



The Functional Family

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I remember being a young parent and reading Doctrine and Covenants 93:40, where the Lord says, “I have commanded you to bring up your children in light and truth.” I wondered, “Exactly how do I do that?” I had heard a lot of people talk about *dysfunctional* families, but I wanted to raise a functional family. So what exactly is a *functional* family?

People seem to think that family members in functional families get along perfectly and solve problems together perfectly. Of course, the reality is that calling a family “functional” does not mean the family is perfect. All families face challenges in dealing with the unique

personalities of family members. However, in a family that functions well, family members recognize that they have weaknesses, and they work to improve their relationships despite their weaknesses. Indeed, family members will be happier when they strive to apply gospel principles in their lives to improve individual and family relationships.

Through many years of working with couples and families as a professional counselor, I have learned some principles that I believe help families function well. This article discusses just a few of them; you may think of some on your own. As you read through these principles, take a moment to consider how they might apply to your family.

In the functional family, parents focus their energy on teaching their children correct principles and allowing them to exercise their agency. As a parent

and grandparent, I put thought and effort into offering as much love, instruction, time, concern, help, guidance, and attention as I can to teach my children and grandchildren correct principles. This includes teaching them that choices have consequences—both good and bad.

Sometimes as parents we slip into the role of a manager seeking to control our children because we expect a desired result. The problem with this approach is that children resist coercion or compulsion, especially as they get older. We will be more effective the less we act as managers and the more we act as coaches, consultants, and guides. That means that we teach our children correct principles and, as their maturity and experience allow, continue to grant them greater latitude to make choices and reap the consequences.

In the functional family, parents *intentionally* strengthen their families. This means that you regularly and privately ponder each child's needs and assess them

What is a functional family? One in which family members work together to improve relationships as they face challenges.

against the overall needs of the family. Many of us find ourselves constantly reacting to the challenges of life. Busy schedules and the demands of life can make it difficult to actively decide how you want to live and respond to the needs and demands of your family. This means that circumstance, other people, or old habits can end up dictating how you respond to a given situation rather than you deciding how you will act. Needless to say, such reactions often lead to unhappy situations where we don't live up to our best capabilities.

One of the best ways parents can strengthen their families is to establish a specific time each week to discuss how the family is doing. I call it "family discussion time." By establishing family discussion time, you and your spouse commit to regularly reflect on your family's needs.

You also create time to consider the changes you and your family may need to make. If you are a single parent, you can schedule time each week to ponder and pray about your family.

Intentionally focusing on your family also means you think about the impact of what you say or do not say to your children. As parents, you begin sending messages about how you feel about your children from the minute they are born. These messages include your words, actions, and attitudes, whether you mean to or not. All of these messages shape how children come to view themselves.



Examples of unintentional though often harmful messages include ignoring or being impatient with a child. If you are too busy to spend time with your son or daughter, you might be sending the message "You are not very important to me." Now, remember, sometimes you can't help being busy, so don't get too paranoid about this. Just remember it is important to intentionally send positive messages to edify your children and to evaluate now and again what messages you are sending so you can adjust as necessary.

What messages would you like to intentionally send your children? Do you want them to know that you love them and are thinking about them? If you plan ahead, you can often send positive messages even when it seems difficult. For example, suppose you have to leave for

work each day before your children awake. Think how surprised and happy a child would be if you made a little sign on colored paper and taped it to the foot of his or her bed so it was the first thing your child saw upon waking up. The sign could read something like this: “Hi! Daddy loves you! See you at dinner. We’ll play together when I get home!” That kind of positive message can have a lasting and powerful impact for good.

In the functional family, relationships are of supreme importance. It is a good idea to regularly examine the condition of *each* relationship in the family. You never know when there might be a specific unmet need that for some reason your children have not shared with you. By listening carefully and being sensitive to the Spirit, you will be more likely to discern how your children are doing and what their needs are.

Of course, that raises a question: when you realize that someone in your family needs some help either in a relationship with you or with someone else, how do you help things improve? One thing I’ve learned is that relationships usually don’t get better accidentally; rather, they improve when we make that result a priority.

