

The Father's Role in Family Education: Preside, Provide, and Protect

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The Substance of Human Life

Learning and teaching, following and leading are the substance of human life. Remove these functions and very little is left. Recognizing and consciously responding to the significance of these four functions is the most important contribution a parent makes in the developing lives of their children—be it good, bad, or indifferent. Beyond providing birth and sustaining life, the central core of human existence is learning and teaching, and following and leading. Every individual forms their own pattern of pursuing these functions. The importance of the pattern we embrace is mirrored in the lives we live. It is inescapable; the process extends beyond the human family and appears in nature itself. Consider two examples—(a) a covey of quail and (b) trees.

Lessons from a Covey of Quail

Frequently I see a family of quail parading across our back lawn. Recently, I watched two or three adults and a dozen or more tiny tots scooting along, mimicking their parents' pecking in the grass. One of the adult birds was on guard duty, perched atop the highest rail of our pole fence. He or she constantly looked this way and that way, alertly following the group on their journey by running along the rail—ever ready to sound the alarm if a cat or other predator appeared. The smallest members of this covey seemed hardly big enough to fly. They were busily learning lessons of survival. **The entire family was diligently doing first things first.** It obviously was a life or death matter. I've watched such coveys diminish in number. Eat or starve. Watch out or die. Keep moving. Don't leave the safety of the group. Watch Mom and Dad; do what they do. Obey instantly. Work hard. They had an agenda and the agenda was constructed around definite priorities. You don't eat when you are supposed to fly. In the "eat and be eaten" world of quail, certain principles or patterns must be learned and taught. Failure spells disaster or death. Human life has its similarities but it involves moral agency as well.

Trees Are Useful Examples

The productive human life might also be likened to a tree. Trees depend on the nurturing influence of a reliable, vital root system. If the root system is inadequate, deficient, or damaged the tree will be impaired; it may degenerate, dwindle or die. In order for people to survive and be successful, a reasonable recognition of the roots of the matter is required. **Like a tree, what is inside a person largely determines what transpires outside; what is beneath supports that which is above.** This essentially hidden network within a person includes information regarding one's *origins, actions,* and *associations*. These are elements to ponder—they are factors that shape the way we *think, feel,* and *act*. It is unwise to ignore them; they determine how we function and how we rear and educate our children. This should be our focus for our children's benefit as

well as our own. Life is filled with such patterns. They deserve to be recognized, studied, embraced and refined. It is not good to be oblivious to the obvious fundamental forces impacting the family.

Human life, from beginning to end, consists of learning and teaching, following and leading. **The better we understand these four functions, the more prepared we will be in choosing helpful not harmful, useful rather than useless, and fruitful more than futile investments of our time and resources.** The personal preparation of parents can be a key to the preservation of the children. Continuing parental development is one way children are blessed. Anciently, it was said that when the parents eat sour grapes it is the teeth of the children that are likely to be set on edge.

Three Related Propositions

As I considered my assigned subject—**the role of the father in family education**—it became clear that a number of propositions are very closely related to this topic. Because we cannot consider everything at once, I feel compelled to mention at least three such observations I will not attempt to explore today. Perhaps some of you may feel they are worth pondering and pursuing.

First, what you think with largely determines the outcomes of what you think about when you engage in education. (The selection of purpose not only drives, it also guides our movement through life.)

Second, the major barriers to improved education is what we do not understand, not what we do not have. (The idea that money and what it can buy is the primary solution to our educational challenges is a seriously flawed notion.)

Third, *purpose and quality, not process and quantity* should pilot our educational thought in the home and in the school. (When these two mutually distinct teams are reversed or scrambled confusion is inevitable. Purpose and quality are unforgiving primary realities; it is unwise and self destructive to make them secondary considerations.)

The Role of the Father in Family Education

This brings me to the specific topic for today: The **role of the father in family education**. Obviously, fatherhood is only part of the educational package but it is part of the package. Certainly, families consist of fathers, mothers, and children. Each plays a vital role. My assignment, however, is to discuss the role of father. And within this context I urge you to recognize three aspects of a father's role in the education of a family: **To Preside, To Provide, and To Protect**. These three elements are vital. When they are adequate there is a safe foundation to build on; when they are absent the task of family education is jeopardized. Yes, life can and does go on without the father role. Success is possible, but it is much more difficult and the sacrifices are far more

burdensome. Regardless of circumstances that may befall us, we should never lose sight of the divine pattern. We just do the best we can. That is all the Lord requires.

