

MARRIAGE
& *families*
FALL 2005

SCHOOL OF FAMILY LIFE, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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Marriage Moments

www.marriagemoments.org—is an on-line program designed to strengthen a couple's relationship as they go through the significant changes of becoming new parents.

Marriage Moments is based on the book *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), by marriage researcher and counselor Blaine Fowers, a professor at the University of Miami. The program emphasizes learning about the changes that occur as a family expands, which naturally changes the relationship between husband and wife.

The program includes the following five lessons:

- **MORE THAN A FEELING:** Introducing Marital Virtues
www.marriagemoments.org/index.php?s=content&p=marital_virtues
- **MORE THAN FUN:** The Marital Virtue of Friendship
www.marriagemoments.org/index.php?s=content&p=friendship
- **MORE THAN GIVING:** The Marital Virtue of Generosity
www.marriagemoments.org/index.php?s=content&p=generosity
- **MORE THAN EQUALITY:** The Marital Virtue of Fairness
www.marriagemoments.org/index.php?s=content&p=fairness
- **MORE THAN COMMITMENT:** The Marital Virtue of Loyalty
www.marriagemoments.org/index.php?s=content&p=loyalty

The website also addresses concerns about when the baby comes, helping other couples, identifying when marriages are in trouble, and where to go for more resources.

Available at no charge, the lessons and activities (including video clip downloads) provide an ongoing resource. Couples who participate in Marriage Moments will learn about building a lasting marriage on four essential marital virtues. The most important parts of Marriage Moments are the recommended personal and partner activities. As couples engage in these activities, they will strengthen the virtues on which a strong marriage is based.

MARRIAGE & FAMILIES is a journal for young couples, husbands & wives, parents, and professionals—including educators, counselors, therapists, psychologists, physicians, social workers, nurses, public health people, teachers, clergy, experts in family law, and everyone interested in marriage and families. Our editorial board members belong to many faiths—with a common belief in the importance of traditional families. MARRIAGE & FAMILIES is dedicated to strengthening families. Without apology, our name begins with the word *marriage*—a concept that many dismiss or completely ignore these days. However, since marriage and fidelity are essentials, not options, in a healthy society, we are pleased to bring you a publication containing credible data supporting this and other time-tested principles and values related to the family.

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In discussing marriage and commitment, I will begin with Aristotle, who maintained that man—and also woman—is a social animal. We are utterly dependent upon forming and maintaining relationships with other people.

A person who has always been truly alone winds up being emotionally dead. Of all of the relationships into which people enter, the family is the most important one. We are raised by parents, confronted by siblings, and introduced to peers through our familial roots.

Gordon B. Hinckley, president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has written, "There is no environment more conducive to the development and enactment of virtue than the family." And he goes on to quote a wise man who said, "No success in life can compensate for failure in the home." I agree with him completely. The best evidence for the centrality of the family is all about us. We care more about our children than the children of others. We run greater risks to help one of our threatened children or one of our threatened parents than we do to help someone else's. When we go home, we expect to be taken in. Indeed, one person said, "The definition of home is where, if you go there, they have to take you in." On the sidelines during football games, the players wave at the television camera and say, "Hi Mom!"

Some countries, and some people in every country, recognize the importance of social commitments, but hope to

maintain them without what they regard as the inconvenience of marriage. They hope to obtain these advantages, in short, from non-family sources. In Sweden, public officials have made it clear that the laws of that country should give no advantage whatsoever to marriage in relation to other forms of union between men and women, or between men and men or women and women. In France, a law is now in force that allows a willing couple to appear before a clerk and, simply by signing a piece of paper, enter into a union, which, if they later choose to end it, can be undone without any divorce proceedings.¹ A very liberal American law school professor has urged "that marriage should be abolished as a legal category," and be replaced by an arrangement in which society will pay for children to be raised by professional caretakers.² Her views were matched by those of a conservative federal judge, Richard Posner, who argued that conventional marriages foster what he called "puritanical attitudes," and went on to propose that America adopt the Swedish system of favoring cohabitation over marriage, because cohabitation would avoid the fostering of such puritanical attitudes.³

To see what is wrong with these views, whether expressed

by the political left or the political right, shift the analogy away from marriage and toward a business enterprise. Suppose that two people decide to make and sell bread. They can do so by having an oral agreement, or they can enter into an enforceable contract. If they rely on an oral agreement, when one or the other becomes bored or greedy or distrustful, that person can walk away from the arrangement with whatever that person can carry. But if they insist on a written and enforceable contract, ending the partnership will require the agreement of the other party and the approval of the law. As a result of the power of contracts, marriages and business both use them.

The analogy also extends to those who live together. Men and women who cohabit have only a weak incentive to share their resources and to put up with the inevitable emotional bumps and grinds that accompany a married life. In this country, at least, the data show that among cohabiting couples, each member of the couple tends to keep a separate bank account. This means that they keep their personal wealth apart and do not share it. When two members of a cohabiting couple have unequal incomes, they are much more likely to split apart than when

"The definition of home is where,
if you go there, they have to take you in."

a married couple has unequal incomes, or, as is the case with many married couples, where one has no income at all.⁴

In a marriage, we share both our feelings and our wealth, and we know that because we share our love, we share a dependency one with the other. Conversely, cohabitation merely means “living together,” or the phrase I was taught in the 1940s when I was growing up, “shacking up.” Marriage means making an investment in another person.

The difference between marriage and cohabitation is that marriage follows a public, legally-recognized ceremony in which each person swears before friends and family and witnesses to love, honor, and cherish the other person until death does them part. Cohabitation merely means sharing a bed.

Of course, many marriages in this country end in divorce, and divorce has become very easy to arrange in most states. But even in this era of no-fault divorces, ending a marriage must still be done before a magistrate and that magistrate will allocate

the goods and services the couple has in common, distributing in accordance with some formula, such as

the best interest of the child or who seems to be least at fault.

Couples who cohabit before they marry in this country are much more likely to end the marriage, should it follow this cohabitation, with divorce. If a family enters into marriage without having cohabitated in advance, they are much less likely to end their marriage in divorce.⁵ Now, cohabitation may have no harmful effects on some people, as people come in a variety of styles and flavors. But, on the whole, cohabitation is a risky idea.

Cohabiting couples, compared to married ones, experience more cases of physical abuse, are more likely to be murdered, are more likely to be sexually unfaithful, and are more likely to be poor. Children living with cohabiting as opposed to married parents are much more likely to witness their parents' partnership end. The children are much more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems, and they are much more likely to be poor.⁶

Now, that is a dramatic picture, which much be qualified by an important fact. Some of the disadvantages of cohabitation that I have just recited result from the fact that, in the United States at least and perhaps in other countries as well, men and women who live together without being married are more likely to be poor and erratic even before they join together. And so some of the effects that I have ascribed to cohabitation may in fact be the result of two people who are ill-equipped either for cohabitation or for marriage.

In the United States, for example, 60 percent of high school dropouts have cohabitated, compared to only half that proportion of college graduates. But in other countries, especially in Scandinavia, cohabitation has become a common way for men and women from upper-middle class backgrounds and highly-educated circumstances to live together. They have, in growing numbers, rejected marriage. Because of these differences, American cohabiting couples are poorer than those you find in Denmark, Finland, or Sweden. And so the grim news I have mentioned about cohabitation may, to some degree as yet unknown, be ascribed to the fact that these people were different before they shared a room.

But the effect in this country must be becoming less important. Every year, we have fewer and fewer poor people, and every year we have more and more cohabiting couples. In 2002, there were five million cohabiting couples, up from half a million 30 years earlier. Even though we have fewer poor people and more cohabiting ones, the tendency I suggest that is implied by these data is that a higher and higher fraction of cohabiting couples have problems because of the fact they are cohabiting and not simply because they enter that relationship with prior disadvantages.

The deleterious effects of cohabitation, whatever they may be, are lost on many young people in America. In a survey, six out of ten high school seniors think it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together



In a survey, six out of ten high school seniors think it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married...



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before getting married because by cohabiting they can find out whether they really get along, despite significant evidence to the contrary.⁷ In 1985, about half of all Americans said there is no reason why single women shouldn't have children. In that same poll, Americans were asked whether it was acceptable if their daughter had a child outside of wedlock. Now, only one out of eight respondents agreed. Apparently, half of us think it's okay for other people's daughters to have children out of wedlock, but far fewer of us think it's okay for our daughters to do the same.⁸

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead put it this way: "Cohabitation is not to marriage what spring training is to baseball."⁹ This tension between our libertarian views about other people and our conventional views about ourselves has made it very hard for people in this country to think seriously about marriage. Almost everyone in this country, when polled, thinks that marriage, in general, is a good idea. They look forward to the possibility of being married. They think, on the whole, that marriage is good for people.

But one-fourth of all children, and over half of all African-American children, are now being raised in single-parent families. There is one large exception to this dramatic increase in the children being raised by unwed mothers. Of Americans who attend church weekly, only one-fourth said that it is morally acceptable to have a child out of wedlock. Among people who seldom or never attend church, nearly three-fourths have the view that it is acceptable to have a child out of wedlock.

The problem of single-parent families is well-known. It is much greater, I think, than the problem of cohabitation. The best research that has been done shows that after controlling for income, growing up with a single head of family—typically a female head of family (you will notice men rarely head families when there is not a wife with them)—makes things worse for the child. Sara McLanahan of Princeton University, and her colleague Gary Sandefur, published a book a few years ago for the Harvard University Press

called *Single Parent Children*, which examined in detail the results of five major longitudinal studies that had been conducted in this country of how people grow up.¹⁰ These are the five most important studies we now have. And in doing so, they concluded that both poverty and being raised in a single-parent family create costs for the child.

After controlling for income, they found that about half the harmful effects that children experience result from growing up in a single-parent family, and that is true of all American ethnic groups.¹¹ After holding income constant, boys in father-absent families were twice as likely as those in two-parent families to go to jail.¹² Girls in father-absent families were twice as likely as those in married families to have an out-of-wedlock birth.

What all of this means for society is easily seen in the streets of our largest cities,

where gangs patrol the roads and commit a disproportionate share of the rapes, assaults, robberies, and murders that our cities experience. And the people in these gangs are people who have turned to gangs in part because they have no fathers, and in a gang they can find what they most need as a young man on the streets of the big city, namely self-defense. We think often of the police as being the principal guarantor of defense in our cities, but that's not quite true. To use a football analogy, the police are the linebackers. The defensive line consists of fathers; and, absent fathers, the police cannot manage this task alone.

