



Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 35: Family and Society



The Decline of the Natural Family

Although the family has traditionally been the foundation of society, the natural family has become the exception rather than the rule in the United States today.^[1] The Heritage Foundation reported: "In 1950, for every 100 children born [in the US], only 12 entered a broken family. Today, for every 100 children born, 60 will enter a broken family ... Each year, about 1 million children experience the divorce of their parents, and 1.25 million are born out of wedlock."^[2] Nearly 1.5 million abortions are performed in the US each year, which is greater than the number of babies who will grow up in intact two-parent homes. A study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago reports that the traditional families of married couples with children accounted for 26% of US households in 1998, down from 45% in 1972.^[3] The US Census Bureau reports that nearly half of all first marriages end in divorce, while 60% of divorcing couples have children. 36.3% of children live absent from their biological father, and 25% live with a single mother alone.^[4] 40% of those who live in fatherless households have not seen their fathers in at least a year. In one study, 72.2% of Americans surveyed cited fatherlessness as "the most significant family or social problem facing America."^[5]

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Consequences of Family Disruption

By examining the consequences of the crisis of broken families, we can appreciate some of the reasons why these trends are devastating to individuals and to society. Reports show that approximately 85% of youth in prison, 85% of children with behavioral disorders, 75% of adolescents in substance abuse treatment centers, 71% of all high school dropouts, and 70% of adults serving long-term prison sentences come from fatherless homes.^[6] Fatherless children average significantly higher in terms of teen suicide, illegitimate birthrates, incarceration and unemployment. 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes. 90% of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes and 85% of all children that exhibit serious behavioral disorders come from fatherless homes.^[7] Because only a portion of each age group grew up in a fatherless home, these statistics mean that children from fatherless homes are 5 times more likely to commit suicide, 9 times more likely to drop out of high school, 10 times more likely to abuse drugs, 20 times more likely to end up in prison and to have behavioral disorders, and 32 times more likely to run away than their peers who grow up in intact families with both birth parents.^[8] These trends persist even when socioeconomic factors are controlled for.

Children in single parent families are more likely to be in trouble with the law than their peers who grow up with two parents,^[9] and criminal behavior experts and social scientists are finding evidence that the epidemic of youth violence and gangs are related to the breakdown of the two-parent family.^{[10],[11],[12]} One report states: "Cities reporting the highest incidence of crime also have the highest percentages of single-parent households. In fact, it would be nearly impossible to find a society effectively rearing the next generation with a preponderance of fatherless homes. The prison population reflects this observation."^[13] Marion G. Romney stated: "The failure of parents to teach their children affects not only them and their children but whole civilizations."^[14]

The home environment is a strong predictor of the future behavior of children, and the impact of broken homes touches almost every aspect of life. A Chinese proverb states: "In a broken nest there are few whole eggs." One study reported that children who lived with only one parent had lower grade point averages, lower college aspirations, poor attendance records, and higher dropout rates than students who lived with both parents.^[15] These trends generally exist even when a stepfather is present. Children in single-parent families are two to three times as likely as children in two-parent families to have emotional and behavioral problems. School children from divorced families are absent more, and more anxious, hostile, and withdrawn than those from intact families.^[16] Children who live apart from their fathers are 4.3 times more likely to smoke cigarettes as teenagers than children growing up in intact homes.^[17] Children with single parents were still twice as likely to have psychiatric disorders, attempt suicide, and abuse alcohol, and three to four times more likely to use narcotic drugs. Both male and female adolescents from non-intact families more likely to engage in premarital intercourse than peers from intact families.^[18] Daughters of single parents are 53% more likely to marry as teenagers, 164% more likely to have a premarital birth, and 92% more likely to dissolve their own marriages.^[19]

In their book *The Case for Marriage*, Maggie Gallagher and Linda Waite evaluated hundreds of studies that examine the impact of family formation on children's health. They stated that divorce "appears to be literally making some children sick."^[20] One study found that divorce made it fifty percent more likely a child would have health problems. Children born to unmarried mothers are forty to seventy percent more likely to die in the first year of life. Children and adults raised in single-parent homes are more likely to die from a variety of causes, including suicide, homicide, drug abuse, and accidental death, than their peers from intact families.^[21]