Our Troubled Times Invite a Father's Involvement

Without diverting to another subject, I emphasize the fact that about **four out of every ten children in the United States are now born out of wedlock**. This dramatic increase from **12% to nearly 40%** in just three decades is shattering the traditional ideal, the divine pattern for marriage and the family. In a dramatic fashion, marriage rates in the U.S. have gone down and divorce rates have gone up. For example, evidence suggests that 40 years ago **more than** $\frac{3}{4}$ of married couples could expect to celebrate a **silver wedding anniversary**; today **less than** $\frac{1}{2}$ are likely to have that experience. This is a downside in our day and it does not bode well for positive family education. But there is a greater upside and fathers can play a vital role despite such trends.

President Hinckley, in a summary statement of his counsel published in the September 2007 *Ensign*, makes two observations we should keep in mind. He said:

How wonderful it is that we believe in modern revelation. I cannot get over the feeling that if revelation were needed anciently, when life was simple, that revelation is also needed today, when life is complex. (p. 6)

I do not know that there was ever a time in the history of the world when there was greater evil in the world than there is today. (p. 7)

These prophetic observations form a backdrop for my comments regarding the role of fathers in family education. **Life today is less simple, more complex, and must be pursued in a time of greatest evil.** I believe this justifies greater attention being given to the role that fathers can and should play in family education. By Divine design, all fathers are inherently privileged to preside in their families and are accountable for their use of the power of procreation. That is why our Church leaders defer to the father when they are in his home. Where priesthood covenants exist, the designated responsibility associated with this accountability and these privileges is expanded. This paternal role, I believe, is a significant part of the foundation for family education. The need for a father's leadership seems self-evident.

My View of Family Education

My view of *family education* transcends various systems that may be used to support this fundamental process. Education and schooling are not synonyms. It is *family education* that is fundamental and inescapable. Whether parents choose to use strategies of **home schooling, private schooling, or public schooling** to supplement their family education is a personal matter related to individual circumstances. I believe all forms of **schooling** are supplemental to **Family Education**. The support system or systems parents select to assist in making *family education* better (or worse) may vary according to culture, parental qualification, children's needs, and social conditions.

Regardless of the types of schooling available, the process of *family education* is unavoidable, ongoing, and non-transferable. The quality just improves or diminishes depending on our choices.

Context Helps Define the Father Role

There is a large context that helps define the father role: We are normally born male or female and grow up as a boy or girl. We become a man or woman, then a husband or wife, and subsequently a father and mother, grandfather and grandmother. This maturation is intended to be **(1) sequential, (2) inclusive, and (3) refining**. A father is a boy who became a man, who became a husband, who became a father and then a grand father. This preparation is intended to help qualify a person to **preside, provide, and protect** that which is most valuable—his family. Today, my focus is primarily on what it means to *preside*. Equal attention could be given to *providing* and *protecting*, but these two topics, critical as they are, seem less mysterious and can be appropriately addressed at another time and place. The inclination for a man to provide and protect appears to be stronger and better defined than shouldering the responsibility to preside in an acceptable and beneficial manner. **This is the bar, it appears, which needs to be raised.**

What Does Presiding Entail?

A father is to preside; that is his privilege and responsibility. To preside is to:

- (1) Occupy a place of authority;
- (2) Be an example;
- (3) Guide and direct;
- (4) Support and sustain.

When a father performs these functions he creates a **presence** that can be felt; he becomes a source and influence of power. This power can be directed toward good or evil. The consequences may be **euphoric** (uplifting) or **ominous** (fearful). They can be comforting or hypocritical. Every father chooses—intentionally or by default—what the outcome will be. A father's **presence** is an extension of his character. That's just the way it is. We all face the same challenge. The character we develop determines the presence we convey. This presence can be sensed and it is felt by those around us.