We have discovered through analysis of data that there is only a very weak link between unemployment rates and crime rates in this country. There is a small link, but it's so small that it is a virtually a rounding error in the calculations. But my observation is that being from a father-absent family has a profound link on crime, and the data I am aware of support this generalization very strongly. If you're not in the labor force, if you are living in a gang, or have no father, you are almost certain to commit a crime.

Boys in single-parent families are more likely to be idle than be in school, or to be unemployed. They are

more likely to drop out of high school. And these differences are as great for white families as they are for African-American and Hispanic ones. And they're as great for children from relatively well-to-do families as they are for children from disadvantaged families. These problems are not limited to the United States. What we are seeing in the world today, at least in all of the Western world, is, to put it bluntly, the marriage problem. There has been a dramatic increase in the last 40 years in the proportion of children who are born out of wedlock, not only in the United States, but in Canada and most of Europe.

Now, some of this increase that we noticed abroad may be explained by families who live together as cohabiting couples rather than as married couples, and act as if they were truly married. And, although we're not certain yet, these cohabiting parents may act much like married ones and devote themselves to child care. But we also know that there has also been, in Europe and in Canada, a dramatic increase in the proportion of children who are living without fathers at all. So we know the problem they face is not simply whatever problems may be attributed to cohabitation, they are problems that arise because of the non-existence of marriage and the absence of fathers.

In Canada and in most of Europe, there has been a

sharp increase in the proportion of children living in single-parent families. In 1960, only one out of every 10 children in Canada, France, Germany, Sweden, and Great Britain lived with a single parent. Twenty-eight years later, that proportion had doubled.

There are several possible explanations for these transformations. One is that women have entered the workforce, and by becoming economically more independent, they can survive, and in some cases do rather well, with a child and without a husband. These are the "Murphy Brown" mothers about which we once heard so much, but they are relatively rare. Only about four percent of white, unmarried mothers are college graduates. The great majority of unmarried parents have either not finished high school or completed only their high school degrees.

The second possible explanation is the relationship between the number of women and the number of men in society. When women outnumber men, as they do in the United States and in many other countries, they face tougher statistical odds against getting married. The more women there are in proportion to the number of men of equivalent age affects profoundly the rate of illegitimacy and the prospects for being married. When the sex ratio is high—meaning there are more single women than available men—it is harder for women to find a husband, and states in this country with a high sex ratio have produced abnormally high

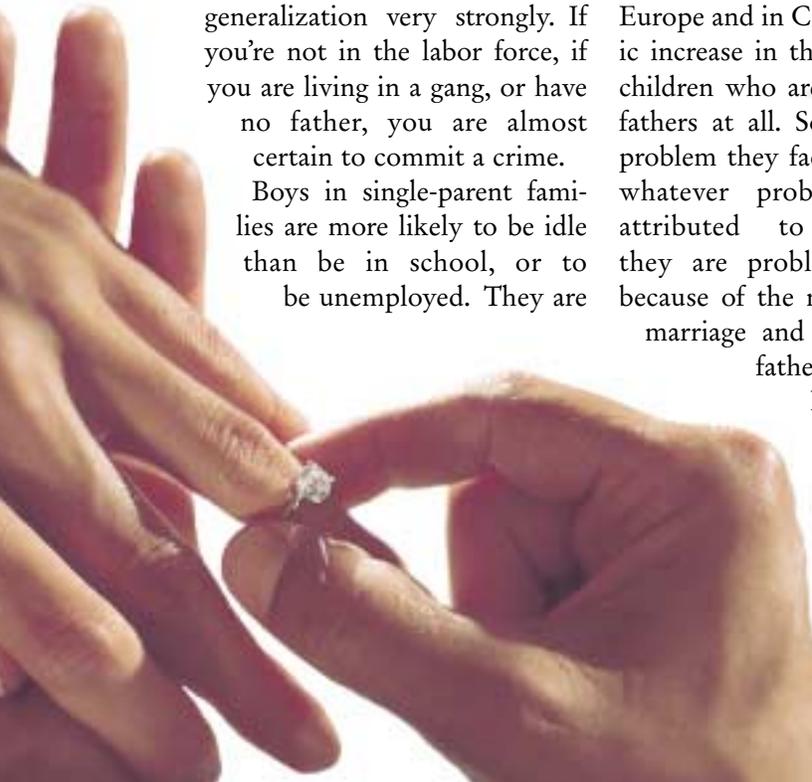


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death rates of poor young men and a high percentage of men in prison. If you send a lot of men to prison, and if they die of murder or automobile accidents while young, even if there is not a war, we will have more women than there are men. And the older these women get, the harder it will be for them to find a husband. The best time to find a husband or wife is when you are in college, which is what I did. It was one of the smartest decisions I ever made. The older you get, the harder it is to find somebody with whom you are likely to live.

The third reason for the increase in single-parent families in this country is the welfare system. The welfare system was created in 1935 to support women who did not have a husband, largely because the husband had been killed in a war or had died in a mining or industrial accident. And so these welfare payments went to unmarried women. And there was a rule in most states that the woman had to be morally suitable, which meant that she could not share her living arrangements with a man to

whom she was not married. But after the Great Depression and the Second World War, the rules changed; and, as a result, the welfare system unintentionally began to encourage women to have children without getting married in the first place. So instead of welfare payments supporting widows, welfare payments began to support teenage brides.

For 20 years after this phenomenon became evident, scholars examining it said the regulations had no effect on the prospects of a woman having a child out of wedlock. But today good research by economists and sociologists has shown that if you look at low-income women and assess their access to welfare, the availability of welfare increases the probability that they will have a child out of wedlock.¹³ Welfare reform is in the air, but, as I will point out, it has done next to nothing to solve this problem.

A fourth reason, and to me the most important one, is that having children out of wedlock or cohabiting with a person to whom you are not married has lost its stigma. We no longer

regard, in most quarters of this country, such behavior as shameful. I spend a lot of time in *The Marriage Problem* trying to sort out the reasons why shame has disappeared and stigma has lost its sting.¹⁴

In the past, this shame was focused on the child, and this may strike you as unfair. The child certainly is not to blame, so why stigmatize the child? Well, this was a way not of trying to stigmatize the child, but of stigmatizing the parents who were responsible for the birth of the child. There have been studies of children born out of wedlock that have been going on in England since the first data were available in the 16th century. (To be clear, I'm not talking about children born to women who were pregnant before they were married. That was quite common in England, it was common in the United States, it was common in Europe. Indeed, in England from its earliest history on, about one third of all the children born in England were born less than nine months after the wedding of the mother and the father.)

...a higher and higher fraction of cohabiting couples have problems because of the fact they are cohabiting and not simply because they enter that relationship with prior disadvantages.

But children who were born to parents who were unmarried faced very severe risks. Those born out of wedlock could not inherit property, and there were no welfare payments to support them. The reality was that if a child were abandoned by its parents, the child would die unless it was taken in by a kindly relative or neighbor. Happily, there were many kindly aunts and neighbors who took them in, but as a consequence of the shame that was visited on the child, the out of wedlock birthrate in England remained remarkably low. Until the beginning of the 18th century, the proportion of all births that were out of wedlock was about 4 percent or less in most English counties. In the 19th century it crept up, but only to about 5 percent. By the 1970s it was over 8 percent. Today it is 30 percent. That increase came about because the state abandoned the penalties it once enforced on persons, because it developed programs to support parents who had children born out of

wedlock, and because it decided that one should no longer regard this action as shameful.

You can see a similar change in the United States if you read carefully the opinions written by the United State Supreme Court. In the late 19th century, just to cite two cases, the Supreme Court spoke of marriage as a “sacred obligation” or a “holy estate.” And one Supreme Court opinion said that marriage was the source of civilization itself. By 1972, only three-quarters of a century after these remarks had passed from the hands of the justices, the court had abandoned any reference to sacred obligations or holy estates, and said instead that marriage is “an association of two individuals, each with a separate emotional and intellectual makeup.” Marriage was once a sacrament, then it became a sacred obligation, and now it is simply a private contract. And for many people, alas, it is not even a contract.

Friedrich Nietzsche would not have been surprised by all this. He predicted that the fami-

ly would “be ground into a random collection of individuals bound together by the common pursuit of selfish ends.” John Stuart Mill may or may not have been surprised, but he certainly would have been pleased. He long argued the marriage should be a private, bargained-for arrangement in which the state should play as small a role as possible.¹⁵

But many women who have gone through this experience have discovered that what Nietzsche predicted and what Mill approved of has been for them a disaster. They may prefer cohabitation, they may shun marriage, they may regard marriage as a trivial inconvenience, but then they discover that cohabitation will not last. And their children will be disadvantaged. Or they may marry, but they will quickly discover that husbands often want new trophy wives and, in order to get them, will find it easy to end the marriage on the basis of a no-fault divorce law. And when the

...out of commitment arises the human character that will guide the footsteps of people navigating the tantalizing opportunities that freedom offers.

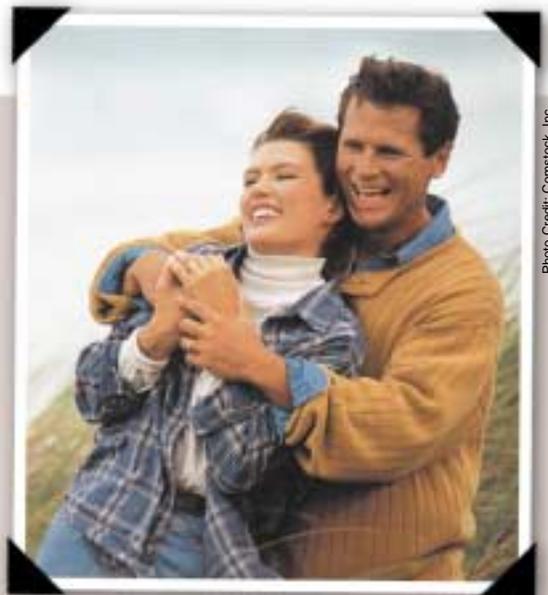


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marriage does end, the women typically discover that, though the courts try to be fair in the allocation of accumulated resources, they will typically be left with too little money with which to support themselves and their children.

Human character arises out of the commitment people make to one another, and marriage is the supreme form of that commitment. When we make marriage less important, we make character less likely. Married people are happier, wealthier, and sexually more satisfied than are unmarried persons or those cohabiting, even controlling for income and education. Married people and their children are less likely to commit crimes.

