by Harry Stack Sullivan, a famous psychiatrist, as “when the satisfaction or the security of another person becomes as significant as is one’s own satisfaction or security.” I’m suggesting that a successful marriage is based on all three types of love: romantic, companionate, and altruistic. Adjusting with contentment also requires an awareness of your marital situation and the areas you want to improve in your relationship to become more content. Then add commitment to improving your marriage and the tools with which to do it. With some dedicated work and adjustments, your marriage will improve. The purpose of this article is to help you begin this process, which will ultimately result in greater contentment.

It’s Your Decision
So, where is your marriage right now? Probably in stage 2 or 3. What do you want to do? Unfortunately, too many couples choose alternative 1 or 2. Everyone knows the divorce rate in the United States is too high. But few people acknowledge that the number of unhappy but stable (unseparated or undivorced) couples in the country is nearly as high as the divorce rate (currently about 40 percent of couples who marry will eventually divorce). What a shame, to live your married life in resigned misery or mediocrity. It’s a national health problem.

The Benefits of Knowing the Stages and Options
Understanding the stages of relationship development and your action options will benefit you in the following ways:

- It normalizes the stresses, changes, and challenges you face so that you no longer feel like you’re different from others or all alone in this.
- It helps you assess where your marriage currently is so that you know what to expect next and better understand the options open to you.
- It helps you realize that you can make conscious choices about your marital future. You can avoid accepting an unsatisfying but stable marriage when you know you can have much more.
- It encourages you to make a conscious choice together to do option 3 above rather than option 1 or 2.

Myths About Marriage that Sustain Problems
It’s not enough to know that marriage changes over time. Myths about marriage—beliefs we hold as true that have no basis in reality or scientific evidence—also help sustain, and sometimes create, marriage problems. To assess your beliefs in marital myths, rate how much you agree or disagree with each of the statements in the worksheet on the following page.
For each of the myths you agreed with, think of your reasoning in support of the myth. For example, who taught you this myth? What evidence do you have that this myth is true or false? Your belief-in-myths score is high if you agreed or strongly agreed with five or more of the myths. If you agreed or strongly agreed with three or four myths, your score is moderate. Agreeing with two or fewer is a low myth score. The more myths you marked “Undecided” to “Strongly Disagree,” the better your understanding of the true nature of marriage and what it takes to be happily married.

**Debunking the Myths**

Let’s go into more detail on these ten myths about marriage. We’ll see why each myth is false and provide an alternative, more realistic belief for each myth. I believe that if you can rid yourself of your beliefs in these myths and start thinking more realistically about marriage, you will have taken an important step toward a more satisfying and ultimately easier experience in improving your marriage.

**The ESP Myth**

The myth: *If my spouse loves me, he should instinctively know what I want and need to be happy.*

This is referred to as the ESP or extrasensory perception (mind reading) myth because it erroneously suggests that spouses can read each other’s minds and that only if they do are they really loving people. This is simply not true! Many divorced couples remember saying, “If he had really loved me, he would have automatically known what I needed.” Research shows that even spouses married for a long time (twenty-five years or more)
do not necessarily know or understand each other significantly better than couples married for a shorter period of time. Someone once explained this using a prisoner example: two prisoners may have spent twenty-five years together but still know very little about each other. Might the same not be true of spouses?

The point is, you have to communicate clearly about what you want and need from your partner for her to start meeting your needs. And it’s not unrealistic to expect to repeat yourself sometimes. This is because all of us have a lot on our minds, along with all of those conflicting interests and stresses (kids’ needs, bosses’ needs, and so on).

The Reality: If my spouse really loves me, she will openly and respectfully tell me what she needs and not expect me to read her mind.

The “I’m-Good-Enough-Just-As-I-Am” Myth

The myth: No matter how I behave, my spouse should love me simply because she is my spouse.

This myth suggests that my own existence regardless of my neglectful, obnoxious, or abusive behavior should make you love me, automatically. I once heard a husband say to his wife in marital therapy, “You should love me for who I am—it’s your duty! When you signed that piece of paper [the marriage certificate] you committed to me regardless of what I do!” He used this duty statement as a manipulation to keep her in their abusive marriage.

But the fact is, my feelings for you are largely based on how you treat me. If you treat me consistently poorly, don’t expect me to love you as a result. I may still be committed to our marriage because I think you can change and become more loving, but don’t expect love to come automatically.

The reality: Your spouse will love you to the extent that you are loveable, and that’s based largely on your behavior.

The Finger-Pointing-Will-Change-Him Myth

The myth: I can change my spouse by pointing out his inadequacies, errors, and other flaws.

No one likes to be negatively confronted or blamed. That’s human nature. And to be reminded regularly that you’re a creep is even worse! The more you remind me of my inadequacies, the less I want to change because after one or two requests, it now becomes a power struggle. This is especially true for husbands. No man likes to think he is controlled by a woman (or anyone else, for that matter!). If you repeatedly hound him (nag), even though he may actually want to change his behavior as you would like him to, he probably will not because then you win and he loses.

Perhaps you have heard the expression “Catch ’em doing something good.” Reinforcing positive behavior works better than regular punishment for negative behavior. But it does not include nagging!

The reality: I can positively influence my spouse’s behavior if I know how, and that can be learned. But nagging does not work.

The Love-in-a-Vacuum Myth

The myth: Either my spouse loves me or does not love me; nothing I do will affect the way she feels about me.

This myth is similar to “I’m good enough just as I am” in its assumption that feelings and behaviors are separate and unrelated. Spouses who believe this myth are often just using it as an excuse not to change themselves.

