

The Sacred Callings of Fathers and Mothers

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“May we be faithful to this great obligation of parenthood, this sacred obligation.”

From the Life of Ezra Taft Benson

By word and example, at home and around the world, in Church and civic settings, President Ezra Taft Benson taught the importance of being good parents. “Nurture your children with love and the admonitions of the Lord,” he said.¹ “God holds parents responsible for their stewardship in rearing their family. It is a most sacred responsibility.”²

President Benson and his wife, Flora, worked closely together in fulfilling their sacred responsibilities as parents. They “approached the task of nurturing their family unit with energy and enthusiasm.”³ They frequently counseled together about their children and other matters. “I could see that I had a spiritually perceptive woman at my side,” President Benson said.⁴

They worked together to create a home where their children could grow and learn—and where their children wanted to be. “I would have rather been home than anywhere,” their son Mark said. “It was a refuge from the storm. Mother was the protective element, and Dad was there with his strength.”⁵

President and Sister Benson approached their responsibilities as parents prayerfully. Mark said: “Mother had more faith than any woman I’ve ever known. . . . I’ve never seen more praying in my life. At the drop of a hat she’d be on her knees, praying for the children, whether it was about a test or a fight on the school grounds, it didn’t matter. She and Dad both had that simple faith.”⁶

President Benson was frequently away from home because of his work and Church duties, so Flora assumed much of the responsibility for nurturing and teaching their six children. She relished her role of motherhood. “The home is the center of our mortal affections,” she said.⁷ Mark recalled, “Mother absolutely loved home. And she loved us—not because it was her duty to, but because that was her life.”⁸ Expressing her feelings about the importance of being a mother, Flora wrote: “If you want to find greatness, don’t go to the throne, go to the cradle. There is mighty power in a mother. She is the one who molds hearts, lives, and shapes character.”⁹

When President Benson was away from home, he always sought ways to watch over and strengthen his family. He maintained regular contact with them through phone calls and letters. When he was home, he spent as much time with them as possible. He often cited the story of “a busy father who explained the hours he spent playing ball with his son by saying, ‘I’d sooner have a backache now than a heartache later.’”¹⁰

He also spent extended time individually with his children. Mark recalled his father taking him to Salt Lake City, Utah, to see a medical specialist: “How fun it was to be with Dad, just him and me! We talked about anything I wanted to talk about. Even as a boy, I knew Dad loved me, because he was with me and helping me get better.”¹¹

When he could, President Benson took his children with him during his travels. In March 1948 he took his daughter Bonnie, who was seven years old at the time, to an agriculture meeting in Nebraska. “The press was so intrigued by the poise of the little girl, and by the anomalous example of a father bringing such a young child on such a long trip to attend such a distinguished function, that a picture of Bonnie was featured on the front page [of the newspaper] the next morning. But to Elder Benson the incident was not an anomaly. He frequently took the children with him on out-of-town trips, both as a means of cementing good relations and of educating them.”¹²

Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson

A father’s calling is eternal.

Fathers, yours is an eternal calling from which you are never released. Callings in the Church, as important as they are, by their very nature are only for a period of time, and then an appropriate release takes place. But a father’s calling is eternal, and its importance transcends time. It is a calling for both time and eternity.¹³

Our pattern, or model, for fatherhood is our Heavenly Father. How does He work with His children? Well, in order to know that, of course, [fathers] will need to know something about the gospel, the great plan of the Lord.¹⁴

For a man, there is no calling as high as that of a righteous patriarch, married in the house of the Lord, presiding over His children. Even the very Elohim has us address Him as “our Father who art in heaven” (Matthew 6:9; 3 Nephi 13:9).¹⁵

Fathers are to provide spiritual leadership in their families.

The father must hunger and thirst and yearn to bless his family, go to the Lord, ponder the words of the Lord, and live by the Spirit to know the mind and will of the Lord and what he must do to lead his family.¹⁶

[Fathers,] you have a sacred responsibility to provide spiritual leadership in your family.

In a pamphlet published some years ago by the Council of the Twelve, we said the following: “Fatherhood is leadership, the most important kind of leadership. It has always been so; it always will be so. Father, with the assistance and counsel and encouragement of your eternal companion, you preside in the home” (*Father, Consider Your Ways* [pamphlet, 1973], 4–5). . . .