The problems our society and any society faces is the need to reconcile personal freedom, which we all value, with character. The reconciliation is not impossible in principle. There are many who have struck an appropriate balance between freedom and character, and have found that this balance produces a life that is much more rewarding than either the blind pursuit of freedom or the slavish admiration of character.

For the good life, mere freedom alone is not sufficient. It must work with and support commitment, for out of commitment arises the human character that will guide the footsteps of people navigating the tantalizing opportunities that freedom offers. Freedom and character, again, are not incompatible, but keeping them in balance is a profound challenge for any

culture, and it is a challenge that this culture and the culture of most of Western Europe are now failing to achieve.

There are some small signs that our culture may be regaining its bearings. The crime rate has dropped dramatically, for reasons that have nothing to do with economic cycles. Crimes rates started falling around 1981, and their decline has been fairly consistent since then, both in good economic times and in bad ones. The sharp increase in the percentage of children living with a single parent that began around 1960 has leveled off, and it was about the same in 2003 that it was 13 years earlier. The abortion rate among women under the age of 20 has fallen since 1985, and is about the same today as it was when *Roe vs. Wade* was enacted in 1973. The rate at which children are born to teenaged mothers has declined since 1991, the year at which it hit its peak in this country. In 2000, teenage pregnancy rates for girls ages 15 to 19 were about one-fourth lower than they had been in 1991. Some of this reduction may well result not simply from regaining our cultural bearings, but from the increased use of contraceptive devices. We know that in 2002, the use of such devices had increased by one third since 1988.

Though there's been a decrease in teenage birth rates, an increase in the use of contraceptives, and a leveling off of the proportion of children living in single-parent families, this may be a sign of a culture regaining its bearings, or it may simply be

a modest and temporary gain. We don't know. I will not in my lifetime know the answer to the question of whether this is a permanent cultural shift. It may be the result simply of the exhaustion of potential victims. There are only a certain number of people who are at risk for all of these miseries, and if society afflicts them all, then the rate of increase will have reached its natural apogee, and it cannot statistically go any higher. We do not know what the answer is, but there are some reasons to think that perhaps we have begun to find a culture that has regained its bearings.

There is one additional effect of marriage that may please some and may displease others, but in the interest of intellectual honesty, I will report it. Married people are much more likely to vote for Republican candidates than are unmarried ones. And that is true even after controlling for age, sex, race, income, and education. Data analyzed by Democratic pollster Stanly Greenberg found that after controlling for every other demographic factor, unmarried people were 1.56 times more likely to vote for John Kerry than to vote for George W. Bush. I doubt that marriage itself explains this gap. Perhaps it is the likely result of the fact that married people are more likely to own a home, have a mortgage, pay property taxes, raise children, and worry about living in a good neighborhood. All of these things provide some support for the appeals that are made in red states.

Having recounted how bad things are, you might now expect that I will offer a solution. I will do no such thing. There is no magic bullet, there is no single strategy. There may not even be a collection of strategies that will deal with this problem. Some people want the government to step in and solve it. I recall the remarks of my own dear friend, former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, shortly before he died. He said, "People who believe that the government can do something about this problem know more about the government than I do." We face a cultural transformation, and that cultural transformation has to be altered by ordinary people operating in small communities through voluntary associations and religious organizations to improve matters.

In the case of welfare, which confronted the fact now recognized by most scholars that the existence of welfare payments encourages unmarried women to have children out of wedlock, reform was enacted in 1996 designed to persuade women to seek work rather than welfare. And in most states in the Union, the changes made have been remarkably successful in that sense. Some states, such as Wisconsin, are more skillful than other states, but in virtually every state, the proportion of women eligible for welfare who have gone on welfare has gone down dramatically. But it has had no effect on the rate at which they produce out of wedlock children. And if you consider the issues involved in running

a welfare agency or any government department, you can see why. You can urge your frontline employees to work with women who are seeking welfare payments. It's acceptable to persuade them to find jobs and to refer them to job training programs. You can give them lists of jobs for which they're qualified. If you do these things, your success in the bureaucratic welfare agency will become immediately evident. You will save money for the state, and you will act in accordance with public opinion that wants you to do this very thing.

But now imagine that you're running a welfare agency and you tell your frontline employees to increase marriage rates. Well, now it's a different matter. The effect, if you're successful, will not be measurable. For many years, it may not even be visible. You will not save the state any money, and you will not have public opinion strongly on your side. And so welfare reform has meant that though we have driven down the welfare rolls, we have confronted many children in this country with the following problem. First, you had no father. And now, because she is working every day, you have no mother either. And this throws a burden on the child care systems which I am not sure the child care systems are quite prepared to accept.

Indeed, there is a tendency in American politics, perhaps because of these contradictory forces, to shy away from any discussion of the marriage problem. I have long felt that the

president and others should use their offices as a bully pulpit to address these messages. And various presidents—Bill Clinton and George W. Bush among them—have done so. But these matters are easily set aside by things to which we react more ardently, such as an airplane crash. Once the Supreme Court struck down laws against homosexual conduct, many people became preoccupied with either encouraging or discouraging homosexual marriage. Whatever your views about homosexual marriage, were it adopted nationally, it could at the most affect 2 or 3 percent of the American population. Meanwhile, cohabitation, divorce, and single-parent families affect most of the people in this country. But it is not something about which we now talk.

I think the frontier for thinking and research in this area is to look at the many efforts that are being undertaken by private (in some cases governmental, and in some cases religious) organizations to solve the marriage problem. There are countless such efforts, such as the Marriage Savers Program, the Promise Seekers, and various school curricula that emphasize the advantages of marriage. The difficulty with these programs is that with only a handful of exceptions, they have never been evaluated, so we don't know whether they work. And the ones that have been evaluated have been evaluated only for three months in one case or a year in another. So we don't know whether they have long term effects. And a school for

We face a cultural transformation...that...has to be altered by ordinary people operating in small communities through voluntary associations and religious organizations to improve matters.

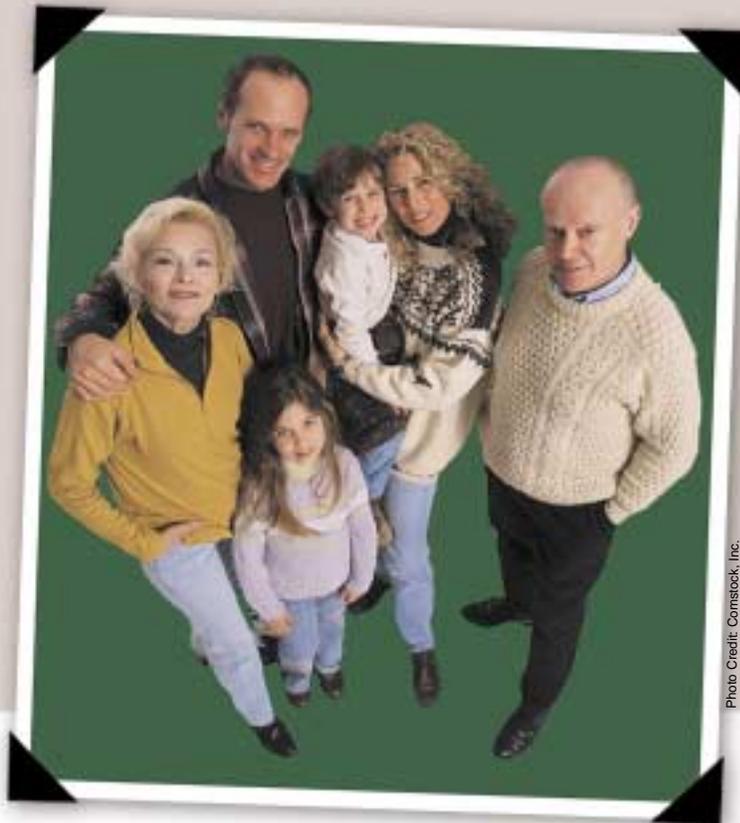


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family, marriage life, and social science is well advised to seize upon this problem and see if we can devise a system whereby the many efforts that are now underway can be given a formal and independent evaluation to find out what's working. And once we know what's working—not simply what people claim is working—we should broadcast across campuses such as this and throughout the country how these things are working so that other people can take confidence from them.

WJ

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This article is adapted from the inaugural Marjorie Pay Hinckley Lecture delivered at Brigham Young University on February 10, 2004. The lecture is part of the Marjorie Pay Hinckley Chair in Social Work and the Social Sciences.

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the FUNCTIONAL FAMILY

by James D. MacArthur, Ph.D.

