

ELEPHANTS, FATHERS, AND FAMILIES

*Every father has a divine role in raising his children
in truth and righteousness.*

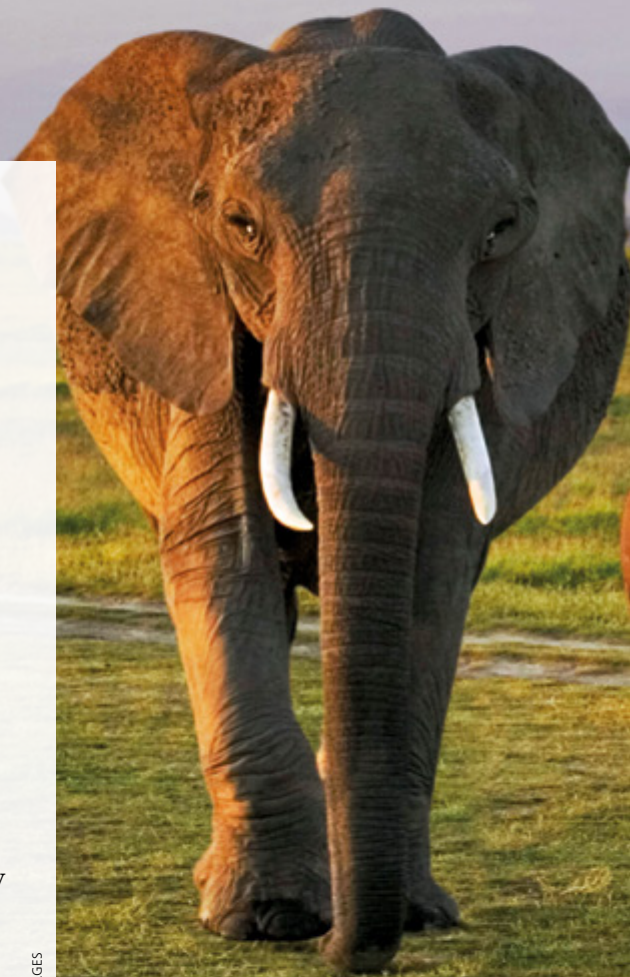
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About 40 years ago, officials at a national park and game reserve in South Africa were faced with a growing elephant problem. The population of African elephants had grown larger than the park could sustain. Since there was no way for the large adult elephants to be relocated—each adult elephant weighed more than 6,600 pounds (3,000 kg) and adult bull elephants weighed closer to 13,000 pounds (6,000 kg)—it was determined that only the young elephants would be moved to another reserve, and some of the adult elephants would be culled to control the population.

The problem was solved—or so it seemed. Twenty years later, the rangers at the other game reserve began to notice that some of the animals living at the reserve were being injured or killed. When the rangers placed hidden cameras around the reserve to find the culprit, they discovered that it was not poachers who were killing these animals but the juvenile elephants. The young males were abnormally aggressive, terrorizing the other animals in the park and charging humans and tourist vehicles.

The rangers ultimately concluded that the cause of the elephants' unusual and troubling behavior was the lack of a role model—in particular, a father. In normal circumstances, the bull elephants would model behavior for their young, helping them understand how an elephant was supposed to act. Without that guidance, the young elephants became violent and uncontrollable.¹

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The Gospel's View of Fathers

Of course, elephants and people are different, but this account does highlight an important gospel principle: the father is a vital cornerstone of the family. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” states, “Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children.” Fathers in particular have the responsibility “to preside over their families in love and righteousness” and “provide the necessities of life and protection for their families.” They work together “as equal partners” with their wives. This divine union is ordained of God and provides an environment where parents can “rear their children in love and righteousness, . . . provide for their physical and spiritual needs, and . . . teach them to love and serve one another, observe the commandments of God, and be law-abiding citizens.”²

Multiple prophets and apostles have also commented on the importance of fathers. President James E. Faust (1920–2007), Second Counselor in the First Presidency, stated, “Noble fatherhood gives us a glimpse of the divine attributes of our Father in Heaven.”³ President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) likewise declared, “A father’s calling is eternal, and its importance transcends time.”⁴ He also counseled fathers, saying: “You have a serious responsibility to assume leadership in working with your children. You must help create a home where the Spirit of the Lord can abide.”⁵

Exemplar and Guardian

Whether they are aware of it or not, many boys learn what it means to be a man from observing their fathers. If a father is rude, dismissive, or abusive, his sons are more likely to develop a rude, dismissive, or abusive attitude toward those they interact with, particularly their future spouse and children. If a father demonstrates love and respect toward others and shows a pattern of service in the home, sons will more likely show respect to others and put an increased emphasis on service. A father can teach his sons to react with patience instead of violence and with humility instead of bravado. Many of society’s problems could be reduced if fathers would seek to turn the hearts of their children to Heavenly Father—teaching, by their example, the basic principles of faith, obedience, respect, and fidelity.⁶

A father’s example is particularly important in inspiring sons to be active and worthy priesthood holders. Consider the powerful influence a father can have in teaching his son the purpose of the priesthood and what it means to righteously exercise it. The nature and importance of priesthood blessings, covenants, and callings become clearer to young men as their fathers guide and teach them.