The fact is, if I exhibit loving behaviors, her love for me will increase in a reciprocal way. To prove my point, just ask your spouse to complete this sentence: “I feel loved when you (list ten specific behaviors).” Then choose one or two of the specific behaviors on her list to start doing sincerely every day for one month. At the end of the month, ask your partner is she feels more love for you. She will. Love does not exist in a vacuum—it is strongly influenced, day-to-day, by our behavior and our partner’s behavior.
The reality: If I behave more lovingly, she will love me more.

**The Let-It-All-Hang-Out Myth**

The myth: The more my spouse discloses positive and negative information to me, the closer I will feel to her and the greater our marital satisfaction will be.

So we should tell our partner everything that is on our mind, right? Just let it all hang out. After all, you’re soulmates. Wrong! Recently, marriage researchers have discovered the 5 to 1 rule. This holds that for every destructive or hurtful thing I say to my partner, I have to say five positive things to balance the books. That shows that negative comments or disclosures are more emotionally powerful than positive comments or disclosures.

So watch what you disclose to your partner. First, ask yourself, Is telling her this going to seriously hurt her? Is this information that she really doesn’t need because it has little influence on our marriage? Here are some examples of things better left undisclosed:

- Something embarrassing from your past that is unrelated to your current relationship—for example, “Last year you really embarrassed me at the company picnic with your silly jokes.”

- Negative thoughts or feelings about someone that has no constructive purpose if told to your spouse—for example, “You know, your father is really a slob. I don’t know how your mother puts up with him!”

- Unsolicited negative comments about your partner’s weight, looks, dress, style, hairdo, and so on. It is better just to pay a compliment when you notice something you like.

The Reality: The expression of positive thoughts and feelings increases marital satisfaction the most. If you have something negative to disclose, watch how you do it so as not to offend.

**The My-Feelings-Have-to-Change-First Myth**

The myth: I must first feel better about my partner before I can change my behavior toward him.

It will be easier to give him more compliments or do him more favors if you first feel more love for him, but how do you change your feelings first? Where is the magic potion? Therapists have little advice on how to feel better first. In comparison, we know a good deal about how to help change your behavior. And it’s much more practical to focus on overt behavior first. Besides, the reciprocal relationship between feelings and behavior means that if you change one (behavior), the other (feelings) will change, too. Let me issue this warning: If you wait until you feel better about him first before changing your behavior, you will probably never change your behavior!

The Reality: Part of being married is learning that you sometimes have to do things for your partner that you would rather not do, simply to please your partner. As he becomes happier, he will likely reciprocate with pleasing behaviors too, and you, too, will be happier (your feelings change). Plus, you will feel much better about yourself as a result of changing your behavior first without hesitating too long.

**The Romantic-Love-Is-the-Key Myth**

The myth: Maintaining romantic love is the key to marital happiness over the life span for most couples.

Having read my earlier comments about the relative importance of companionate love versus romantic love in preserving long-term marriages, you may not have agreed with this statement! Although maintaining romantic love has some positive effect on long-term

---

**The Romantic-Love-Is-the-Key Myth:**

**Maintaining ROMANTIC love is the key to marital happiness over the life span for most couples.**
marital satisfaction, you need to become friends, preferably before or shortly after marriage. You also need to become more altruistic. These three kinds of love can together preserve your relationship over the life of your marriage.

The reality: *It takes compassionate and altruistic love, too, to preserve your marriage.*

**The It’s-A-50-50-Deal Myth**

The myth: *Marriage should always be a 50-50 partnership.*

Unfortunately, circumstances and individuals are too complicated to assume that we can always maintain equal inputs into our marriage. Some days (say, when my wife is sick) I may have to put 90 percent into my marriage while my wife only puts in 10 percent. The next week, that could change to a 10 percent – 90 percent ratio due to illnesses, job responsibilities, child-rearing problems, or other circumstances. Over the short term, you cannot have a 50-50 marriage. Over the *long-term,* happily married couples report more of a 50-50 contribution to their marriage. In addition, couples who try to split everything equally forget that some things in marriage may be best done by the person most competent at it—for example, car repairs may be easy for me but difficult for you. So I’ll do all the car repairs. That’s fair to both of us but may not reflect a 50-50 marriage as far as car maintenance goes.

The sign of a troubled marriage, incidentally, is when spouses keep tally sheets in their heads, counting everything they do for their partner and resentfully saying, “You owe me!”

The reality: *Your marriage will be stronger if you focus on pleasing your partner and making sure you are doing all you reasonably can to contribute without keeping a tally.*

**The Marriage-Is-the-Ultimate-Answer Myth**

The myth: *Marriage can fulfill all of my needs.*

Newly married couples often think this, but after a few months of marriage, they discover the reality that they have many needs and marriage can only fulfill some of them. Each person is responsible for getting those other needs met. For example, a young bride complained that her new husband wouldn’t sit and listen to her (endlessly, it seemed to him) at the end of the day and meet her need for meaningful conversation and understanding. He was not used to such long, intimate conversations and quickly tired and eventually got irritated. Luckily, she soon started sharing more of her feelings with close friends, without concluding that her marriage was poor because her husband didn’t meet all her needs for conversation.

The fact that you’re married does not alter the fact that you should still expect to meet many of your needs outside of marriage, just as before you were married. For example, my need to play golf has never been fulfilled with my wife as my golf partner. She just doesn’t like the game. My male buddies do, and so they fill my need for golf course companionship, competition, conversation, and so on.