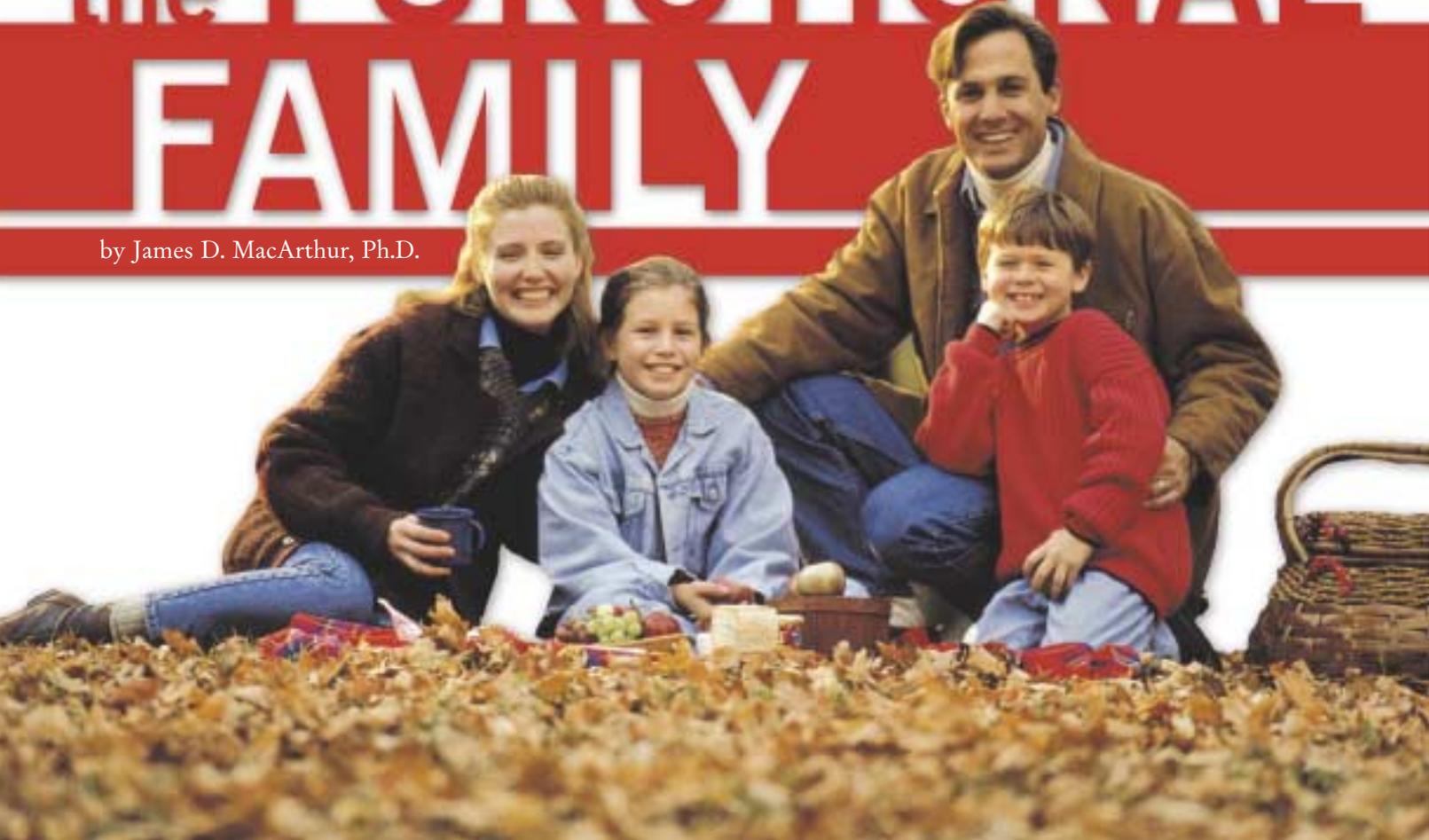


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I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE a very personal conversation with you about families. Though written, it will take the form of a chat, a heart-to-heart talk about families. Because I want to discuss families in the first person rather than the third person, I'll share some personal experiences from my own family. The whole idea of family is so personal that I can tell it that way best. The greatest privilege of my life is to be a husband and a dad in a family. To me it is a sacred responsibility, standing

above anything else I am asked to do in my life.

My theme has to do with functional families. We hear the term *dysfunctional* applied to families frequently, meaning one that does not work right. But what does a functional family mean? Simply that "it works right." A functional family is not intended to be a perfect family; as a matter of fact, such families are quite aware that perfection is not the goal. In a functional family, everyone is aware of the existence of weaknesses in the

family. Those weaknesses are not considered to be something to hide. Children and parents acknowledge them and work on them over time. The functional family is a place where people feel like they can grow together as individuals within the family environment. There is love and unity, but also individuality among the family members. They like to be there. Being home feels good most of the time. There is not a lot of criticism in the home. People take time for each other and offer

support and guidance to each other. The parents care about the family and make its well-being their top priority in life. They teach their children and set a good example for them to follow.

Again, a functional family is not a perfect family, but it is one where its members feel that, with all its strengths and weaknesses, their family is a unified organization that is intended to strengthen each member. There is a substantial amount of consistency in the functional family, but it also has its ups and downs. Any family can get off track for a time. The members of a functional family sometimes have such difficult episodes, but they can recognize them, join together in problem-solving, and offer their best thinking and caring toward producing some redirection so that the family feels better about where it is then going. In the functional family, all of this is viewed as part of a long learning and growing process that is experienced together. Parents and children learn from their own individual experiences and also vicariously from the learning experiences of others in the family as they are shared with each other.

Amitai Etzioni, a Jewish writer, once said, “Making a child is a moral act. . . . We must make parenting an honorable vocation again.” The family is where the most important events in our lives take place.

As my contribution to strengthening the family, I will describe a group of important characteristics of the functional

family. Where did I get them? From much pondering about my own experiences growing up, from over 30 years of raising ten children of my own, from my church leadership experiences trying to help families struggling to faithfully raise their own children, from my over 25 years as a psychologist and marriage and family therapist, and from a number of years owning and running a treatment program for troubled adolescents. From all of that, here is an overview of some of the key characteristics of healthy, functional families.

You are likely now asking yourself if your family is dysfunctional or functional. Neither, probably. All families have strengths and weaknesses. So, instead of trying to categorize your family as one or the other, let’s take a trip together as I share with you a group of characteristics of families that seem to work fairly well. (As I discuss each one, I would encourage you to rate your family on a 1-10 scale, with 7-10 indicating strength and 0-4 suggesting that you lack something in that particular area. And I would suggest you save your answers to evaluate your family’s progress down the road.)

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In the functional family, there is an inviting, comfortable, and loving atmosphere in the home and family. The atmosphere in a home is somewhat intangible but is at the very center of the family soul. In a functional family, there is a good feeling, and it feels good to be together. The atmosphere is “easy” and “not tight.” People like to be there. It is kind of like ice cream—you can’t seem to get enough of it!

As a parent, you might find it interesting to ask each family member to write down five or so words that describe the atmosphere in your home over a period of time. Then take some time to discuss together your “findings” and see what you can learn from each other’s observations. In some families, parents try too hard to “produce” a certain desirable atmosphere. They work at it too hard, and the result is often an uptight atmosphere that no one likes. Sometimes you can learn about the type of atmosphere you want and how to produce it by observing pleasing and uplifting atmospheres in the homes of others you know. But be careful not to try to imitate someone else’s style too closely. Your own

In the functional family, parents are mostly

interested in what they can offer their

children—and pay less attention to what their

children will do with what they are offered.

family “style” and atmosphere is uniquely your own.

Although I’ve mentioned atmosphere first, it really grows out of the other characteristics I’ll now discuss.

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In the functional family, parents are mostly interested in what they can offer their children—and pay less attention to what their children will do with what they are offered. You will be less tense, stressed, and troubled when you realize that is all you can do anyway: offer your children whatever you can, and accept that the results of what they do with your offering are beyond you. Since that became clear to me as a parent, I operate differently in my family. Now, I put my thought and effort into doing my very best to offer as much love, teaching, sharing, concern, help, guidance, and attention as I can to my children and grandchildren—and leave what they do with it up to them. Then the path they travel after that is their path to choose. I see myself as a teacher, coach, consultant, and guide—and not as a manager who must get

results. If you see yourself as the latter, you will likely try to control your children and will get worse results. If, instead, you offer what you have to give them from your heart and let them govern themselves, I think you will like the results you get even better.

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In the functional family, parents consciously and intentionally parent. You cannot afford to allow your parenting to become casual. You must be very serious about your responsibilities as a parent. Not uptight, but serious and focused. If I could convince parents to do one thing that would make all the difference in their families, it would be to set aside a specific time once a week or perhaps every two weeks (but not further apart than that) to sit down together and discuss family matters. For those who are single parents, set aside a time to think about each of your family members and your overall family needs. Some single parents have taken this advice and joined together with friends at a regular time each week to discuss family issues and help each other. If you need convincing, think about an important

meeting that you attend regularly—and that you make sure you never miss, such as a meeting at work where the goals of the workplace are discussed. Then ask yourself

why you would miss the time set aside for thoughtful consideration of each child’s needs, overall family needs, marital needs, and the personal needs of you as parents in the family? Intentional parenting means regularly taking some private time to think about each child and what he or she needs.

If you still can’t see how setting aside a time once a week to talk together about family needs, goals, and plans can possibly make that big of a difference, consider that it does so because parents have no forum for regularly discussing their family needs unless you create one. I call this crucial, once-a-week meeting *Family Discussion Time*. Only parents attend it.

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In the functional family, parents are very aware of the impact they have on their children. They understand their children are like “human blackboards,” standing in front of them as they hold up their personal blackboards and say, “Write what you think of me!” This reality has the potential of being so powerful—or very counterproductive. You, as parents, from the minute your children are born, begin to write messages about them on their personal blackboards, whether they are intentional or unintentional.

Unintentional messages may be written as a parent ignores a child, shows impatience, or cannot find time to be together. What message might appear on your child’s personal blackboard if you are too busy for them?



The family is a garden where we

grow healthy people – or try to.



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Could it be “You are not very important to me” or “You are not worth me taking time to show an interest in you”? Some parents may respond, “Well, when I am too busy that is not the message I intend to send!” That may be your view, but it might be the message that is received anyway.

Be particularly mindful of the patterns of messages you send. Don’t get so paranoid that you feel you have to watch every word or deed with your children. You don’t need to be that wary, but you do need to watch for patterns. To be too busy once in a while or impatient occasionally is unlikely to inscribe a negative message on your child’s blackboard. But a regular pattern of being too busy or too impatient could.

The more important issue is, what messages would you like to intentionally write on your child’s blackboard? Suppose, because you leave for work so early every morning, you never see your children until you return home in the evening. But you want them to know you are thinking of them and they mean

a lot to you. So on several mornings you make a little sign on colored paper and tape it to the foot of their beds so when they wake up it’s the first thing they see. And the sign says, “Hey! Daddy loves you! See you at dinner. We’ll eat lots of chocolate ice cream together.” You’ve just written a very powerful message on those blackboards.

Or, what might you be writing on their blackboards if you consciously take time to play games with your children—together or one-on-one. “You are fun. I like you. You are worth it.” Those are good messages that won’t be erased.

I would love to see you write many more intentional and uplifting messages on your children’s blackboards—regardless of their age! In fact, there is no reason, when you’re 80, that you can’t write a significant message on your child’s blackboard who is 50!

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In the functional family, parents understand that the best place to address basic human needs is within the family. A basic

human need is something a human being must have to grow and develop and be emotionally healthy. In my view, there are three basic human needs we each have: The need to feel

- Significant and Important,
- Loved, and
- Capable and Competent.

The family is a garden where we grow healthy people—or try to. Not coincidentally, children believe what they hear and learn within their families—whether it be for good or ill. What can you do to help your son or daughter feel significant and important? Or loved? Or capable and competent?

One of my colleagues recently left a significant career to stay home with her newly adopted son. What does her decision write on her son’s blackboard about basic human needs? Perhaps it speaks to all of them: You, my son, are significant, important, loved, capable and competent—and that is why I made that decision to stay with you.

What about the single parent who works long hours and still consciously parents? What is she communicating about how much she loves her children?

I’ve known of mothers who stay up into the early morning hours doing computer data entry in order to support children in their schooling, missionary service, and other worthwhile pursuits. What is the message being written on those blackboards? “You are worth it. You are important to me.”