With love in my heart for the fathers in Israel, may I suggest 10 specific ways that fathers can give spiritual leadership to their children:

1. Give father's blessings to your children. Baptize and confirm your children. Ordain your sons to the priesthood. These will become spiritual highlights in the lives of your children.
2. Personally direct family prayers, daily scripture reading, and weekly family home evenings. Your personal involvement will show your children how important these activities really are.
3. Whenever possible, attend Church meetings together as a family. Family worship under your leadership is vital to your children's spiritual welfare.
4. Go on daddy-daughter dates and father-and-sons' outings with your children. ...
5. Build traditions of family vacations and trips and outings. These memories will never be forgotten by your children.
6. Have regular one-on-one visits with your children. Let them talk about what they would like to. Teach them gospel principles. Teach them true values. Tell them you love them. Personal time with your children tells them where Dad puts his priorities.
7. Teach your children to work, and show them the value of working toward a worthy goal. ...
8. Encourage good music and art and literature in your homes. Homes that have a spirit of refinement and beauty will bless the lives of your children forever.
9. As distances allow, regularly attend the temple with your wife. Your children will then better understand the importance of temple marriage and temple vows and the eternal family unit.
10. Have your children see your joy and satisfaction in service to the Church. This can become contagious to them, so they, too, will want to serve in the Church and will love the kingdom.

Oh, husbands and fathers in Israel, you can do so much for the salvation and exaltation of your families! Your responsibilities are so important.¹⁷

“Have regular one-on-one visits with your children.”

We sometimes hear accounts of men, even in the Church, who think that being head of the home somehow puts them in a superior role and allows them to dictate and make demands upon their family.

The Apostle Paul points out that “the husband is the head of the wife, *even as* Christ is the head of the church” (Ephesians 5:23; italics added). That is the model we are to follow in our role of presiding in the home. We do not find the Savior leading the Church with a harsh or unkind hand. We do not find the Savior treating His Church with disrespect or neglect. We do not find the Savior using force or coercion to accomplish His purposes. Nowhere do we find the Savior doing anything but that which edifies, uplifts, comforts, and exalts the Church. Brethren, I say to you with all soberness, He is the model we must follow as we take the spiritual lead in our families.¹⁸

As the patriarch in your home, 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. ...

Your homes should be havens of peace and joy for your family. Surely no child should fear his own father—especially a priesthood father. A father’s duty is to make his home a place of happiness and joy. ... The powerful effect of righteous fathers in setting an example, disciplining and training, nurturing and loving is vital to the spiritual welfare of [their] children.¹⁹

A mother’s role is ordained by God.

[Mothers] are, or should be, the very heart and soul of the family. No more sacred word exists in secular or holy writ than that of *mother*. There is no more noble work than that of a good and God-fearing mother.

In the eternal family, God established that fathers are to preside in the home. Fathers are to provide, to love, to teach, and to direct. A mother’s role is also God-ordained. Mothers are to conceive, to bear, to nourish, to love, and to train. So declare the revelations.²⁰

We realize that some women, through no fault of their own, are not able to bear children. To these lovely sisters, every prophet of God has promised that they will be blessed with children in the eternities and that posterity will not be denied them.

Through pure faith, pleading prayers, fasting, and special blessings, many of these same lovely sisters, with their noble companions at their sides, have had miracles take place in their lives and have been blessed with children. Others have prayerfully chosen to adopt children. We salute these wonderful couples for the sacrifices and love you have given to those children you have chosen to call your own.²¹

God bless our wonderful mothers. We pray for you. We sustain you. We honor you as you bear, nourish, train, teach, and love for eternity. I promise you the blessings of heaven and “all that [the] Father hath” (see D&C 84:38) as you magnify the noblest calling of all—a mother in Zion.²²

Mothers should love, teach, and spend effective time with their children.

Mothers in Zion, your God-given roles are so vital to your own exaltation and to the salvation and exaltation of your family. A child needs a mother more than all the things money can buy. Spending time with your children is the greatest gift of all.²³

With love in my heart for the mothers in Zion, I would now like to suggest 10 specific ways our mothers may spend effective time with their children.

[First,] whenever possible, be at the crossroads when your children are either coming or going—when they leave and return from school, when they leave or return from dates, when they bring friends home. Be there at the crossroads whether your children are 6 or 16. ...