The reality: *Marriage can fulfill many of my needs, and the others can be fulfilled by other appropriate people.*

**The Keep-Quiet-and-Do-It-Alone Myth**

The myth: *Couples should keep their problems to themselves and solve them alone.*

This is called the intermarriage taboo. That is, it is taboo to talk to others about your marriage or to seek help outside of marriage. In America we value privacy, but not all cultures do. Too many couples keep their problems to themselves until it is too late—the marriage is so dysfunctional that it’s really impossible to repair even by marital therapists. I admire a spirit of independence—we can do it ourselves—but another sign of strength is
knowing when to seek outside assistance to improve your marriage.

There are many loving and professional people ready and willing to help you resolve your marital problems—close family members, friends, clergy, and therapists. Many of our life problems are, after all, solved through others who care. Who cares deeply about you and your marriage who could serve as a sympathetic ear or a source of encouragement or advice? It needs to be a person who can hold confidences like a good friend or a professional. The more objective the person (such as clergy or marital therapist), the better.

The reality: Keeping your problems quiet and going it alone often leads to failure. Get trusted others to help you.

What’s Next?
Now that you better understand where your marriage stands in the stages of marriage model and you are thinking more realistically about your relationship and how individuals change, you are ready to more objectively assess or evaluate the condition of your marriage and set goals for improvement. It may be time for a “marriage tune-up”.

Tune-ups are relatively easy to do, inexpensive, take little time, and focus on identifying your assets and liabilities as a couple. Most can be done without the assistance of a licensed marital therapist. In cases where problems are more chronic or serious, couples can take their tune-up results to a professional for assistance.

An approach based on good theory and research on what predicts marital satisfaction is called The Great Marriage Tune-Up Book (Larson, 2004). Using this tune-up manual, couples assess their individual traits (e.g. personality traits), couple traits (e.g. communication skills) and contextual or environmental traits in which their marriage functions (e.g. stress from outside sources). Guidelines are given for how to use the results (like an x-ray of your marriage) to celebrate your assets and improve on your liabilities. The whole process takes only 3-4 hours.

Other resources for couple assessment and enrichment can be found at this website: www.smartmarriages.com. Enrichment approaches like tune-ups are more preventive than treatment. Prevention is less expensive, time consuming, scary, inconvenient, and stressful; and, it’s more private than therapy. It is the thing to do to vitalize your marriage!

Jeffry H. Larson, Ph.D. is a professor of Marriage and Family Therapy at Brigham Young University. He was the chairperson of the Marriage Preparation Focus Group of the national Council on Family Relations and has been a marriage and family therapist for 25 years. He is the author of two books, Should We Stay Together? (Jossey-Bass) and The Great Marriage Tune-Up Book: A Proven Program for Evaluating and Renewing Your Relationship (Jossey-Bass), from which this article is adapted.

Notes
4. Myths 1, 2, 4, and 6 from N.S Jacobson and G. Margolin, Marital Therapy (New York: Burre/Mazel, 1979); remainder from A. A. Lazarus, Marital Myths (San Luis Obispo, Calif.: Impact, 1985).
6. Jacobson and Margolin, Marital Therapy, p. 148
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
They became alarmed and confused when her weight dropped dangerously low and she adamantly refused to eat many of the foods prepared for the rest of the family. She became secretive about her eating and disappeared into the bathroom after meals. Her parents could not understand what was happening to their “perfect” daughter. They struggled to understand the tempest raging inside her that was ruining her health and causing her to withdraw emotionally from the family. Like many high-achieving, perfectionist women, Lucy had developed an eating disorder. This was her way of feeling “in control” as pressures in her life mounted.

Most individuals with eating disorders are women, but men are also at risk. The prevalence for both men and women is rising sharply. Although on the surface these disorders appear to be about food and eating, it is important to understand that they represent struggles with deeper problems. You might think of struggles with food, weight, and eating habits as the tip of a large iceberg. The tip is visible. Underneath the surface, however, is a larger mass of concerns that can be even more dangerous to the person’s physical, emotional, and spiritual welfare.

Many individuals develop eating disorders as they attempt to master the skills necessary to live in the adult world. When these seem overwhelming, life may feel beyond their control. Some of these skills include learning how to have healthy relationships; becoming independent; understanding and regulating emotions; understanding new feelings and changes in their bodies as they enter puberty; managing social and cultural pressures to achieve; countering false media messages about thinness, beauty, and individual worth; and developing an adult identity. Difficulty in mastering these skills may flood young people with fear of not being “good enough.”

Young people in today’s world have more choices and opportunities than ever be-
before in history. However, the expectation to do everything and do it all with excellence can create stress. Teens may not always have sufficient opportunity to learn important skills for managing stress, choosing between possible options, and setting priorities. They may also be required to perform beyond their current capabilities. When faced with these impossible situations, they frequently turn to the belief that keeping their eating and weight perfectly under control can provide a solution to their distress.

Mary’s family moved when she was in the ninth grade. When she entered her new school, she felt lonely and frightened. She noticed that many of the more popular girls were very thin. Her body was naturally more rounded. She believed that her classmates would like her more if she could lose weight. She also began struggling to keep up in school.

Mary began to feel overwhelmed, left out, and under stress. She heard from some of the other girls that you could “eat whatever you wanted if you just throw it up after you eat.” At first, she believed that this was the solution to her problems. She thought she could comfort her loneliness with food and still get thinner through purging (throwing up). This did not provide any real, lasting solutions to her problems, however. After a while, she found that she could not stop the cycle of bingeing and purging. What had been an attempt to control her life was now controlling her.