The key point here is this: It is the privilege of the father to lead his family toward the *doctrines, principles and practices* that will bring them the greatest happiness. This is the kind of father who contributes most to the welfare of his wife and children. Such a father **intentionally** guides, supports, encourages, and assists in his family's education. This is sufficient reason for a father to engage his family in the search for *true doctrine, correct principles, and safe practices*. [There are false doctrines, incorrect principles, and unsafe practices.] The manner in which this occurs is the substance of a father's life and the priorities he chooses to pursue. We should not underestimate the significance of this task. The following may be helpful.

Distinguish Between Doctrines, Principles, and Practices

One of the great challenges of a mature life is to understand and implement personal doctrines, principles, and practices. Everyone inherits, adopts, or manufactures *doctrines* and *principles* which they implement or *practice* in their lives. **Personal doctrines are fundamental beliefs about life that people embrace. They are assumptions about what is real, good, and true.** For example, to embrace the idea that *I am a human being, not an animal, vegetable, or mineral* is a doctrine some people use to define their unique role in nature. Such a **doctrine dictates a view of who we are, why we exist, and what our destiny can be.** A doctrine is a general proposition which embodies principles that govern how we think and act. Because **doctrines can be true or false; which doctrines we embrace makes a difference—sometimes a huge difference.** It is important that family members identify, understand, and evaluate the doctrines they have embraced or should embrace to strengthen the family and the individuals within the family. Fathers should lead out in this task. Ignorance is not a safe transport. Fathers who know true doctrines are the best guides.

True Principles and Practices Support True Doctrines

Personal doctrines are few in number. Principles are more numerous than doctrines. Principles form our plan for living. They direct the way we intend to behave. Practices are what we actually do—moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day. Principles and practices tend to support doctrines and influence how we conduct our life. **Doctrines give us vision; principles propose a plan; practices determine the outcome.** A personal *doctrine* could also be to claim *the universe is based on law. Obedience to law* (authority) is an example of a *principle*. Whether or not we act on that principle can be considered a *practice*. What we believe, what we honor, and what we do qualify us for life's major blessings or disappointments. It is important to become aware of the doctrines, principles, and practices we embrace. This requires a conscious effort.

We are more complex than quail or trees. I believe human life transcends the animal and vegetable kingdoms—it belongs to another kingdom of a higher order. But there are useful similarities; sometimes these patterns can prompt useful comparisons and valuable reflection for those who are willing to observe and ponder. Parents who bring such patterns to the attention of their children will bless their lives. Some human experience may be *providential* or *incidental*, but the larger part of what happens to us is *intentional*, determined by the doctrines we embrace, the principles we apply, and the practices we initiate. Harmony between doctrines, principles, and practices is essential for success in human endeavors. **A lack of harmony introduces hypocrisy into human affairs. Hypocrisy creates confusion, and confusion undermines the safety provided by the moral order that sustains family welfare and social discourse.**

Conversion is the Prerequisite to Success

Like most aspects of life, fatherhood requires conversion. Our lives emerge from innocence and develop as we make choices and invest our time, energy, and interest in a

variety of actions. Because we are mortal and live as fallen people in a fallen world conversion is central to nearly everything we accomplish—good or bad. As we exercise our agency, like Adam and Eve, there are consequences. We all fall short and compromise our allegiance. The solution now as it has always been is a matter of reconciliation. And reconciliation requires conversion either to Deity and his doctrines, or to the Adversary and his doctrines. There is no middle ground; only ignorance or apathy delays the inevitable consequences of our developing allegiance. Conversion to God is the process required by the scriptural doctrine of reconciliation.

The LDS Doctrine of Reconciliation (Conversion)

Keeping the ideas of allegiance and conversion in mind helps us grasp the significance of the revealed doctrine of reconciliation—sometimes called conversion. Consider these three views of this doctrine from many that appear in our scriptures:

The Apostle Paul’s View

All things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; . . . and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation . . . we are ambassadors for Christ . . . be ye reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21)

Jacob’s View

Therefore, cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves—to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life. Wherefore my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not the will of the devil and the flesh; and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved. (2 Nephi 10:23-24) [Notice that Jacob said “beloved brethren” not “beloved sisters.”]