Benefits of Intact Families

The institution of the family brings psychological, mental, and spiritual, and economic benefits. Linda Waite writes: "Both men and women live longer, happier, healthier and wealthier lives when they are married. Unmarried cohabitation ... typically does not bring the benefits -- in physical health, wealth, and emotional well-being -- that marriage does." William Galston, former assistant to the President of the United States for Domestic Policy, notes: "You need only do three things in this country to avoid poverty -- finish high school, marry before having a child, and marry after the age of 20. Only 8 percent of the families who do this are poor; 79 percent of those who fail to do this are poor."^[22] Joseph F. Smith stated: "There appears to be something beyond and above the reasons apparent to the human mind why chastity brings strength and power to the peoples of the earth, but it is so."^[23]

Although research demonstrates compelling societal benefits when children are raised in a stable home with both biological parents, good parenting involves much more than the mere presence of both parents. Not all intact families present ideal environments, and some children manage to overcome the disadvantages of being raised in a broken home. An involved and loving single parent is often able to provide a better home environment than a two-parent household with dysfunctional or abusive relationships. Yet on the whole, sociologic data demonstrate a much greater likelihood of positive outcomes when children are raised in a loving home with both birth parents than in other situations.

Nonmaternal Care

Numerous studies document the developmental risks of problem behavior and insecure attachments "associated with nonmaternal child care initiated in the first year, especially on a full- or near full-time basis."^[24] Research demonstrates that mothers who leave the home for employment less than a year after a child's birth are exposing that child to lasting psychological risk.^[25] Studies have shown that "children whose mothers worked at all by the ninth month of their life had lower scores on a [standard test of child cognitive development] at 36 months than did children whose mothers did not work by that time." Across all ages, children of a mother employed outside the home "spend less time in ... play, structured activities such as church, family activities ... and learning time such as reading."^[26] Researchers conclude that these deficiencies "reflect differences in time spent at home and availability of a second parent." The activities missing from the lives of children in employed-mother homes appear to be the very ones that foster cooperative behavior. Having a full-time parental presence in the home is what is best for young children. The care and attention children get from even "a top-notch day care center" is inferior to what they would get at home with a parent.^[27]

A recent study suggests that improving children's academic performance may have more to do with keeping mom at home than it does with strengthening the public schools.^[28] Researchers found living with a married mother fosters significantly higher math achievement, while "higher maternal working hours are negatively associated with math achievement." Having a married mother also predicts "gains in reading recognition," while "higher maternal work hours have negative effects." In contrast, higher work hours for the father "actually promote reading recognition." The authors remark that the effect of school environment is only modest, while the impact of family environment on academic achievement is stronger. A letter to the editor in one newspaper stated:

"... [I]t amazes me that we need a study to tell us that child care is not the best place for children ... Our lives are full of choices and the consequences of those choices. Should I laugh or cry when I read about the firefighter whose wife is in college, so their child has to attend day care? Our children are not pets, and an upscale standard of living is not an entitlement. It's all in the choices that we as parents decide to make."^[29]

In contemplating the decision to send a mother to work outside the home, many families overvalue things and undervalue people. Ezra Taft Benson states: "A child needs a mother more than all the things money can buy. Spending time with your children is the greatest gift of all."^[30]

Communism and the Family

The role of the family cannot be replicated by social programs or institutions. When the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia, they sought to replace the family with collective institutions. The theory was that "Soviet power would assume full responsibility for dependent children, raising them in social institutions designed to transform them into steadfast communists."^[31] This task was entrusted to state-run orphanages, in which mortality rates ran from 25 to 50 percent. They were overcrowded, disease-ridden, and fatal places, so by the early 1920s, "[d]esperate to save lives, local authorities ... resurrected the tsarist policy of placing orphaned infants and dependent children with families that would in turn receive various forms of

compensation." This policy was formally adopted in 1926 as patronirovanie, and it signaled "an enormous retreat for the Communist Party," namely: "an admission that communist dreams about eliminating the family were unlikely to materialize."^[32] Within five years, the Russian communists had discarded plans for collectivizing the upbringing of orphans and returned to tsarist-era foster care policies because "they recognized that, as a rule, families provided better homes than institutions."