Eating disorders involve dynamics similar to other addictions. When skills are lacking to manage painful emotions, a person may turn to “quick-fix” solutions such as food, drugs, pornography, compulsive sex, alcohol, or compulsive shopping. These “quick-fix” solutions may temporarily soothe painful feelings but result in even more painful consequences. In addition, the “quick fix” does not provide a real solution to the original problem. The person begins to feel helpless, inadequate, and out of control. This creates more emotional pain and even further reliance on the “quick-fix.” Recovering from an addiction requires learning new skills, attitudes, and behaviors in addition to stopping the “quick-fix” behavior.
Mary had always trusted her parents. When she expressed her loneliness and fear of failing in school, her mother listened attentively without judging or punishing. She gently told Mary that she knew Mary had an eating disorder and that she wanted to help Mary. She reassured her that her health and happiness were more important than being a high achiever. She asked Mary what kind of support she needed to feel more confident at school. Her parents hired a tutor to help with her hardest classes. Her mother also agreed to prepare healthier meals and have healthy food available. This made it easier for Mary to manage her weight without bingeing and purging. Mary also agreed to see a counselor and a dietician. Her parents took the counselor’s suggestion to let Mary invite friends over to the house more often and even included a friend on some family outings.

Mary’s father and brothers eliminated any negative comments about women’s weight and body size. They complimented Mary on her strengths and positive qualities. She began to appreciate her own unique beauty. As Mary began to feel more comfortable, she seldom resorted to bingeing and purging.

Many Latter-day Saints and other religiously-oriented individuals who struggle with eating disorders also struggle with spiritual concerns. They may misinterpret gospel concepts and see God as a demanding, punitive parent who is angry or withdraws love when they fail to perform well or struggle with weaknesses. They may not understand the difference between a frantic drive for a flawless performance and a healthy quest for wholeness, growth, and eternal perfection. Christ’s admonition to be perfect (see Matthew 5:48) is not a command to immediately possess all possible skills and good qualities without ever making a mistake. It is a commandment to enter into a covenant process that involves repentance, change, and growth.

This process is dependent upon Christ’s Atonement and takes time, experience, and patience. Christ is the only one who ever lived a perfect life. However, even He “continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness” (D&C 93:13). The Prophet Joseph Smith clarified the spiritual quest for perfection:

> When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave.

People with perfectionist tendencies experience excessive shame over mistakes and struggles. They believe they are lovable and valued only if their lives are perfect. If young people have experienced abuse or other painful life events,
they may interpret these traumatic events as evidence that God has abandoned them because they are unlovable. They may then turn to perfectionism and eating problems as a way to compensate for deep feelings of inadequacy and perceived unworthiness. Helping Latter-day Saints and others come to an accurate understanding of God’s love, the Atonement, and the purposes of mortality can help them develop spiritual resources to combat the eating disorder.

How can parents and loved ones help to calm the emotional, psychological, and spiritual storm that accompanies an eating disorder? Do not try to control the person’s eating for them. People with eating disorders often struggle with confusion about control of their own behavior. Tightening control by trying to force them to eat, forcing them on a diet, monitoring their eating, or other coercive measures usually backfires. It is important to understand, however, that eating disorders can be extremely dangerous. They contribute to serious health problems such as heart irregularities, osteoporosis, severe dental problems, infertility, gastrointestinal problems, and kidney failure and have a mortality rate as high as 20 percent.³

Warning signs that professional help is needed include rapid weight loss of 25 percent or more, or body mass index (BMI) below 19 (e.g., 5’7” and 121 lbs., 5’1” and 100 lbs.); prolonged exercise despite fatigue and weakness; intense fear of gaining weight; peculiar patterns of handling food; amenorrhea in women; episodes of bingeing and purging more than once a week for 3 months or longer; depression, suicidal thoughts, frequent insomnia, or extreme mood swings; insistence on dieting even though build/body is very slim; hair loss, fainting spells, gastrointestinal disturbances, frequent sore throats, and swollen glands or cheeks. Suggestions for those who wish to help a loved one with an eating disorder⁴ include the following:

• Reinforce definitions of success that focus on personal qualities rather than performance, achievement, and appearance. For example, being a good friend may be more important than winning a competition.
• Honor diversity of appearance and body build. Beauty is found in many sizes, shapes, and colors.
• Be aware of how competition and perfectionism can negatively affect relationships.
• Be inclusive rather than exclusive. A Zion community has a place of value and belonging for all of its members.
• Keep conversations about eating supportive and confidential rather than adversarial. Focus on concern for health rather than weight or appearance.
• Do not try to change the behavior yourself. Seek help from God and appropriate Church leaders. Seek competent professional help if necessary.
• Be supportive. Be available

He who calmed the tempest and stilled the sea can also calm the soul and bring peace to a troubled heart.
to listen with understanding. Show you care. Encourage the person to get help.

- Be yourself. Share your own struggles and challenges. Be open and real.
- Remember that a person with an eating disorder is just that—a person first and only secondarily a person who has problems with food.
- Provide positive reinforcement for strengths. This builds feelings of self-worth.
- Understand that recovery can be a slow process and may involve setbacks.
- Give nonjudgmental feedback. Use “I” statements such as, “I worry about you when you don’t join us for dinner.”
- Model healthy eating habits and attitudes.

A spiritual perspective can strengthen family relationships when a family member struggles with an eating disorder. Christ promised peace to those who have faith in him (see John 14:27; 16:33). That peace is not a promise of a “perfect” life without struggles, temptations, and challenges. It is not peace “as the world giveth,” but the peace that comes from a correct understanding of the plan of salvation and from faith in Christ. He who calmed the tempest and stilled the sea can also calm the soul and bring peace to a troubled heart. This peace enables us to continue toward exaltation and eternal life with patience and hope.