Savior’s View

For he will give unto the faithful line upon line, precept upon precept; and I will try you and prove you herewith. . . . Therefore, be not afraid of your enemies, for I have decreed in my heart, saith the Lord, that I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death, that you may be found worthy. (D&C 98:12-14)

It is interesting that the root meanings of the word *reconcile* refer to an assembly or council. The term has to do with bringing something or someone back into unity or harmony with an assembled body or directive. Modern revelation clearly explains our opportunity to come back into harmony with the great council convened in heaven. It is by reconciliation (conversion) that we drifting mortals will be reunited—brought together again. Fathers are to play a leading role in this process. This is our job.

Government Based on Law Requires Conversion

Let's review the process in very simple language. Everyone begins mortality as a child; and no one becomes a mature adult without conversion. The bridge between childhood and adulthood cannot be crossed in a single bound. This trek is a natural step-by-step accomplishment. But the transition should not take a lifetime; it is to be achieved as a young adult. And it will not occur without a conscious desire to override selfish interests and impulsive, habitual distractions. When we are children we may act like children, but when we are old enough to be adults, we should behave like adults. This means we should become less selfish and more responsible. The marriage covenant of advanced societies helps define the male's responsibility. Nine months of pregnancy is a powerful influence of focus for the female. Human gestation is an intentional aid for prospective parents. It is an extended opportunity to give due consideration to the importance of parenthood. Time can be a wonderful teacher. These natural and social forces should not be ignored or wasted. They can serve a great purpose in bringing about the conversion to adulthood and the blessing of little children. Finally, true conversion begins within the heart; it is not the outcome of the external environmental influences.

Conversion to true parenthood is marked by conversion to legal and lawful marriage between a man and woman. Cohabitation devoid of marriage is a novelty, a convenience to satiate appetites; it is overtly an informal social contract with limited commitment. It is a major barrier to conversion from adolescence to mature adulthood. Too often, even formal marriages operate in a similar manner. A husband who cannot define himself as a married man, shouldering the responsibilities of a married man, will not likely behave like a married man. A woman who cannot define herself as a married woman, embracing the responsibilities of a married woman, is likely not to behave like a married woman. Such individuals could hardly be expected to fully assume the responsibilities of fatherhood or motherhood. Would you like to be married to a spouse who was unable or unwilling to define him-self or her-self as married? Would you be comfortable with partial conversion in your spouse? The same rationale applies to parenthood. How can the best interests of a child be met by individuals unable to define themselves as converted parents? They cannot. The evidence is conclusive. Children survive but it is not the best way to rear and educate the next generation.

Conversion Increases Our Capabilities

Something very important happens to people when they truly convert to a social role. For example, there is a transition point in the preparation of a medical student to become a doctor. A pervasive transformation occurs which impacts how the person defines him or herself. When this transition takes place the individual changes from defining him or herself as a "student" studying medicine to becoming a doctor ministering to patients. He or she is transformed by a new feeling—an *apperception* of self. The person undergoing this paradigm shift in perception now feels the self-definition of being a doctor of medicine. The same thing happens to nurses, dentists, and surgeons; it happens to chefs, carpenters, plumbers, artists, athletes and all who pay the price. When conversion occurs, there is a difference in their confidence, competence, and performance. They are more responsible and more effective; they operate on a

different level. And this is important. After all, who wants to be the patient on the table of a surgeon who defines himself as a plumber? Who wants a plumber who defines himself as a surgeon meddling with the plumbing and heating system? Conversion is real, and conversion to marriage and parenthood is vital; it is requisite to achieving the best way to parent and the most effective way to teach. Conversion is the foundation for loving and nurturing parenting; it is the context that frames the most successful parent-child relationships. And substantial conversion is a process composed of events more than it is a specific event in the maturation process.

