

# Blessing Our Children

BY IMPROVING OUR MARRIAGES

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One day I was conducting a therapy session with an adolescent who had recently put her own life at risk by engaging in dangerous behavior. I had previously worked with her parents and was trying to assess her perception and understanding of her family's relationships. When I asked about her parents' marriage, she looked me in the eye and without hesitation replied, "My parents don't like each other."

I asked how she knew that, since her parents had repeatedly told me that they never had conflict and had expressed certainty that their children were unaware of their marital distress. It was an assertion I heard regularly from many couples as a marriage and family therapist.

"You can just tell," she answered. She explained that she never stopped worrying about the potential collapse of her family. She tearfully revealed that it was making her physically sick and that she was struggling to sleep and to attend school. "I think about it all the time," she said.

*The quality of your marriage is influencing your children, whether you realize it or not. As you and your spouse work to improve your relationship, your children will be blessed.*





My heart broke as I sat across from her and considered the all-too-familiar scenario. I knew her parents both loved her and wanted to do anything to help her, and yet I worried that they underestimated the degree to which their difficult marriage was hurting her and their other children.

The family proclamation states that “husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children.”<sup>1</sup> Sometimes I worry that the “for their children” part crowds out the “for each other” part.

In my profession, I observe members of the Church making enormous sacrifices for their children to help them succeed. These parents foster positive religious practices in their children, such as prayer, scripture study, and church attendance. They encourage educational pursuits and the acquisition of skills that will prepare children for bright futures. However, I fear that some may undervalue the valuable resource that high-quality marriages offer in preparing youth for eternal purposes.

Many couples devote their attention to causes that are worthwhile but that do little to strengthen their marriages. Some diligently adjust their schedules to attend children’s

performances but can’t seem to find time for a date with a spouse. In the whirlwind of child rearing, career building, and fulfilling Church callings, marriages are easily neglected and can sometimes even become colored with conflict, resentment, and betrayal.

As couples become more aware of the powerful influence their marriages have on their children, it becomes clear just how far-reaching the benefits can be when couples actively seek to nourish and strengthen their marriages.

### **Marital Quality Influences Children**

I believe most Latter-day Saint couples want their marriages to succeed, and I’m impressed with the levels of marital commitment most of them display. In general, Latter-day Saints who enter into the everlasting covenant of marriage (see D&C 131:2) take that covenant seriously and will often endure enormous amounts of distress to keep their marriages intact.

However, I sometimes encounter marriages that offer more stability than quality. Some couples mistakenly think

that if they simply refrain from arguing in front of their children, their children will be unaware of the disconnection in the marriage. Children are extremely intuitive and usually have a sense that something isn't going well, which can lead to deep feelings of insecurity. Absence of conflict in a marriage is a cheap substitute for secure connection.

Research on marital quality and children suggests that a high-quality marriage promotes a sense of emotional security, enhancing children's general well-being.<sup>2</sup> In my clinical practice, I am a witness to the reality that children are deeply affected by parents' marital quality. This principle is reflected in the words of President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985): "Marriage . . . has to do not only with immediate happiness, but also with eternal joys. It affects not only the two people involved, but also their families and particularly their children and their children's children down through the many generations."<sup>3</sup> I often explain to people that they aren't just creating their own marriages but in essence their children's and grandchildren's marriages as well.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles additionally stated: "The weakening of the concept that marriages are permanent and precious has far-reaching consequences. Influenced by their own parents' divorce or by popular notions that marriage is a ball and chain that prevents personal fulfillment, some young people shun marriage. Many who marry withhold full commitment, poised to flee at the first serious challenge."<sup>4</sup>

As a marriage clinician, I can affirm that adults whose parents divorced or had low-quality marriages often report insecurity in their own abilities to sustain and endure successful long-term relationships. They are often hypersensitive to any disagreement in the marriage and go to great lengths to avoid conflict, which can sometimes limit marital closeness. It is not uncommon for me to see adults weeping as they recall the emotional pain they experienced in watching the decline and fall of their own parents' marriages. Confidence in marriage is diminished in households with poor marital quality.

## Choosing to Improve Marital Quality

Improving marital quality has much to do with choice. Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles affirmed that "a couple in love can choose a marriage of the highest quality or a lesser type that will not endure."<sup>5</sup>

Popular marriage clinician and researcher William J. Doherty has written about the importance of combining commitment with intentionality, or active efforts to improve the marriage relationship: "Even if we have an unbending commitment to our mates, most of us are blind to how we lose our marriages by slow erosion if we do not keep replenishing the soil. . . . Commitment without intentionality leads to stable but stale marriages."<sup>6</sup> Numerous couples express deep commitment and stability but do little, if anything, to try to actively benefit the marriage. It is disheartening to see valuable marital capital go underutilized.

## Loving Your Spouse

When former Young Women general president Elaine S. Dalton gave a talk suggesting that the most important thing a father could do for his daughter was to "love her mother,"<sup>7</sup> I was pierced with the recognition that it was I and not my husband who needed to hear the talk; he had been far more conscientious about communicating to my children how much he loved me than I had in the reverse. I thought of the multiple times I had walked into a room and my husband had asked one of my children, "Guess what?" to which one would respond, "I know . . . you love Mom," or, "I know . . . Mom's your best friend," or "I know . . . Mom's your dream girl," or any number of similar declarations he had reinforced over the years. I realized that the immense security I felt in my marriage, and that I had taken for granted, was a direct result of my husband's generosity in expressing his love, admiration, and respect for me to our children.