Marleen S. Williams works as associate clinical professor of counseling psychology at Brigham Young University. Her Ph.D. is in clinical psychology and she specializes in women’s mental health. She and her husband, Dr. Robert F. Williams, have nine children and sixteen grandchildren.

Additional Reading
Deborah Low (2002), The Quest for Peace, Love and a 24” Waist (Springville, UT: Bonneville Books).


Notes
1. Names have been changed.
2. Eating Disorders Coalition website, http://www.edauk.com
6. Gurze Books is an excellent resource for books on eating disorders; visit http://www.gurze.com
Alex and Terri were two individuals whose lives took some unexpected turns. Alex served a successful mission, went to college where he met Terri, and was married at 23. In a 15-year marriage, Alex and Terri had three children and held a variety of Church callings, but developed an escalating pattern of bickering that progressed to explosive confrontations and divorce.

Barbara met Kyle in an institute class at the community college, and it was love at first sight. They had two children in their 10-year marriage and their love seemed to grow each day. Barbara’s life fell apart when she received a telephone call informing her that Kyle had been seriously hurt in an automobile accident. He died before she arrived at the hospital.

Approximately three years after Alex’s divorce and five years after Barbara was widowed, Alex and Barbara met, fell in love, and were married. None of their childhood dreams included a wedding reception with five children at their sides. They definitely had never pictured a wedding where the family of Barbara’s late husband was in attendance and expressing genuine feelings of love and best wishes.

Every blended family has its own story. Most parents of blended families freely acknowledge that their marriage and family

By S. Brent and Janet S. Scharman

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

There are no perfect families, either in the world or in the Church, but there are many good families . . . who are righteously and “anxiously engaged” in nurturing and providing for their families, often against such heavy odds!

—Elder Neal A. Maxwell
circumstances vary, sometimes dramatically, from what they had anticipated as younger people. Their family experiences are a mixture of good times and tremendous demands. When difficulties arise, some quickly assume the problems are associated with and maybe even caused by the complexity of being in a remarriage.

Unfortunately, like all families who focus on what they don’t have instead of what they do have, blended families may actually create unnecessary problems for themselves. It is true that blended families tend to be more complicated than two-parent biological families, but research supports the notion that the same ingredients vital to developing healthy first marriage families are also essential in remarrriages.

SUCCESSFUL FAMILIES

From earliest years, members of the Church have been taught the significance of marriage and of providing a healthy and righteous atmosphere for raising children. For a variety of reasons, people find themselves trying to fulfill this important responsibility in a blended family. Because their families are different in some ways from two-parent biological families, they sometimes wonder if they have the tools or if they can even access the blessings of our Heavenly Father to help their family progress eternally.

“The Family: A Proclamation to the World” is a powerful statement given to us by our prophetic leaders to guide our efforts as we desire to raise good families. Sometimes “disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation.” To those who worry that required adaptations for their family’s set of life’s complications may be too challenging, President Gordon B. Hinckley has offered this reassurance: “Every home,” he said, “can provide an environment of love which will be an environment of salvation.”

Elder Bruce C. Hafen of the Seventy reminded us that “family life is by its nature a continual struggle between the ideal and the real. But if your home often knows warm feelings of love and laughter, if your family is trying—even most of the time—to have family prayer, home evening, and honestly shared gospel experiences, you are learning the pattern for happiness.” And it is “devotion to God in the home,” President Faust said, that “seems to
forge the spiritual moorings and stability that can help the family cope.”

**FACTORS INCREASING THE LIKELIHOOD OF SUCCESS**

Every blended-family story is a complicated mix of sadness and disappointment combined with optimism. Two hundred years ago, Samuel Johnson said that remarriage “represents the triumph of hope over experience.” Half of all recent marriages in the United States are remarriages for either the husband, wife, or both. This is a remarkable figure given that all remarriages are born out of loss, either the death of a spouse or divorce. In spite of these painful experiences, most people desire to remarry if given an opportunity. About 75 percent of divorced people, even after a difficult first marriage, remarry, with 30 percent remarrying within a year after their divorce. The impact of this on children is tremendous. About one-third of children living in the United States today will live in a blended or stepfamily situation before they become adults.

As blended family and stepfamily life is becoming more prevalent, researchers are trying to understand the complex dynamics of this family structure. In a search of the professional literature, three scholars found that stepfamily research published in the 1990s exceeded the entire output of the previous 90 years of the century.

The good news is that today we know a lot about what is needed to help these families thrive. Elizabeth Einstein, a family therapist and also a member of a blended family, said of her earlier experiences: “My stepparenting mistakes were not so much misdeeds as misinformation.” With good information and the motivation to build on proven principles, all families can be optimistic about their chances to be productive and happy with those who matter most to them. The following are factors that have been shown to help blended families move forward in constructive ways.

**Losses are acknowledged and mourned.** All family members will have experienced significant losses prior to the organization of the new family, and each may need the opportunity...
to work through individual concerns on his or her own timetable. Losses will vary but may include relationships, money, prestige, security, and dreams. Divorced members of the Church may feel they are off course, stunted in their eternal progression without a way of redeeming themselves. Adjusting to divorce is sometimes more difficult than adjusting to the death of a spouse because of guilt, worries about failure, unresolved issues, and continued interactions with the former spouse concerning children. It can be helpful for individuals to take some extended time for healing or to seek help in overcoming old injuries.

During these times the power of the Atonement can be called upon and its comfort felt. In addition to hard work and perseverance, success in family life also requires hope, faith, and trust in our Heavenly Father. The Lord has promised each one of us, in our unique set of circumstances, that He will make up for our shortcomings both during and “after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23).