Church Attendance

Church attendance of families during formative years plays a lasting role in the lives of young people. One author wrote:

"Increased religious service attendance of parents significantly increases their moral expectations and supervision of their adolescent children ... Accumulated scholarship provides ample empirical evidence that religion is a factor in the lives of American adolescents that often influences their attitudes and behaviors in ways that are commonly viewed as positive and constructive."^[33]

Another researcher writes: "Sociologists have shown that regular churchgoing correlates highly with civic involvement, charitable giving, volunteering, and other publicly crucial behaviors. The level of regular churchgoing is therefore a matter of civic, not merely ecclesiastical concern."^[34]

Christian researcher George Barna found that 61% of US adults who attended church as children still attend regularly today, while nearly four-fifths those who were not church-goers as children are still absent from churches.^[35] The survey also found that adults who attended church as a child are twice as likely to report reading the Bible during a typical week as those who avoided churches when young; twice as likely to attend a church worship service in a typical week; and nearly 50% more likely to pray to God during a typical week. Barna has also noted that over two-thirds of those who make a decision to accept Christ do so by the age of fourteen.

Children are unlikely to remain active in church unless both parents are regular churchgoers. One Swiss study reported:

"If both father and mother attend regularly, 33 percent of their children will end up as regular churchgoers, and 41 percent will end up attending irregularly. Only a quarter of their children will end up not practicing at all. If the father is irregular and mother regular, only 3 percent of the children will subsequently become regulars themselves, while a further 59 percent will become irregulars. Thirty-eight percent will be lost. If the father is non-practicing and mother regular, only 2 percent of children will become regular worshippers, and 37 percent will attend irregularly. Over 60 percent of their children will be lost completely to the church."^[36]

Training Children in Faith

President Harold B. Lee taught: "the greatest work you will do will be within the walls of your home."^[37] David O. McKay stated: "no other success can compensate for failure in the home."^[38] Elder Dean Larson observed: "The patterns we set in our homes and the values we develop there, whether they be good or bad, almost cannot be overcome."^[39] Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught: "Good homes are still the best source of good humans."^[40] He also noted: "Those who do too much for their children will soon find they can do nothing with their children. So many children have been so much done for they are almost done in."^[41] How do we develop the kind of environment in our homes that fosters the training of children who will serve the Lord and contribute to society?

Consistent patterns give structure and form to family life. Family prayer, daily book of Mormon study, and weekly family home evenings are important for teaching our children as well as ourselves. President Ezra Taft Benson taught that Book of Mormon study as a family for thirty minutes each day brings greater love into our homes, expands our knowledge of the gospel, and gives us a greater ability to resist temptation.^[42]

Parental example has a lasting influence on children. President David O. McKay stated: "The law of cause and effect is working in parenthood as it is in any other law of nature. There is a responsibility upon all, and especially upon fathers and mothers, to set examples to children and young people worthy of imitation. Parents must be sincere in upholding law and upholding the priesthood in their homes, that children may see a proper example."^[43] He further taught:

"In teaching there are three ever-present factors: first, what the teacher is; secondly, what the teacher says; and thirdly, what the teacher does. The least important of these is what the teacher says; the other two are most vital in child training. It is worse folly for a teacher to attempt to teach something which he himself does not believe. There is a sixth sense in most of us, and particularly in children and youth, which instinctively detects the inconsistency between pretension as expressed in words and reality as it exists in thought and feeling. A dishonest teacher cannot effectively teach honesty, nor an atheist teach belief in God, nor an immoral one teach purity of life. True teaching springs from the heart, not from vocal chords."^[44]

Psychologists have documented that strong negative conditioning occurs when children are told to do one thing while parental example sends a conflicting message. Elder Sterling W. Sill noted: "We should remember that any disobedience to God or any other offenses that we pick up in our own lives are soon transmitted to others, particularly our children. That is, the power of example is the greatest power in the world."^[45] The Lord commanded all the children of Israel:

"And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."^[46]

The Book of Mormon prophet King Benjamin declared:

"Ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry, or naked; neither will ye suffer that they transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil, who is the master of sin, or who is the evil spirit which hath

been spoken of by our fathers, he being an enemy to all righteousness. But 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."[\[47\]](#)

President Gordon B. Hinckley stated: "Good homes are not easily created or maintained. They require discipline, not so much of children as of self."[\[48\]](#) Building a strong family is not the result of chance or circumstance, but of specific behavioral choices. Having two parents whose example and conduct consistently reinforce the gospel message is vital, with daily family scripture study, family prayer, home evening, and other activities to fortify our homes. Lehi observed: "I know that if ye are brought up in the way ye should go ye will not depart from it."[\[49\]](#) It is much easier to provide a good upbringing for children than to attempt to remedy the consequences of a bad one. Parents have a divine obligation to teach their children, and the Lord declares that when children are not properly the gospel by parents, the sin will be "upon the head of the parents."[\[50\]](#) Against tremendous odds, some individuals are able to establish patterns of gospel living gospel habits in spite of a lack of an ideal environment in the family of their birth. Gandhi observed, "I have also seen children successfully surmounting the effect of an evil inheritance. That is due to purity being an inherent attribute of the soul."