The importance of Sister Dalton's instruction is underscored by the prophet Jacob in the Book of Mormon. As he chastised the Nephites for their wickedness, he pointed out



## THE POTENTIAL OF MARRIAGE

“Marriage brings greater possibilities for happiness than does any other human relationship. Yet some married couples fall short of their full potential. They let their romance become rusty, take each other for granted, allow other interests or clouds of neglect to obscure the vision of what their marriage really could be. Marriages would be happier if nurtured more carefully.”

Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Nurturing Marriage,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2006, 36.

that, in contrast, the Lamanite “husbands love their wives, and their wives love their husbands; and their husbands and their wives love their children” (Jacob 3:7), reinforcing the idea that the Lord considers this of great significance.

*Homefront*, a public service announcement series aired by the Church, has a popular TV spot called “By the Hour,” in which a little boy is trying to get his working father’s attention. At one point the father says, “[If] Daddy doesn’t work, Daddy doesn’t get paid,” to which the mother adds, “People like Daddy’s work so much they pay him for it.”<sup>8</sup> This is one of my favorite ads, because the mother avoids a common and ineffective triangulation in which a parent steps in and supports a child by scolding the withdrawn parent. This typically results in defensiveness in the other parent and insecure feelings in the child. With a positive and strategic statement, the mother in the ad supports both father and child. I am convinced that if more parents altered their conversations to be more like this one, overall marital and family quality would improve.

## Suggestions for Improving Marital Quality

The good news about improving marital quality is that shifts can be potentially immediate by incorporating small changes. Following are some suggestions:

*Articulate and share what you want your marriage to look like in 5, 10, or 20 years.* I’m always surprised by how many couples don’t talk about the kind of marriage they want to have. Having this conversation places the marriage on center stage and

sets couples on a course for active marital improvement and commitment for the future.

*Write down and share a positive memory in the marriage.* Negative emotions tend to be so absorbing that they often crowd out hope. When people think about and share positive memories, they make space for feeling hope again.

*Share a memory of a time that you were able to overcome a challenge together.*

Recalling these circumstances is a way to access unity as a married couple.

*Create small but meaningful rituals for when you part and come together again.*

This seems intuitive, but couples often forget the importance that a predictable kiss, hug, or verbal expression can have in generating positivity in the marriage over time.

*Introduce an element of novelty into your dating.* There is research suggesting that couples who intentionally date by seeking new experiences often achieve improved relationship quality. This requires creativity and effort, not money.

*Tell your children regularly what you admire about your spouse.* This is my favorite. When I have had couples in therapy follow through on this directive, they have reported immediate and positive results.

*Actively seek uplifting marital improvement resources.* This includes books and articles (print or audio), games, lectures, fire-sides, workshops, conferences, and more.

*Ask each other regularly if you are more or less connected as a couple than before and discuss what you can do bridge the gap.* This can be done daily, weekly, or even monthly and provides a way to refocus attention on the marriage.



*Counsel with your bishop to access professional resources if necessary.* For a variety of reasons, people often delay seeking help. I can't count the number of times I wish a couple had sought help years earlier, before so much resentment had poisoned the marriage.

*Pray.* President Henry B. Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency, counseled: "Pray for the love which allows you to see the good in your companion. Pray for the love that makes weaknesses and mistakes seem small. Pray for the love to make your companion's joy your own. Pray for the love to want to lessen the load and soften the sorrows of your companion."<sup>9</sup> If this seems too difficult, spouses can pray to *want* to desire those things.

### Heavenly Father Wants Us to Have Happy Marriages

President Howard W. Hunter (1907–95) declared that "whatever Jesus lays his hands upon lives. If Jesus lays

his hands upon a marriage, it lives. If he is allowed to lay his hands on the family, it lives."<sup>10</sup> I have a conviction that Heavenly Father wants us to have excellent marriages of the highest quality and that He will guide us in our efforts to improve those relationships for the benefit of our families. Happy marriages supply profound blessings for us and for our children. ■

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#### NOTES

1. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2010, 129.
2. See E. Mark Cummings and Patrick T. Davies, *Marital Conflict and Children: An Emotional Security Perspective* (2010).
3. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (2006), 193.
4. Dallin H. Oaks, "Divorce," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2007, 70.
5. Russell M. Nelson, "Celestial Marriage," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2008, 92.
6. William J. Doherty, *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart*, 2nd ed. (2013), 8, 9.
7. Elaine S. Dalton, "Love Her Mother," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2011, 77.
8. See "By the Hour" (video), *Homefront* TV spots, [lds.org/media-library/video/homefronts](https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/homefronts).
9. Henry B. Eyring, "Our Perfect Example," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2009, 71.
10. Howard W. Hunter, "Reading the Scriptures," *Ensign*, Nov. 1979, 65.