Children may be dealing with issues that are quite different from those the adults are experiencing. They may see a remarriage as an end to their hopes of parents’ reconciling at the very time when the adults are full of optimism for a new beginning. Children often need to be invited to talk about concerns, and they may prefer to talk with someone other than a parent. 

Expectations are realistic. It is important to remember that remarriage is not a replacement for a first marriage or a second chance to get a first marriage right. Remarriage is an entirely new, potentially rewarding opportunity. Being open to fresh possibilities and new ways of doing things, while keeping long-term, eternal goals in focus, can help families let go of the past and move forward. Many children experience what Judith Wallerstein calls “reconciliation fantasies.” Even if children were young when their parents divorced and both biological parents are now happily remarried, some children hang on to the hope that past issues can be resolved and their biological (or adoptive) parents will get back together. Understanding this particular dynamic can help parents to proceed carefully, making it possible for each individual to determine to what degree they will bond on an emotional level, be best buddies, or settle for a relationship that is less close. Openly acknowledging that the integration required for a group of people to feel like a family typically takes years, not weeks or months, can allow individual members the time and space they need to become comfortable with each other.

Loyalty conflicts can be common in blended families. Steprelatives do not have to love each other. At the same time, an unexpected side effect of developing feelings of love for a steprelative is a feeling that one is abandoning biological relatives. A young child, for example, may feel guilt at loving a stepfather as though it is a betrayal of his biological father. Such feelings, while they may sound illogical to an outsider who would point out that love is not exclusive or restrictive, may be surprisingly powerful and persistent.

The couple is unified. The Lord said, “If ye are not one ye are not mine” (D&C 38:27). Elder Robert E. Wells of the Seventy was raised in a stepfamily and then was a parent in his own stepfamily after the death of his first wife. Based on firsthand experience, he offered this wise observation: “Familial unity starts with the parents. Solidarity and love between couples help generate solidarity and love among siblings. That is why the primary relationship in a strong, unified family is the relationship between husband and wife.”

In remarriage, couples sometimes choose to put their relationship on hold while they work on the many complexities of their family, including forming good connections with stepchildren. While this is understandable, it is critical that couples view time together
as a necessity rather than a luxury. Spending time together is not only desirable for the couple; it provides good modeling and reassures the children about the stability of the relationship.

Both partners need to decide together how they will deal with major issues. Generally, it is a good idea to phase slowly into parenting one another’s children, allowing the biological parent to handle most of the disciplining of his or her own children initially. As time passes, parents of healthy families come to clearer agreement of how children should be reared.

*Satisfactory relationships are formed.* Gordon B. Hinckley was 20 years old when his mother Ada, his father’s second wife, died. “Gordon had never felt such emptiness or hurt,” his biography states.22 Less than a year and a half later, Gordon’s father announced to his children his intention to remarry. “The resulting silence was deafening.”23 “In our wildest dreams,” Gordon’s sister Ramona said, “I don’t think we imagined Father would remarry. We just couldn’t imagine him with anyone but Mother.”24 After the normal silences and awkward family interactions, Gordon’s father, Bryant, spent the time necessary to talk through the issues with his son; he reassured Gordon of his continued love of Ada but also of his desire not to be alone for the rest of his days on earth. From the first, May, the new stepmother, made it clear that she had no intentions of replacing Ada; she just wanted to find a place of her own in the family. It took time, but “Aunt May,” as they came to call her, was patient and loving and eventually earned the respect of all the family.25

Whether a person comes into the new family because there has been a death or a divorce, stepparents who at least initially define their role with their stepchildren as that of a friend are usually most satisfied.26 No matter how open, caring, sincere, or unselfish a person is, step-relationships may never feel exactly like biological or adoptive relationships, and that’s okay. Many report that, given time and opportunity, their interactions have progressed to a place where they are extremely meaningful and rewarding.

Often under-considered in discussions about remarriage adjustment are the multitude of individuals who do not live under the family roof. Forty percent of all families include step-grandparents, for example.27 Other relatives—uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, cousins, and even friends—are forced to adjust to the new family. One of the factors that make this particularly difficult is that, while a remarriage may significantly influence their lives, they may have had little or no input into the decision. Successful step-families are inclusive and make an effort to identify and reach out to concerned family members.

*Families are informed.* Successful families read enough relevant literature to have a basic awareness of what other blended families say has worked for them. Some individuals have found it beneficial to develop their own support system with one or two other successful, similar families.

It can be helpful to have some understanding of the typical stages of blended or stepfamily development.28 Patricia Papernow offers one model with these typical stages:

- Fantasy. This is a time filled with complex, hopeful wishes and expectations.
- Immersion. The family structure begins to appear and the stepparent may feel somewhat like an outsider.
- Awareness. Family members make more sense out of the confusion.
- Mobilization. During this sometimes chaotic, confusing time, differences are openly expressed as individuals are more aware of their feelings and are more comfortable in sharing them.
- Action. Enough time has passed that new negotiations are made about how the family
will function and new boundaries are drawn.
• Contact. The family now functions without constant attention to “step” issues, and more authentic one-on-one relationships are formed.
• Resolution. The family now has solid and reliable relationships and a new history is being created.

Most families go through these stages, although the timing and smoothness of progression may vary significantly from one family to another, and different life crises may cause the same family to cycle through some phases more than once. The important point is that families understand there are predictable phases their family is likely to experience. A difficult period of time should not signal to the family that life will always be hard or chaotic. In fact, over time, families naturally adjust and adapt. People tend to do best when they understand that the challenges they are experiencing are normal and most often temporary.