Parents who recognize the powerful effect they have in their children's lives will seek out a particular child and sit down with him or her and talk together about how things are going. Those times together are not coincidental, they are intentional; and parents do it because they want to write a message that says, "You are important and are worth the time for me to stop whatever else I am doing and talk to you and see how things are going for you." What a great message to put on your children's blackboards.

When one of your children brings home an improved report card, you take the time to sit down and enjoy it with them. You might even ask if you could share the good news with others in the family. If you can spread the good news, then many family members can write on the child's blackboard a message of love and encouragement.

However you do it—and the possibilities are limitless—the principle to remember is that every human being needs his or her basic human needs met. And, as a parent, you can consciously and intentionally find ways to help your children meet theirs. Don't simply hope they will receive the messages they need by chance; make sure they know, at least from you, that they are worthwhile, important, loved, and competent. There is no greater gift, in terms of personal well-being, that you can offer them. As a child I knew the pain that accompanied an absence of feeling important and valuable to someone. Don't let

that happen to any child in your family. Discuss your intended efforts each week in Family Discussion Time.

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In the functional family, relationships are of supreme importance. It is within the context of a good relationship that you are able to write on your children's blackboards and help meet their basic human needs. You must be willing to regularly assess the condition and needs of each relationship in the family. Don't assume the relationships are okay. I've found it helps to rate each one on a ten-point scale, with a high number representing a strong relationship and a low number a weaker one. Do that in Family Discussion Time also and compare notes.

When you can see that a relationship is weak, how do you begin to improve it? First, begin by paying attention to the rela-

tionship in obvious ways. Talk, play together, spend one-on-one time with the person, send love letters, cards or notes, give compliments, try some surprises, ask for forgiveness, say "I love you" or "I like you," listen to the other person, ask for their help in some area of need you have, share personal feelings, and simply "notice" the other person. You will find that just by paying some attention to the person, things will begin to change.

Relationships usually don't improve accidentally. In counseling and therapy, I ask clients working on relationships to get a small notebook and keep track of what they do specifically to enhance the relationship and then share it with me in our counseling sessions. If you will do that for a month or two on a specific relationship, it will help you stay focused on what you are trying to do and whether or not your efforts are working.

**In the functional family,
 parents have clearly defined
 roles and responsibilities
 they mutually agree upon.**



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Also, remember that you don't have to completely "fix" a relationship for it to feel much better to you. Just do something that will alter it or improve it "a little bit," and enjoy that improvement for awhile. Most often, relationships improve in stages, not overnight.

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In the functional family, the parents are the teachers. They consciously and intentionally plan what they want to teach in the family. Don't just hope your children will learn important things—teach them the things you feel they should know. In your Family Discussion Time with your spouse (or, if you are single, by yourself), ask, "What do we want to teach in our family?" And, "How, when, and where do we want to teach it?"

Of course, there is direct and indirect teaching that takes place within in the family.

In a given month, you should decide

specifically what you will teach directly in the family. If you plan for it to happen, it will more likely happen. Some might ask, "Teach what?" The answer is simple: Anything your family needs to learn about. Topics might include courtesy, how to develop a friendship, finances, getting out of debt, how to use time effectively, the importance of education, mutual respect in the family, the need for everyone to do their share within the home, honesty, faith and religion, how to manage angry feelings. There are an endless number of topics you could teach in the form of a very short lesson and then have a discussion where everyone shares their thoughts and participates as they choose. What you teach is not as important to me as that you teach. And that you do it regularly!

Of course, you also teach indirectly through means other than your own words. Although generally not planned, indirect teaching allows you to be more consistent and regular in conveying those principles you want your children to learn. Often, you are trying to teach the same topic you taught directly—but this time you do it indirectly. It is a double dose through two different methods.

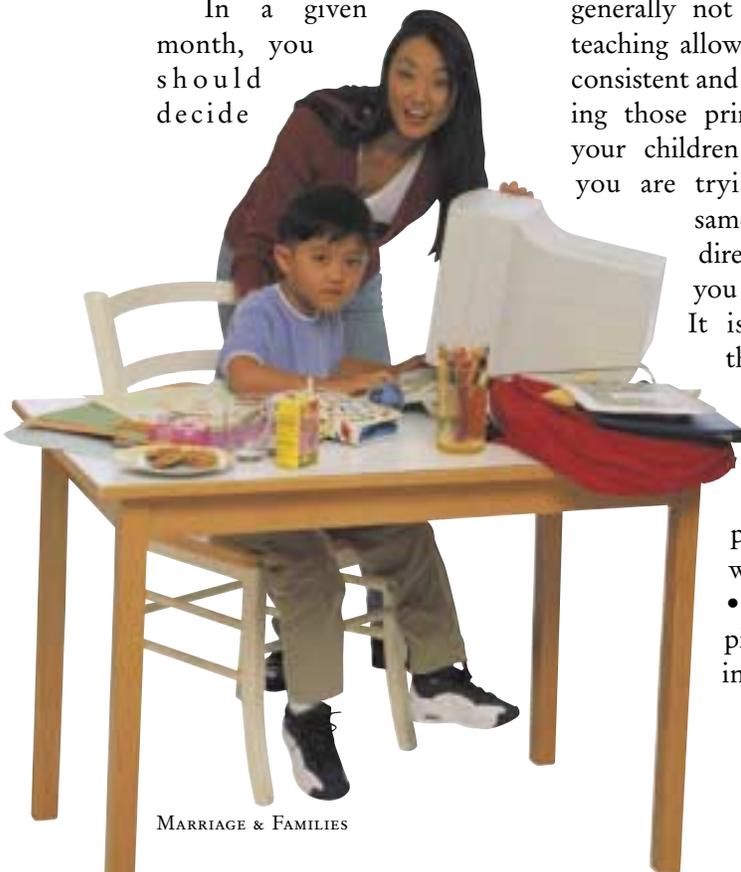
Indirect teaching in my own family has happened in many ways:

- We have hung pictures and paintings representing

principles and ideals we would like to convey

- We put up family pictures of all types.
- We put a sign that read "The Family Is Where the Most Important Things Happen" on the bulletin board in our kitchen.
- My daughter made a computerized composite family photograph of all family members spanning from 1839 to 1997—158 years! We gave one to everyone in the family for Christmas one year. As my wife and I have visited our children and their families, we have noticed that extended family photograph in many of their homes in a prominent place, which tells us we've had success in helping our children realize the value of not only those now living but those who helped bring us to where we are.
- We have displayed awards and special recognitions in a prominent place for all to see.
- My son recently wrote a paper, together with his wife, that he presented at a conference. We were able to share it with the entire family via e-mail so we could all enjoy their great accomplishment.
- Also via e-mail we have shared many ideas and insights within the family.

Remember also that example is one of the best forms of indirect teaching. If you have concluded that courtesy is something you want to teach in your family, first teach it directly. Then act courteously in your family relationships and with others you encounter.



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In the functional family, parents have clearly defined roles and responsibilities they mutually agree upon. You need to know what your roles and responsibilities are within the family, and then accept full responsibility for them. These decisions should be made together, not apart. If you are a single parent, define what your major roles are so you are clear about what you want to pay attention to as a parent. Then you must do all you can to be psychologically and physically present as much as you can, both fathers and mothers. Make the well-being of your family your highest priority. Of course that includes your own emotional and physical health as well.

If you are not in good shape, you probably

won't have much to offer your family either.

Some areas to consider are which parent will take the lead on financial support, the management of finances, the various aspects of home management, teaching different topics, nurturing particular children in need, helping with homework or special learning or training. In some cases both parents will want to contribute to an area of need fairly equally. In other areas one will take the lead and the other will serve as backup. The important thing is to sit down together and make decisions you both agree on. Then make sure you regularly assess how you're doing, what particular needs have arisen, and how each of you is feeling about the roles. All of this is conscious and intentional—not vague and casual. Don't be vague and casual as parents! Use Family Discussion Time to plan intentionally.

I have a particular bias regarding roles, which is that fathers need to be willing to be nurturers. Some feel that is the woman's or mother's role. That is absolutely not true. Children need to see their fathers as nurturers. More specifically, children need to see their fathers doing whatever it takes to support and run the family. Fathers in functional families will read stories to children, help with homework, do dishes, vacuum,

change diapers, cook, go shopping, get up at night with a sick child, go to Back to School Night or Parent Teacher Conferences, etc. They need to consistently show their children that the family is so important that there is no limitation on what they are willing to do.

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In the functional family, parents exhibit strong and confident leadership and help develop a shared vision of the purpose of the family. In my role as a father, there is no question I ask myself more often than, "Can I recommend to my children that they follow my example and emulate how I behave, both publicly and privately?" Parents need to regularly ask themselves what they want their children to be like. Then they need to show their children how they should live through their daily actions and choices.

- Do you want them to be patient? Then show patience.
- Do you want them to relax, have fun, and learn to enjoy life? Then do it yourself.
- Do you want them to read and love wholesome books and the scriptures? Then sit in an obvious place and read in front of them or read with them!
- Do you want them to develop faith and follow the religious precepts that guide your life? Then show them how your beliefs guide your daily actions.
- Do you want them to care about family relationships? Then kiss, hug, smile, listen,



Children need to see their fathers doing whatever it takes to support and run the family.

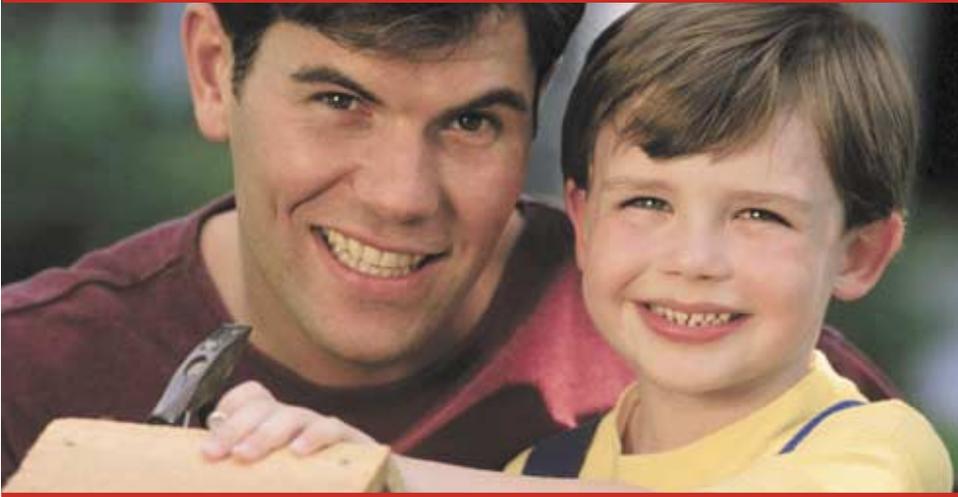


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and share personal experiences.