Happiness in the Home

The philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe noted: "He is the happiest, be he king or peasant, who finds peace in his home." Tolstoy's novel Anna Karenina begins: "All happy families are happy alike, all unhappy families are unhappy in their own way." While this is undoubtedly an oversimplification, happy homes share many common characteristics. The Proclamation on the Family declares: "Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities."[\[51\]](#) Mother Teresa stated:

"Sometimes it is harder for us to smile at those who live with us, the immediate members of our families, than it is to smile at those who are not so close to us. Let us never forget: love begins at home."

Brigham Young taught: "We should commence our labors of love and kindness with the family to which we belong, and then extend them to others."[\[52\]](#) Good communication and daily sacrifice are necessary for success in the home. Andre Marois stated: "A successful marriage is an edifice that must be rebuilt every day." Every marriage has its challenges, but our families are worth the sacrifices that are required.

Dress and Grooming Standards and Morality

Tattoos, body piercings, and suggestive or immodest dress are ultimately destructive to the family. Studies have found that teens with strong religious views are significantly less likely to engage in premarital sex than less-religious teens.[\[53\]](#) Teens who have their bodies tattooed or pierced in locations other than the ear are more likely to engage in premarital sexual relations, abuse illicit drugs, and even commit suicide than their peers.

Divorce

Jesus taught: "Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so."[\[54\]](#) In most cases, divorce impoverishes both men and women.[\[55\]](#)[\[56\]](#) Divorce has devastating emotional, psychological, behavioral, and health consequences on children that are not improved with remarriage. One study found that like children in single-mother homes, children living in reconstituted families had over twice the risk of children in intact families of suffering from psychological problems.[\[57\]](#) A researcher concluded: "Many studies have documented an association between marital disruption and a wide range of deleterious effects in children ... [S]tudies on the effects of remarriage on children generally fail to show a beneficial effect."

The Future

Stephen Covey stated: "I am convinced that if we as a society work diligently in every other area of life and neglect the family, it would be analogous to straightening deck chairs on the Titanic."[\[58\]](#) Societies that neglect divine principles regarding the family face an inevitable spiral of decay that is not reversed by education dollars, sponsored child care, or social programming. No program will ever be able to compensate for the reality that children need two loving parents in the home. The Proclamation on the Family of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints states, in part:

"We ... solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children. Husbands and wives -- mothers and fathers -- will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations. The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity ... We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring, or who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God. Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets. We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society."[\[59\]](#)

LDS prophet Howard W. Hunter stated:

"A worried society now begins to see that the disintegration of the family brings upon the world the calamities foretold by the prophets. The world's councils and deliberations will succeed only when they define the family as the Lord has revealed it to be. 'Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it' ([Psalms 127:1](#))."[\[60\]](#)

By examining the trends of the increase in births out of wedlock, divorce, and abortion, we cannot doubt that the future will bring greater challenges than those already experienced. We might do well to remember the words of Lord in the Book of Mormon: "Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; and inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence."[\[61\]](#)

Setting our Hearts Right

Mother Teresa stated: "I think that the work of the Church in the developed and rich Western Hemisphere is more difficult than in Calcutta, South Yemen, or other areas where the needs of the people are reduced to the clothes needed to ward off the cold, or a dish of rice to curb their hunger -- anything that will show them that someone loves them. In the West the problems that people have go much deeper; the problems are in the depths of our hearts." Most sins that disrupt family life begin in the heart. Jesus declared: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." [62] Selfishness, greed, and bad priorities are also destructive to families.

The most important heart each of us can change is our own. Confucius taught: "To put the world in order we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must cultivate our personal life; and to cultivate our personal life, we must first set our hearts right." Christ declared: "if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and come after me." [63]

Twenty-five centuries ago, the Prophet Malachi wrote: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse." [64] Only by turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and hearts of the children to the fathers and establishing enduring love in our homes can redemption from the judgments of God be achieved for individuals and societies.

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