Try to invest time in the relationship in obvious ways. Here are some things I’ve tried that may work for you: talk together; play together; spend one-on-one time together; send letters, cards, or notes sharing your affection; give compliments; do something fun and unexpected; say, “I love you”; listen to the other person; ask him or her to help you on a project; share personal feelings. All of these require that you personally get engaged in things the other person is doing. Afterward, talk about your efforts with your spouse during your family discussion time. You might be surprised at how far-reaching your positive influence can be.

In the functional family, parents are active teachers. Adam and Eve were excellent examples of parents being good teachers. For example, “Adam and Eve . . . made all things known unto their sons and their daughters” (Moses 5:12). They taught their children gospel principles, such as the plan of salvation and the importance

and blessings of keeping the commandments. We have the same responsibility to teach our children not only life skills but also the gospel. If we leave the spiritual education of our children to chance or to someone else, we take a big risk that they won’t learn the things that will bring them true happiness.

That means we need to consider what we teach and how we teach. For example, when holding family discussion time, you might ask, “What do we want to teach in our family in the next few months? How, when, and where do we want to teach it?” Consider writing the answers down as family goals and posting them prominently so



you remember them. Then follow through with your goals.

What else might you teach? Anything you think your family needs to learn. Some topics include courtesy, honesty, prayer, scripture study, finances and getting out of debt, mutual respect in the family, how to use time effectively, how to manage angry feelings, the importance of education, and the need for all family members to do their share within the home.

Effective teaching also happens outside of a formal or direct teaching setting. Indirect teaching occurs when you teach without using words. In fact, you might not even be present when the “teaching” occurs! For example, I hang pictures that represent characteristics I would like my children to think about, such as a picture of pioneers traveling in a snowstorm to represent not giving up when

things get tough. We also have 29 individual photographs of our grandchildren along the mantle in our living room at home. Although there are no written words with these pictures, this visual presentation gets a lot of comments. People just can't miss them. The pictures send the message that our grandchildren are an important part of our family.

In the functional family, parents lead by example. Children are always watching and observing our behavior, whether we know it or not. In my role as a father, I regularly take stock of my behavior by asking myself, "Can I recommend to my children that they follow my example both publicly and privately?" If the answer is no, I make corrections where needed.

Here are some questions I've asked myself:

- Do I want my children to be patient? Yes, so I try to be as patient with them as I can.
- Do I want my children to relax, have fun, and learn to enjoy life? Yes, because I believe these qualities are vital

T*each your children correct principles by word, by example, and by the Spirit as you bear testimony to them.*

to developing healthy, happy relationships. I try to have fun with my children as often as I can.

- Do I want my children to read the scriptures and wholesome books? Yes, so I make sure they see me reading, and I read to them.
- Do I want my children to care about family relationships? Yes, so I kiss and hug them, smile at them, listen to them, play with them, and share personal experiences with them.

Remember, our children want their parents to set an example of a person who has a clear sense of direction on personal as well as spiritual matters. We as parents need to live worthy of the guidance of the Holy Ghost at all times, especially when things get tough.

Finally, in the functional family, parents teach

their children faith in our Heavenly Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. This faith will establish a sure and solid foundation for family living that is unequaled in any other way. It is also a commandment from our Heavenly Father. Regarding our duty to our children, King Benjamin taught that "ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another" (Mosiah 4:15).

Perhaps the most important thing we will do in life will be to teach our family members to have faith in Jesus Christ and His teachings and to keep the commandments. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" states, "Happiness in



family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ."¹ Teach your children correct principles by word, by example, and by the Spirit as you bear your testimony to them.

Remember to be patient with yourself and your family members. Relationships usually improve in stages, not overnight. Strengthening them requires time and effort. However, as you strive to have a functional family based on the teachings of our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ and His restored gospel, you will provide your family the best opportunity you can to grow closer together and to face challenges with a greater sense of harmony and happiness. ■

NOTE

1. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Liahona*, Oct. 2004, 49; *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102.