Constructive rituals are developed. Remarriage changes everything, both important and less significant things. Soon after a remarriage takes place the new family will have to decide how to celebrate a birthday, Christmas, the Fourth of July, or how to handle a summer vacation. If the children are older, traditions will have been formed. Traditions are good for families and most people reflect pleasantly as adults on the patterns they lived out in their childhood. In a blended family there may be four different parents and many opinionated extended family members who have a bias about who should be where for specific occasions.

As complicated as these realities can be, they are solvable. Part of the fun of remarriage can be the forming of new traditions. Families where divorced parents have agreed to alternate spending Christmas Eve with children find it works well. Developing new rituals like celebrating the remarriage date as a family, honoring birthdays on the first Sunday of the month, or spending a weekend away together every six months can be satisfying. Of course, maintaining previous rituals such as having regular family prayer, scripture study, family home evenings, and father’s blessings, when possible, offer the stability and continuity that strengthens everyone.

No matter how open, caring, sincere, or unselfish a person is, step-relationships may never feel exactly like biological or adoptive relationships, and that’s okay.
Family members need not worry about the sealing situation of blended families as it might be in the next life. Our concern is to live the gospel now and to love others, especially those in our family.

Jennie’s mother woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of crying down the hall. She went into Jennie’s room to comfort the 10-year-old, who seemed almost inconsolable. As Jennie began to calm down, she was willing to tell her mother what was bothering her. “I don’t know who I’m going to be with in heaven,” she blurted out. “I want to be with you and dad, but how can that work now that you’re divorced? Now that you’re married in the temple to somebody else, what will happen to me? I wish this would all go away and things could go back to being the way they used to be.”

A frequent question raised by Latter-day Saint blended families is how sealings will work in the eternities. How does divorce affect the promises of the sealing covenant when one marriage partner has been true to the gospel and one has not? How does remarriage to a second wife, following the death of a first wife, affect what the family dynamic will be like in the celestial kingdom? What happens when a wife, previously sealed in the temple to a man killed on their honeymoon, civilly marries another man and they live happily together for fifty years? These are difficult but common questions.

Although of prime concern to Latter-day Saint remarried families, these questions are among many others for which we will likely not receive a neatly defined answer during this existence. Elder Robert E. Wells, drawing from his experience, offered this advice: “Family members need not worry about the sealing situation of blended families as it might be in the next life. Our concern is to live the gospel now and to love others, especially those in our family. If we live the gospel to the best of our ability, the Lord in His love and mercy will bless us in the next life and all things will be right.”

There is additional counsel from Elder Neal A. Maxwell: “Of course we cannot know the meaning of all things right now. But we can know, right now, that God knows us and loves us individually!”
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The family is the basic structure the Lord devised to help train and protect His children so that they might return to His presence. Families are entitled to all the supports and all the blessings needed to fulfill the Lord’s great purpose. Elder Henry B. Eyring said: “The test a loving God has set before us is not to see if we can endure difficulty. It is to see if we can endure it well. . . . To endure well is to keep those commandments whatever the opposition, whatever the temptation and whatever the tumult around us.” In the midst of the tumult many feel at times, it is important to remember that God wants us to be happy and successful. He will bless our righteous efforts in our families as we endeavor to expand loving networks, develop new and creative traditions, learn from mistakes, and refine the qualities that create maturity and enable us to live “after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27).

S. Brent Scharman is a licensed psychologist who works as director of Evaluation and Training for LDS Family Services and chairs the Missionary Mental Health Committee for the Church. Janet S. Scharman is also a licensed psychologist and is currently vice president of Student Life at Brigham Young University. They have a blended family of nine daughters, one son, and seventeen grandchildren.

ADDITIONAL READING

S. Brent Scharman (2002, April), When you don’t have custody, Ensign, 32(4), 58–63.

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

NOTES
1. Neal A. Maxwell (1994, May), Take especial care of your family, Ensign, 24(5), 89.
2. The term blended family is used where there are children of more than one union. Stepfamily is used where all the children are of one union. As information in this chapter applies to both situations, these terms are used interchangeably and are not differentiated in the chapter.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley (1994, November), Save the children, Ensign, 24(11), 54.
18. Ibid., xvii.
23. Ibid., 53.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 54.
29. Ibid., 353.
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

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

**CHILDREN 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 DEEPLY ENDED 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.
MEAN GIRLS START IN PRESCHOOL

New research finds that girls as young as four and five use social aggression to maintain dominance and their place in the social hierarchy.

A new study out of Brigham Young University shows that relational aggression -- harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage to relationships -- may be associated with social prominence as early as four and five years of age.

Reported in a special issue on relational aggression during early childhood in the most recent issue of the journal Early Education and Development, the study is the first to examine the correlation between relational aggression and peer social status. Previous studies involved children older than eight years and have typically focused on physical aggression as it relates to peer status.

Exclusionary behaviors and threatening to withdrawal friendship are two prime examples of relational aggression. Research indicates that this behavior is the preferred type of aggression among girls.

“We are all aware of girls who secure their social hierarchy through relationship manipulation during adolescence; but, it is striking that these aggressive strategies are already apparent and related to increased social centrality in preschool,” said David Nelson, senior author and assistant professor of marriage, family and human development at Brigham Young University.

“Preschoolers appear to be more sophisticated in their knowledge of social behaviors than credit is typically given them.”

Who are these preschool “Queen Bees?” According to the study, they are the controversial children, those who received a substantial number of both “like” and “dislike” nominations from their peers. Accordingly, they are the children with a strong social impact. They are the children who are perceived by their peers as more sociable as well as more aggressive than the average child. They are the children who demonstrate an active mix of positive and negative behavior.