Fathers who are more interested and involved in meeting their own personal needs—such as recreational activities, hobbies, inordinate quests for wealth, power, or prestige—are likely to be delinquent in meeting parental obligations. Escaping such perspectives and patterns of thought and behavior requires conversion. Everyone has finite time, energy, and resources. Decisions need to be made that put proper priorities in place. Some things are more important than others. Children should not be by-products in a father's life; they are preeminent and deserve individual preference and priority. When a father comes home from work and makes himself available to his wife and children—each of them individually—the family is strengthened. This is not the time to escape relationships by hiding behind the newspaper or losing one's self in TV programs, hobbies, or hiding in the study or workshop. Converting one's attitude to cherish family time can be a relief from the pressures of a vocation. **In no place will a father's leadership and presence produce greater or longer lasting rewards than in his own family circle. It is a father's privilege and duty to take the lead in these matters.**

Husbands and fathers should stand as presiding providers and protectors of their families. It is imperative that we acquire and exercise positive qualities of leadership. Every home is blessed by the husband and father who displays these endearing qualities: **love, respect, and gentleness; diligence, meekness, and persuasion; kindness, mercy, and forgiveness; compassion, long suffering, and pure knowledge.** We should regularly ask our Self, **How am I doing?** Blessed are the wives and children of such men.

Love Them; Correct Them; Provide a Way for Them

There is a guideline that I believe can help all of us do better; a principle that will enhance our conversion. This general instruction, given by the Lord to help us accomplish our task as parents, is given in the Doctrine and Covenants 95:1. As fathers, we are to preside, provide, and protect those for whom we are accountable and we are to do this by following a simple formula—the one Heavenly Father and his Son abide by in their relationship with us. We are to **love them, correct them, and prepare a way for them** to accomplish that which is of greatest worth. Family education, like all education, is a matter of **show, tell, and helping them do.** But this application of instruction will only succeed at the highest levels when it is pursued on the foundation of **loving, correcting, and preparing a way.** The better we understand this connection as fathers, the more effective we will be in blessing our families.

A Concluding Suggestion

I am now in the grandfather and great grandfather category. As of this date we have 37 grandchildren and one great grandchild. Fatherhood is not a position one attains from which he can expect to be released. The circle of general accountability continues to expand although the nature of personal responsibility changes quite dramatically. At times this can be challenging. New skills and strategies have to be developed and incorporated into one's relationships. Second, third, and subsequent generations of our children are no longer under our immediate control. It is more of a stand back and speak when spoken to operation. There are a myriad of personalities involved and there is no way we can participate directly in that many family's differing schedules of events and activities. But there is a connection that we feel as grandparents; we are deeply concerned about the next generation. Within our limited role, we want to be as helpful as we can without interfering or abdicating. I have no failsafe prescription as to how other people should meet these challenging changes. And every extended family is unique. I do know that it is only our **ideas, memories, and relationships** that will extend beyond our mortal lives. We have little or no control over anything else. But I am convinced that what grandparents can appropriately do they should do. We can make a difference.

An example of two things we have done is to (a) each write our life story and be a personal witness to what life on earth was like for us. Generational impact is real and one's first hand account can be very influential. We all know this by our own experience. (b) The second project I felt might be helpful to some of my posterity was a little different. During my life I have noticed that when people stray they often lose the Spirit. They may become uncomfortable, even resentful, of any discussion using conventional religious or scriptural language. And they are quick to defy and debate authority. So I decided I would try and share some of the ideas and information which I felt strongly about in another form. It seemed clear to me that some things are just self-evident.

I felt that if I could express to my posterity the validity of certain truths in a non-threatening way; in language that did not quote academic studies, authority figures, or scripture and verse, it might serve as a basis for discussion, reflection, or perhaps a bridge back. I know our children and their spouses are trying to teach their children like we tried to teach them. Hopefully, our grandchildren will do the same with our great grandchildren. But statistically the odds are against any extended family remaining free from spiritual casualties in these days—we are all vulnerable. My sole intent was to complement—not supplant what is or will be taught in their homes or Church. I just wanted them to clearly understand what Grandpa thought about a number of things. So I made the effort to write a 300 page essay trying to explain why I believe some things are more important than other things. We give each of our grandchildren this book about the time they graduate from high school. Every father could make their own plan on how to help the next generation. It will be worth the effort whatever you choose to do.

I conclude these remarks with this suggestion:

Let the door to your life, home, and family swing on these three hinges:

Attach the temporal to the spiritual. This will *change your priorities*.

Place others beside or ahead of self. This will *change your attitudes*.

Connect your present with your future. This will *change your behavior*.