It is crucial that you do all you can to show strong and confident leadership in your family because children actually want to follow their parents. But they more easily follow parents who have integrity and who are credible. Your children watch you—and they want to see someone who has a clear sense of direction on personal as well as spiritual matters.

They look for someone who leads in the family willingly and not begrudgingly. They want clear but not rigid leadership. They want to respect you but not fear you. Lead them, guide them, but don't drive them. Your leadership needs to be fair-minded, and you should be able to invite the input, thoughts, and recommendations of your children in your family councils. If

you invite the help of your children, they will feel more like they are a part of the family team.

As an example, one of my older sons once made the observation that because our family was spreading out around the country and even outside the country, we should do a monthly family e-mail newsletter so we could all keep in touch and be closer. We have been doing it now for over a year, and it has, indeed, kept us all in touch with each other—even when we had a daughter in India! And that suggestion came from one of my children—not from me.

Some time ago I made a list of families I know that impressed me as being strong and healthy. Then I interviewed the parents and found an interesting thing: Each of these parents talked with passion about their family. Their family was a

big deal to them. I also found that, along with passion, these parents had made many sacrifices for their families—a testimony to their children of how important the family is to them. And, in many cases, this feeling of the importance the family had rubbed off on the children of that family, and they likewise viewed the family and the idea of the family as important.

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In the functional family, the family realizes it does not have to be perfect. Some parents need to put away the whip. They need to relax, ease up, and let go of any need they may have to present a “perfect” family to the world. Children are not going to be perfect. They are “projects under construction,” which I use to convey the idea that in the functional family, we understand that each family member is growing, developing, and learning, which is our purpose for living in this mortal realm. In the functional family, mistakes are okay. As parents, we should expect a certain amount of them. Then we should pull together in dealing with them and learning from them. In the more dysfunctional family, mistakes are bad and are to be hidden from public view as they are simply embarrassing. In the functional family, we do not go looking for mistakes and problems, but we understand they are a natural part of the mortal experience, and we love one another and offer support, keeping our heads up while facing them courageously together as a family.

In the functional family, the parents and children play and have fun!



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Some parents have actually rejoiced over their worst moments in the family because those are the moments that brought them together, deepened their love for each other, and allowed the family members to see that they could hold together in love through the worst of storms. Are the best families free from mistakes? Or are they the ones who face mistakes together arm in arm?

I often fear our children experience too much pressure to perform flawlessly so that we, as parents, look good. We place a tremendous burden on our children when we treat them like a merit badge we want to display. We need to ease up a little and not push our children so hard. We should encourage our children to do well, to learn, grow, and progress, because of what it will do for them rather than what it will do for us as parents. Parents should quit trying to be

perfect. Relax a little, loosen up, make life a little easier for everyone in the family. You will all like it more! Be serious about your family, but not so serious that you feel like managers of a business. There are things that work well in a business that are inappropriate in a family. For example, you don't easily fire family members for not doing their family jobs well enough! You keep working with them and encouraging them.

The approach you take boils down to what you believe the fundamental purpose of your family is. I recommend you consider this view: "The family is a place where there is love, support, and guidance while each individual in the family goes through 'project under construction' experiences." You have to help everyone in your family to try and do their best, but the overall purpose for a family is to give love and support while each

member goes through the learning and refining processes in their life. Everyone will "bump their nose" a few times and make their share of mistakes. We don't write our children (or ourselves) off when they do because mistakes are a normal part of the expected human experience for which we came to the earth.

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In the functional family, the parents and children play and have fun! Some of us are too serious too much of the time. Slow down, take it easy, laugh, play games, hold hands, take walks together, and just enjoy one another. We need to be fiercely serious and dedicated when it is time for that, but some of us are that way all the time. Put smiles back on your faces, close your planners, don't answer the phone for a few hours, give up your drive to success long enough for some release of tension and stress to occur. Make sure the atmosphere in your home and family is not too tight. Play, goof off a little, relax. You will do the important things of life much better if you don't forget to get down on the floor of your family room and chase your kids around on your hands and knees and tickle them! Be spontaneous, let your hair down, and just hang out together with no agenda.

I worry that some families are feeling too overwhelmed. So, put down the mop and play together, and you will feel better. You might even have a family council together where the subject of discussion is, "What are some ways we could have more

fun together?” I’ll bet attendance at that one will be high if you announce the subject of discussion in advance.

Here are some examples of fun things you can do to enjoy one another. Make up stories with your own children as the central characters. They will love it! With everyone there, tell the funniest, silliest, or even the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you. Play the “stare ‘til you laugh” game, where two people look into each other’s eyes and try not to laugh. If you laugh, you are out and the next person steps up to take your place.

Some parents hold the erroneous belief that spirituality and serious devotion to the “true” objectives of the family are incompatible with fun and frolic in the family. And yet what does playing with each other communicate? I think it says, out loud and clear, “We like each other!” If you like each other and it is fun to be together, then you will get together more often; and

then, when the serious times come, you will enjoy those, too. Think of the people in your life you have respected and looked up to the most. Did they have a fun side that you enjoyed when it presented itself?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Finally, in the functional family, parents teach their children faith, together with the guiding principles and values we each need to live a full and complete life. In rural America some 150 years ago, it was common to have both parents in close proximity to the home much of the day. Then fathers had to go to the cities to find work, and only the mother was left at home with the family. Later, women also decided to work away from the home, sometimes by choice and sometimes out of necessity. Thus, the “family schoolhouse” was left unattended for much of the day. That is largely our condition today in much of the world: children are left in the home without parents too much of any given day. No one to teach, no one to supervise, no one to guide, no one to listen.

Parents, do all you can to be available to your family, and remem-

ber that there is nothing you will do of greater importance in your life than to be there for your family—to teach and guide them and help them. And among all the things you can and will do, teaching them faith in God and in the teachings and commandments he has given his children is the most important. Be sure they hear all the basic principles of correct and righteous living from your own lips—over and over again. There is nothing I want my children to remember more about me than my absolute, resolute, and unequivocal testimony of the religious beliefs I strive to adhere to.

And so I want to be remembered in my family as a parent who taught my children those beliefs and principles in my home! It is more important for you to teach those things personally in your home and for your children to learn them from you there than for them to be taught those ideals in any other place. When my days on this earth are over, I hope one or more of my children will say, “Mom and Dad worked hard and intentionally at setting an example for us, teaching us, caring for us, and enjoying us. We think we were their highest priority.” *mf*

James D. MacArthur is a clinical professor of student development at Brigham Young University and is the author of *Everyday Parents Raising Great Kids*. This article is adapted from a presentation made at the *BYU Family Expo*, April 2005.

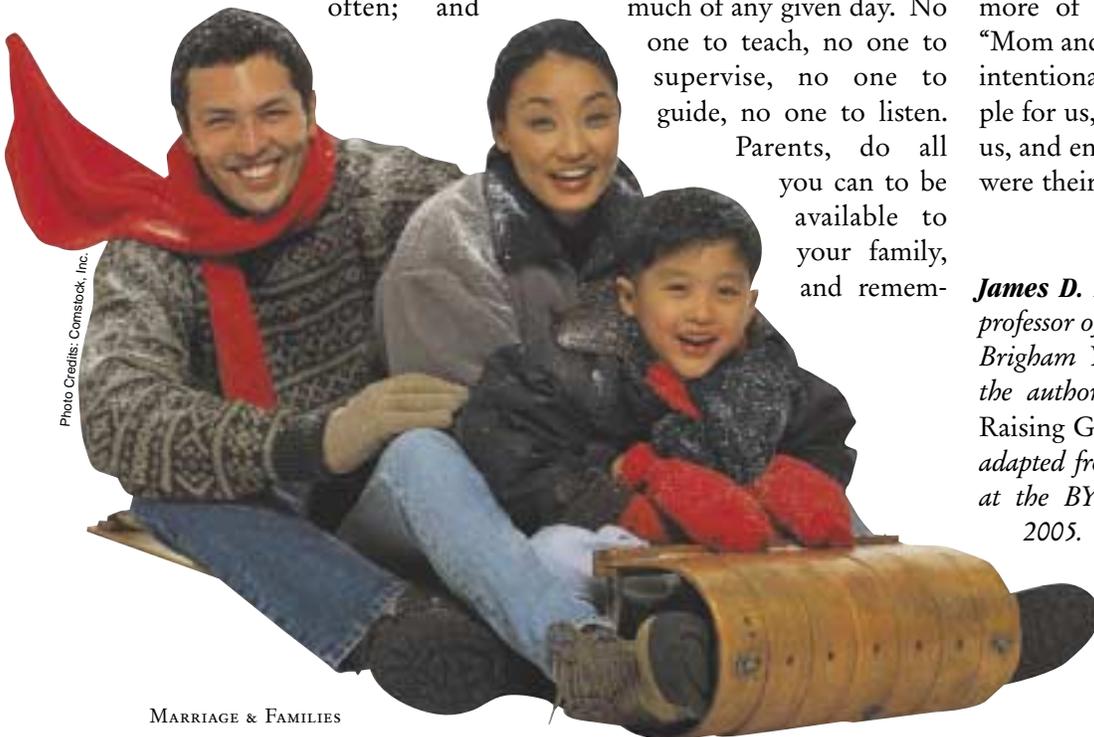
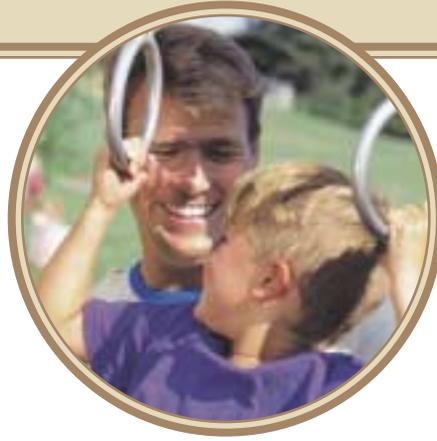


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KEEPING OUR
Credibility
AS PARENTS

by Robert Lichfield

*f*OR THE LAST 25 YEARS I have worked, either directly or indirectly, with hundreds of struggling, defiant, difficult, or troubled youth. Because of my experience, I have had countless parents come up to me and say, “I am having problems with my teen. He won’t listen to me.” Or they ask about a younger child: “My child doesn’t seem to pay attention to me. She ignores me. She is unresponsive and doesn’t follow through on anything I say. What can I do?”