Fathers are role models not just for their sons but for their daughters as well. Elaine S. Dalton, former Young Women General President, advised fathers: “You are your

daughter's guardian in more than the legal sense. Be present in your daughter's life. Let her know your standards, your expectations, your hopes and dreams for her success and happiness. . . . Help her understand the importance of education. Help her understand that the principle of modesty is a protection. Help her choose music and media that invite the Spirit and are consistent with her divine identity. Be an active part of her life."⁷

As I was growing up, my father's loving example taught me about the power of the priesthood and the importance of finding a righteous spouse. I clearly remember the comfort and peace I felt whenever a father's blessing or blessing of healing was given to me. I remember the way my father treated my mother and served our family. I remember the time my father spent with me and my siblings, reading books out loud or playing with us in the backyard. I remember how, even when he had callings or work that required a great deal of his time, my father always found moments to attend soccer games and track meets, talk with us about our lives, and teach us about the gospel. When I started dating in college, I tried to find someone who showed the same dedication, respect, and commitment to the gospel that my father displayed, and my search led me to a wonderful husband.

Father Figures

In the South African game reserve, the solution to the delinquent elephants was to send in male bull elephants in specially designed trucks. As soon as these males arrived, the younger elephants' violent behavior stopped completely. Although these bull elephants were not their literal parents, they were still able to provide an example that the younger elephants could emulate.

Likewise, there are some Church members who have not had fathers present in their lives due to death, abandonment, divorce, or a number of other circumstances. In these cases, various blessings associated with having a father can still be present in their lives through mentors and role models.

A WORD TO SINGLE MOTHERS

The importance of fathers does not diminish the critical role that mothers play in the family, especially in fatherless homes. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has noted that "no love in mortality comes closer to approximating the pure love of Jesus Christ than the selfless love a devoted mother has for her child,"¹⁰ and President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) declared that "none other can adequately take [a mother's] place."¹¹ Just as much as their husbands, mothers are role models to their children and have a great influence on their children's well-being, testimony, and overall happiness and success. Mary F. Foulger, a former Relief Society general board member, advised mothers raising children alone to "remember that you and the Lord constitute a majority. As your arms encircle your little ones, his arms are there, too. Feel secure, for his arms are lengthened out toward us all the day long."¹²



Those who can serve as role models or father figures include grandfathers, uncles, stepfathers, priesthood leaders, and other worthy men. Even more importantly, members with distant, absent, or abusive fathers can be comforted by the knowledge that "we all have a Father in whom we can trust and to whom we can turn for comfort and counsel. He is our Heavenly Father."⁸ Our Heavenly Father is the perfect example of fatherhood; He cares for us, He nurtures us, and He leads us. Regardless of our circumstance, we can always turn to Him.

Conclusion

Our Heavenly Father has set a high standard for fatherhood, one that all fathers and father figures will fall short of in this life. Fatherhood is difficult. It exposes faults and weaknesses and requires sacrifice. But, as fathers show love to their families, teach their children the gospel, and follow the example that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ have set before them, they can give their children “the key to peace in this life and eternal life in the world to come.”⁹ They can become a cornerstone of strength within their families and an example of righteousness for their posterity. They can become worthy of the divine title of “Father.” ■

NOTES

1. See “The Delinquents: A Spate of Rhino Killings,” CBS News, Aug. 22, 2000, cbsnews.com.
2. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
3. James E. Faust, “Them That Honour Me I Will Honour,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 46.
4. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson* (2014), 194.
5. *Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 196.
6. See D. Todd Christofferson, “Fathers,” *Ensign*, May 2016, 94.
7. Elaine S. Dalton, “Love Her Mother,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2011, 78.
8. Kenneth Johnson, “We All Have a Father in Whom We Can Trust,” *Ensign*, May 1994, 30.
9. D. Todd Christofferson, “Fathers,” 94.
10. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Behold Thy Mother,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2015, 48.
11. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Women of the Church,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1996, 69.
12. Mary F. Foulger, “Motherhood and the Family,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1980, 105.
13. Jeffrey Rosenberg and W. Bradford Wilcox, *The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children* (2006), 12, childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/fatherhood.pdf.
14. See Sarah Allen and Kerry Daly, “The Effects of Father Involvement: An Updated Research Summary of the Evidence,” *Father Involvement Research Alliance* (May 2007), 3, fra.ca/cms/documents/29/Effects_of_Father_Involvement.pdf.
15. See Michael Yogman and Craig F. Garfield, “Fathers’ Roles in the Care and Development of Their Children: The Role of Pediatricians,” *Pediatrics*, vol. 138, no. 1 (July 2016), e4.
16. Yogman and Garfield, “Fathers’ Roles,” e4; emphasis added.
17. See “C2, Household Relationship and Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years, by Age and Sex: 2016,” United States Census Bureau, census.gov.

INVOLVED FATHERS VS. ABSENT FATHERS

- “From birth, children who have an involved father are more likely to be emotionally secure, be confident to explore their surroundings, and, as they grow older, have better social connections with peers.”¹³
- Children with involved fathers are also better at tolerating frustration and stress.¹⁴