“The controversial child is socially savvy,” said Craig Hart, co-author and BYU professor of marriage, family and human development. “They are good resource controllers, socially skilled, popular, conscientious, socially integrated, and yet among the most aggressive, dominant and arrogant children in the peer group. It is this bi-strategic mix of positive and negative behavior that allows them to maintain their standing in the social hierarchy.”

In this study, relational and physical aggression as well as sociable behavior of preschool-age children were assessed using peer reports and teacher reports. Peer nominations of acceptance and rejection (like and dislike nominations) were also collected and used to form sociometric status groups.

Study participants selected three children in their class they liked to play with and three they did not like to play with from a picture board. The children were also asked in individual interviews to identify the peers in their class that exhibited certain sociable behaviors, physically aggressive behaviors and relationally aggressive behaviors. Results were standardized and used to compute a social impact score and a social preference score for each child.

A few of the relational aggressive tactics used by preschoolers include:

• Not allowing a specific child to play with the group.
• Demanding other children not play with a specific child.
• Threatening not to play with a child unless certain needs/demands are met.
• Refusing to listen to someone they are mad at (the aggressive child may even cover their ears).

“It is pertinent and somewhat disturbing to note that by the age of four a substantial number of children have apparently figured out from their environment that using relational aggressive strategies can be used to their advantage and is rewarded with social status,” said Clyde Robinson, co-author and BYU professor of marriage, family, and human development.

As stated in the research, preschoolers are capable of more sophisticated strategies as well, such as spreading malicious rumors or telling secrets.

“It is pertinent and somewhat disturbing to note that by the age of four a substantial number of children have apparently figured out from their environment that using relational aggressive strategies can be used to their advantage and is rewarded with social status,” said Clyde Robinson, co-author and BYU professor of marriage, family, and human development.

– Tonya Fischio
BYU RESEARCH GIVES GUIDANCE TO FAMILIES STRUGGLING WITH CANCER

A new study by family therapists at Brigham Young University found steps family members of cancer patients can take to better cope with the impact of the disease on their lives.

Building on previous research that has shown family support is key to improving patients’ lives, the researchers worked with families throughout the therapy process to identify trends in the ways families react to a disease that afflicts more than 10 million Americans.

The study is published in the latest issue of "Families, Systems & Health," a journal of the American Psychological Association. The researchers’ recommendations for families, health care providers and therapists follow:

• Acknowledge cancer’s effect on the entire family

“By and large our nation’s model of healthcare is still a Western biomedical approach and our primary focus in care is on the treatment of the body,” says Jason S. Carroll, assistant professor of marriage, family and human development at BYU and study coauthor. “We’re starting to realize the need to pay attention to the emotional and relational issues that are very much a part of the reality of physical illness.”

This idea is especially important since it “seemed foreign to [study] participants because illness has been portrayed as an outside entity that is solely controlled by the medical profession,” says the paper’s lead author W. David Robinson, who conducted the research while a graduate student at BYU. “We’re starting to realize the need to pay attention to the emotional and relational issues that are very much a part of the reality of physical illness.”

• Share in differences and be open about contradictory feelings

Patients and family members struggle to find the balance between acknowledging the reality of cancer in their lives and the extreme of allowing the disease to dominate their lives. One ill mother in the study purposely avoided playing with her 2-year-old daughter so the little girl wouldn’t be “used to having that type of interaction” and miss it if the mother died.

“One of the most significant findings was the degree of protection leading to isolation that occurred in the families,” says Robinson, who is now associate director of behavioral medicine at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. “These families cared about each other so much that they did not want to burden each other with their struggles. We found that this led to isolation and individual suffering. Not only did the process of sharing their personal experiences not add to the burden of other family members, but it contributed to greater connection and decreased suffering.”

The researchers, who also included Wendy Watson, BYU professor of marriage and family therapy, found many opposites among affected families, where some members felt the illness was pushing them together while others felt isolated. Another common reaction was seeking meaning or purpose in the struggle with the disease at the same time other members of the family avoided the subject because of the pain it brings.

• Preserve routines as much as possible

Some study participants struggled with feelings that cancer had taken over their entire lives and dictated drastic disruption, even during gaps in treatment. Although understandable, Robinson says, that is a distraction families should resist.

“Illness often takes away the feeling of normalcy and can disrupt the day-to-day routines that help families function properly,” he says. “Finding ways to keep as many family rituals and routines -- such as family dinners or Friday night dates -- will aid the family in coping with the illness. It is imperative that the illness not deprive them of the activities that make them a family.”

• Advocate for treatment and seek help from therapists

The study found that families should not hesitate to communicate clearly with healthcare professionals about treatment.

“Too often, family members suffer needlessly because they do not fully understand a disease, treatment and/or prognosis,” says Robinson. “They feel that the medical professionals are too busy to answer their questions or they feel like they do not want to look ignorant so they do not ask their questions. These families must learn to advocate for themselves and obtain all of the necessary answers to their questions so they can make informed decisions on the management of their disease.”

“Rather than just targeting the biological aspects of cancer, there’s a real need to address how the illness is impacting family members’ relationships and emotional well-being,” Carroll says.

“The study showed that seeking therapeutic help should be an option families consider in conjunction with their medical treatment.”

The research article is copyrighted by the journal “Families, Systems & Health.” Those interested may seek a copy at a university library or visit this site to purchase a reprint: http://content.apa.org/journals/fsh/23/2/131.html.
“Children know more than we sometimes suppose and can do more than we sometimes think.”

—Coleen K. Menlove