In response, I tell them that they lack credibility with their child. Credibility is more of a struggle for parents today. It used to be that just being the parent would give you some level of credibility, but not so in today’s culture. Gone are the days when “Father knows best” or “children are to be seen but not heard.”

Many children today seem to believe that their parents’ main roles are to provide but not necessarily to preside. These children want their parents to provide them with their needs and wants but don’t want their parents to preside over them or have any input into how they live their lives. If you are able to properly preside in your home and have your children’s respect, it is because you have been able to establish a level of credibility with your children. While this is quite easy with some children as they just seem to naturally respect and revere their parents, for

many children credibility is something that is hard earned. This can even happen within the same family, with some children in the family easily accepting parental direction while others contest any parental boundaries. For those children who are resistive to parental authority, establishing credibility becomes even more crucial. Credibility is necessary for any parent to be effective.

One way parents can assess their level of credibility is to look at the word *no*. What does the word *no* mean to your children? Does it really mean *no*? To some children, *no* means “I asked the wrong way.” To other children it means, “I asked at the wrong time.” To others it means, “I asked the wrong parent.” And to others it even means, “I just haven’t asked enough times. Eventually, if I ask enough times, my parents will say ‘yes.’” So every time we say *no* and then we end up changing it to a *yes*, what does that do to our credibility? What do our children believe? Do they believe *no* really means *no*? Of course not. Do we have credibility? No. Even worse, our children now have more of a basis to not accept *no* the next time. They are even becoming conditioned to never have to accept *no* as an answer.

The credibility problem also works in another way. That’s when we tell our children that if they do a certain thing there is going to be a consequence—and then we don’t follow through on the consequence.

As an example, you may say to your children, “We’re all going out Friday night for dinner and a movie. In order to go, you must keep your room clean all week.” So you have a daughter, and all week her room is a pigsty. Then on Friday night, she makes a token effort to clean it and promises to clean it better tomorrow.

Do you leave her behind? Or do you take her? In most cases, you would have to leave a spouse behind to stay with her. So, what do you end up doing? You take her. And what does she learn about your credibility?

Perhaps you’re angry because your son did something you didn’t appreciate, and you tell him, “You’re grounded for a month!” But a few days later, there is an important school activity that your son really wants to go to and he gets extra credit for attending. If you don’t let him go, you

know he is to going sulk, whine, and pester you all night for not letting him go. And you were hoping for a nice relaxing night at home. Since he is getting extra credit, you rationalize and let him go. But, what does that do to your credibility? What is your child learning after this happens time and time again? Worse yet, your child begins to believe that they don’t have to follow through and there won’t be any consequences, making it harder to enforce them the next time. Little by little the threat of consequences begins to mean nothing to your child. They don’t believe you mean what you say. They believe that while you may make harsh and rash threats in moments of frustration, you won’t ever stick to them. You have reached the point of no credibility.

What to do? The solution is that we need to talk less and act more. The key to establishing and maintaining credibility with our children is consistent follow-through on whatever we say. When we consistently follow through, amazingly enough, we get consistent results. Children consistently respond to consistent follow-through. In fact, this is not only true with children, but researchers have found it true with laboratory rats. They found if rats go down a certain tube in a maze where they then consistently get shocked, the rats will quit going down that tube. Now, our kids are certainly smarter than rats, but even rats are smart enough to figure out that “Every time I go down that tube there is a consistent, negative consequence. So, I’ll quit going down that tube.” So, if your children are going down a tube you would prefer they avoid, it only means one thing: there is not a consistent, negative consequence. Otherwise, they too would decide to quit going down that tube.

Researchers made another interesting finding. Working with three groups of pigeons, they put each group in a cage with a button. With the first group, when the pigeons would push the button, food would appear. With the next group, every time they pushed the button, nothing happened. With the third group, when they pushed the button, sometimes they would get food and sometimes they wouldn’t. And, when they did get food, sometimes they would get a small amount, and other times they would get a very large amount.

What the researchers found was that the first group was pretty consistent at going and hitting the button—until they got full or bored. Then they would no longer hit the button. With the second group, the pigeons quickly came to the point where they didn't even care about the button. In fact, they acted like it didn't even exist. The pigeons in the third group, interestingly, were the ones that hit the button the most times—and were the most vigorous and the most enthusiastic in doing so.

So, what the researchers learned is that intermittent reinforcements—in other words, sporadic rewards—are very powerful. They found out with pigeons what Las Vegas found out a long time ago: that people are willing to risk a very painful experience (losing their money) if there's a chance of a great reward.

What I learn from that study is that children, in order to get what they want, are willing to risk getting some hassles, some conflict, and even some token consequences if there is a chance—or, better yet, a history—of occasionally getting what they want. Understanding this makes consistent follow-through even more important.

So, if consistent follow-through is so critical, why do we not follow through? What stops us from doing what we know would be best for our children? Some suggestions I've heard are:

- We get tired.
- It's difficult.
- It takes time.
- It is emotionally draining.
- We are not sure we know what we are doing.

Many times, we don't follow through because we don't want our children to have consequences. So we avoid trying to give our kids any consequences. While I understand how parents feel, what I tell those who are struggling with their children is, the minute your child is as interested in not getting consequences as you are in not giving consequences, the game is over. It's a done deal. The problem will be solved. You see, we're the ones who are trying to not give the consequences. Why? Because we love our children. When they bleed, we bleed. So we don't want to give our children consequences. In fact, we go to

great lengths to not give our children consequences—often to their own detriment.

How do we do that? We tend to use talk instead of using consequences. We lecture. We yell. We scold. We lay guilt trips. We warn. We threaten, sometimes even with rage. And, we remind. Basically, we talk, hoping we don't have to take any action.

We use the term “*reminding* our children.” But what do our children call it? “*Nagging!*” We're not reminding, we're nagging, which actually *hurts* relationships.

How many of you have had the experience of a child saying, “Thanks, Dad, for that lecture. I now understand things better”? Lectures don't help. Scolding and guilt trips often shame and hurt the child. The solution is to talk less, and act more.

The best example of this is when our Heavenly Father introduced Adam and Eve into the Garden of Eden. He said to Adam, “Here are all these trees you may freely eat of. But here is one tree that you are not to eat of.” Then what does God do? He leaves. And, when He comes back, Adam and Eve have partaken of the fruit. So, what did God do? Lecture? Yell? Call them names? Lay a guilt trip on them? Remind them of what He had said? Give them a warning, and another chance?

No, He followed through on what He had told them. He acted, instead of talking about it. If we are going to be successful with our children, we have to follow the same example.

If we try to avoid imposing consequences on our children, we are ignoring the fact that



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If we try to avoid imposing consequences on our children, we are ignoring the fact that consequences are a necessary part of their development.



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consequences are a necessary part of their development. No one knows this better than God. God could save us from all of the consequences of our actions. He could save us from all of our pain. But He loves us and is committed to our growth to the point that no matter how much He loves us, He very seldom intervenes. Even when He extends mercy, He is going to let us, for the most part, suffer the consequences for our decisions so we can learn from them.

Let me suggest some techniques that will help us avoid losing credibility. The first one goes back to that little word I referred to at the first, the word *no*.

It's very important that when you say *no*, you follow through with your *no*. In order to do that, you must become much better at not using *no* except when you really mean it. If you use *no* too quickly and too frequently, it will end up meaning *yes* to the child, just with a slight detour between what they want and when they get there.

Years ago I worked with a man who said, "Whenever kids ask a question, just tell them 'No!' because it's right 80 percent of the time." And while there may be some truth to that, if you go around saying, "no, no, no," then you will completely lose your credibility over a period of time. Sometimes, the things our children ask to do really are okay! So, don't use *no* until you know for sure that you mean it and are going to stick to it.

There are times when, before you answer, you should use the simple technique of "buying time." This is done by saying, "Let me think about it,"

rather than rushing into a decision. Take the time to make sure you've thought through the issue completely. And make sure that your spouse is on board so that they're not learning, "I asked the wrong parent." Then you can say with confidence, "We have thought about it, and the answer is no."

There are times when your children will ask a question that you want to think about, but you don't want to give them any false hope. In these cases you may want to say, "I doubt it, but let me think about it." Then you maintain your flexibility, but you haven't given them false encouragement or hope that they are eventually going to get the answer they want. Again, use *no* when you need to; but when you say it, mean it.

The next way in which we hurt our credibility is by using bluffs or exaggerated threats: "You do that, and you'll be grounded for a year." "Do that again, and you're going to live to regret it." Your children likely know you're not going to follow through, and so you once again lose credibility. To avoid that, I suggest two things. The first is to not use consequences that penalize you too much because you won't deliver on them. The second is, wherever possible, don't identify the consequences. Just let them know, "If you make those kinds of choices, there will be consequences." The reason is, as soon as you identify the consequence, what have you done? You have committed yourself. You have taken away your flexibility because your only choice at that point is to either follow through—or not follow through and lose credibility. By not identifying the consequences (beyond, "there will be consequences")

God *will never put His* desire for our acceptance
and approval *ahead of His* credibility or principles.



you maintain your flexibility, and you can then think through and create consequences that conform to what you want to do, what you feel you can do, and what fits the situation. In addition, fear of the unknown is often greater than fear of the known. There are times, though, that you want your child to clearly understand the severity of the potential consequences. In these cases, you may want to clearly outline what action you will take as long as you are prepared to deliver. This is what God did in His statement to Adam, “In the day you eat the fruit, you shall surely die.”

Another way to maintain your credibility is to avoid making decisions hastily or under pressure. And children will always try to press you to make a decision right then. “Can I go? Can I go? Can I go?” In situations like that, you’re going to make bad decisions that you’ll later have to reverse—and that hurts your credibility. Again, buy time in order to avoid making decisions based on pressure.

The last way in which we damage our credibility is by rescuing our children from their consequences. It’s very hard, as parents, not to do that, and it’s something we all have to work on.

Watching parents try to rescue their children reminds me of the story of the little boy who watched a butterfly try to break out of a cocoon. He watched as it struggled and fought its way out, and the boy finally decided that it just wasn’t going to get out by itself. Finally, out of compassion, the boy helped the butterfly break free. Then he threw it up in the air, where the butterfly flew for a ways, and then fell to the earth and died.

The grandfather who had watched all of this came over to the boy and said, “Son, a butterfly needs to exercise its wings to the full extent in getting out of its cocoon. If it doesn’t, it

doesn’t develop the strength it needs, and so it dies.”

That’s what we do many times when we try to rescue our children from the consequences of their actions. As we try to avoid that tendency, our best example, once again, is God. No one loves us more than God loves us. But He lets us struggle through the cocoons of life until we develop the strength that will carry us through. We must learn to do the same with our own children.

Within reasonable limits, we need to let our children learn from natural consequences. If they leave their lunch at home, there is a natural consequence that will likely result in their being much more attentive to remembering to pick it up before they walk out the door in the morning. If a child has blown off opportunities to earn enough money to go on an activity Friday night, there is a natural consequence that will help them learn about work, budgets, and saving at an early age. We will do our children a favor by letting them experience natural consequences.

Of course, there are situations where you have to intervene. If a three-year-old runs out into a busy street, it’s not a good time to say, “Well, Johnny is going to learn from natural consequences today, and what a lesson he’ll learn.” Or, if a child is using drugs or drinking or creating other serious risks to themselves or others, this would be a time to intervene. There are certainly those moments, but, wherever you can, you need to let your child learn from natural consequences.

In order to be effective with our children, we need to also have a relationship with them. It can’t all be about consequences and rules. A warm relationship is also critical. But parents sometimes get confused over what the word *relationship* means. In my experience, there are right kinds of relationships and there are wrong kinds of

relationship. The wrong kind of relationship is where the parent is more concerned about being liked by the child than being credible, or more concerned about being accepted and approved by the child than being respected. To use God as the example again, He loves us and He wants us to love Him. But God will never put His desire for our acceptance and approval ahead of His credibility or principles. He doesn't bend his rules so we will like Him more.

Sometimes parents are trying to develop the wrong kind of relationship. They are looking for approval or acceptance. They want to be viewed as a friend or as cool. That can end up giving us the wrong kind of relationship. One where we only have a relationship when we give our children what they want.

Another vital part of having the right kind of relationship with our children is that we need to be very nurturing. There are those who believe that if you have a lot of rules and a lot of expectations, you are just going to make your kids rebel and they will end up as juvenile delinquents. If that were really the case, then there would be an extremely high rate of juvenile delinquency among the Amish, which is not the case. What I've found over the years is that it's not so much the rules that turn kids off as it is a lack of nurturing.

When you have a good mixture of accountability and nurturing, you have the ingredients you need for success. You can readily see how the two work together by looking at the workplace. Imagine having a job where there is no accountability. No one really cares about when you show up or even if you show up. And it doesn't seem to matter to anyone if you get your work done, or if you do it very well. Obviously, that business is not going to succeed. You have to have accountability. But now consider working in an environment where there is a lot of accountability, but there is no nurturing. There is no appreciation and certainly no recognition of what you contribute. In that environment, most people just check out. A family is much the same. As parents, you need to encourage that sense of accountability, but you also need to provide regular, ongoing nurturing.

Here are some suggestions on how to do that. First, look for opportunities to express appreciation or validation and then express it whenever you can. With some children, that may mean taking them by the hand and helping them take the garbage out. But once the garbage is out, make sure you tell them, "Thanks for helping me with the garbage."

Second, create the right kind of atmosphere in your home. In my view, there are three critical times when you can most effectively create the right kind of atmosphere in your home: The first thing in the morning; the last thing at night; and, as often as possible, when the kids come home from school.

In the morning, you have the opportunity to set the tone for the day. Warm encouraging interaction at the beginning of the day can go a long ways in creating a loving, nurturing environment in your home.

In the evening, you have an opportunity to ask each child how their day went and let them know how much you appreciate them. Children love this personal attention, and it allows them to go to bed knowing they have parents who care for them.

When your children first get home from school—before all the competing demands set in—you have an opportunity to ask your children how their day at school went, and you are there for them if needed.

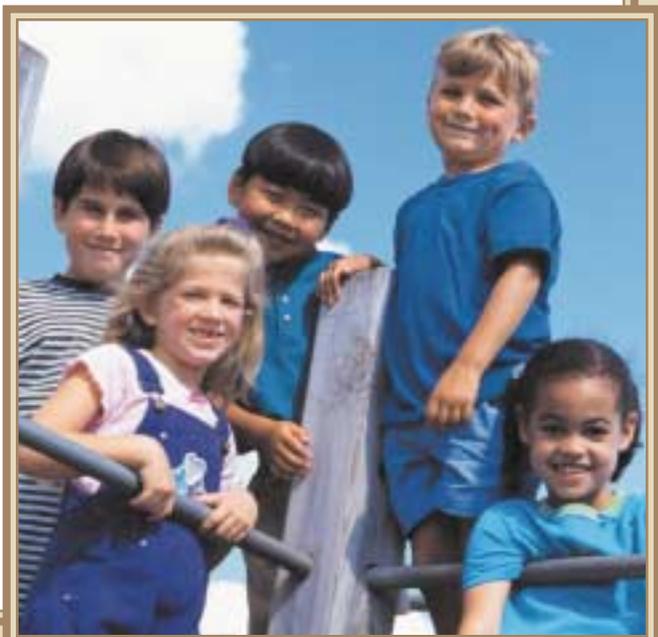


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*If children get
the right kind
of nurturing,
they will
respond well to
accountability.*



I have found that if your children feel you care about them and are on their team, they will work with you when problems arise. It's when they feel you are not on their team—that you are frequently angry, frustrated, or upset with them, or that you're not interested in their lives—that's when they will struggle.

Third, spend time together. In working with hundreds of struggling, troubled teenagers, I have invariably found that when teens first began to be headed for problems, they were isolating themselves from their parents and the rest of their family, whether it was through computer games, loud music, non-stop videos, or spending every possible minute with their friends. Spend time together. Get your children out of their rooms. Limit the time they spend watching television or playing on the computer or whatever it is that allows them

to cut themselves off from the family. When a child is isolated, your relationship is headed downhill, and the problems are on the way up.

Finally, provide physical expressions of your love through hugs, a touch on the shoulder, a pat on the back, or other appropriate ways of letting them know that you care about them. Touch validates. It lets your children know you care about them.

To tie all of this together, we need to develop credibility. We need to create accountability in our homes, but we also need to create a nurturing, warm influence. Family life is like a football game. Rules and penalties are important to a football game, but no one wants to go to a game where it is dominated by rules, penalties, or refereeing. Refereeing and penalties are necessary so that the game doesn't break down. In like manner, families need parents

who referee and provide enough penalties that the family doesn't break down, but the home should be more about fun, personal growth, progress, involvement, and joy. This can only happen when children feel loved, valued, needed, and involved. If children get the right kind of nurturing, they will respond well to accountability. And it's our job, as parents, to provide an appropriate measure of each. *mf*

*For 25 years, **Robert B. Lichfield** has worked with, owned, or consulted for over 30 different schools and programs for struggling teens. In that role he has conducted numerous parenting seminars and workshops. He is married to the former Patti Peart. They are the parents of seven children and seven grandchildren. This article is adapted from a presentation made at the October 2004 Families Under Fire Conference held at Brigham Young University.*

NEWS

NEW BUILDING HOUSES SCHOOL OF FAMILY LIFE

The Joseph F. Smith Building also houses the two largest colleges at BYU and replaces the Smith Family Living Center

Before a capacity crowd in the BYU Marriott Center on Sept. 20, President Gordon B. Hinckley, president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and chair of the Brigham Young University Board of Trustees, dedicated the newly completed Joseph F. Smith Building and praised its namesake.

“He was a man of unshakeable courage in the face of adversity, [a man] of industry and devotion, and of faith and knowledge concerning the latter-day work of the Redeemer,” said President Hinckley. “It is proper that this wonderful new building carry the name of this remarkable man.”

Joining President Hinckley and BYU president Elder Cecil O. Samuelson of the First Quorum of the Seventy for the ceremony were Presidents Thomas S. Monson and James E. Faust, first and second counselors in the First Presidency, and President Boyd K. Packer, acting president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Built on the site of the old Joseph F. Smith Family Living Center west of the Harold B. Lee Library, the 280,000-square-foot Joseph F. Smith Building is now home to the two largest colleges on campus. The College of Family, Home and Social Sciences occupies the second floor and the south and west portions of the first floor, and the College of Humanities resides on the third and fourth floors.

Its 25 classrooms can accommodate 1,400 students, and it also houses faculty offices, laboratories and conference rooms as well as several academic centers affiliated with the two colleges.

Constructed with the theme of “light and truth,” the modern glass façade of the building’s main entrance contrasts with a cloistered inner courtyard featuring a fountain.

Some of the building’s residents include:

- The Family History and Genealogy Center is the hub for family history education, where more than 800 students each semester are trained in the basics of family history research, including computerized genealogical programs.



JFSB Photography by Katherine Willis, Jaren Wilkey and Mark Philbrick

- The Humanities Technology and Research Report Center is a multi-faceted, computer-supported environment that assists students taking one of the many foreign language courses offered at BYU.

- The Gallery and Gallery Overlook, a beautiful, light-drenched space, is designed to house a series of exhibits that will expand on the educational experiences offered in the building.

- The Child and Family Studies Laboratory, founded in 1950, is a popular campus fixture. It serves more than 280 preschool and kindergarten children annually and provides a research base for the university’s marriage, family and human development programs.

- The Anthropology Laboratory provides a much-needed space for training students in skills unique to this discipline, such as studies in museum presentation, primitive technology and human osteology.

The building honors President Joseph F. Smith (1838-1918), who was the sixth president of the Church of Jesus Christ. He was five years old when his father, Hyrum Smith, and uncle, Joseph Smith, were martyred in Carthage, Ill.

Known as a preacher of righteousness and a youthful missionary, he was called as a missionary to the Sandwich Islands, now Hawaii, when he was 15 years old.

In his dedicatory prayer at the Smith Family Living Center dedication in 1955, Elder Willard R. Smith, a son of Joseph F. Smith, spoke of President Smith’s “great love for the youth, the children of Zion; and the great hope that was always in his breast that opportunities and privileges might be granted them to be spiritually enlightened, to be physically strengthened, and to be put in tune with our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ.”

That same spirit of enlightenment continues in the new building.

—Cecelia Harris Fielding



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“Children are naturally eager to share their experiences, which range from triumphs of delight to trials of distress. Are we as eager to listen?”

—RUSSELL M. NELSON

MARRIAGE
& families

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