Second, mothers, take time to be a real friend to your children. Listen to your children, really listen. Talk with them, laugh and joke with them, sing with them, play with them, cry with them, hug them, honestly praise them. Yes, regularly spend one-on-one time with each child. Be a real friend to your children.

Third, take time to read to your children. Starting from the cradle, read to your sons and daughters. ... You will plant a love for good literature and a real love for the scriptures if you will read to your children regularly.

Fourth, take time to pray with your children. Family prayers, under the direction of the father, should be held morning and night. Have your children feel of your faith as you call down the blessings of heaven upon them. ... Have your children participate in family and personal prayers, and rejoice in their sweet utterances to their Father in Heaven.

Fifth, take time to have a meaningful weekly home evening. Have your children actively involved. Teach them correct principles. Make this one of your family traditions. ...

Sixth, take time to be together at mealtimes as often as possible. This is a challenge as the children get older and lives get busier. But happy conversation, sharing of the day's plans and activities, and special teaching moments occur at mealtime because parents and children work at it.

Seventh, take time daily to read the scriptures together as a family. ... Reading the Book of Mormon together as a family will especially bring increased spirituality into your home and will give both parents and children the power to resist temptation and to have the Holy Ghost as their constant companion. I promise you that the Book of Mormon will change the lives of your family.

Eighth, take time to do things as a family. Make family outings and picnics and birthday celebrations and trips special times and memory builders. Whenever possible, attend, as a family, events where one of the family members is involved, such as a school play, a ball game, a talk, a recital. Attend Church meetings together, and sit together as a family when you can. Mothers who help families pray and play together will [help them] stay together and will bless children's lives forever.

Ninth, mothers, take time to teach your children. Catch the teaching moments at mealtime, in casual settings, or at special sit-down times together, at the foot of the bed at the end of the day, or during an early-morning walk together. ...

A mother's love and prayerful concern for her children are the most important ingredients in teaching her own. Teach children gospel principles. Teach them it pays to be good. Teach them there is no safety in sin. Teach them a love for the gospel of Jesus Christ and a testimony of its divinity.

Teach your sons and daughters modesty, and teach them to respect manhood and womanhood. Teach your children sexual purity, proper dating standards, temple marriage, missionary service, and the importance of accepting and magnifying Church callings.

Teach them a love for work and the value of a good education.

Teach them the importance of the right kind of entertainment, including appropriate movies, videos, music, books, and magazines. Discuss the evils of pornography and drugs, and teach them the value of living the clean life.

Yes, mothers, teach your children the gospel in your own home, at your own fireside. This is the most effective teaching that your children will ever receive. ...

Tenth and finally, mothers, take the time to truly love your little children. A mother's unqualified love approaches Christlike love.

Your teenage children also need that same kind of love and attention. It seems easier for many mothers and fathers to express their love to their children when they are young, but more difficult when they are older. Work at this prayerfully. There need be no generation gap. And the key is love. Our young people need love and attention, not indulgence. They need empathy and understanding, not indifference from mothers and fathers. They need the parents' time. A mother's kindly teachings and her love for and confidence in a teenage son or daughter can literally save them from a wicked world.²⁴

“Take time to read to your children.”

Do you know one reason why righteous mothers love their children so much? Because they sacrifice so much for them. We love what we sacrifice for and we sacrifice for what we love.²⁵

Parents should work together in unity and love in raising their children.

Husbands and wives, as co-creators, should eagerly and prayerfully invite children into their homes. ... Blessed is the husband and wife who have a family of children. The deepest joys and blessings in life are associated with family, parenthood, and sacrifice. To have those sweet spirits come into the home is worth practically any sacrifice.²⁶

When parents, in companionship, love, and unity, fulfill their heaven-imposed responsibility and children respond with love and obedience, great joy is the result.²⁷

God help us to support one another. May it start in the home as we support our families. May there be a spirit of loyalty, unity, love, and mutual respect. May husbands be loyal to their wives, true to them, love them, strive to ease their burdens, and share the responsibility for the care, training, and the rearing of the children. May mothers and wives show a spirit of helpfulness to their husbands, uphold and sustain them in their priesthood duties, and be loyal and true to the calls that come to them from the priesthood of God.²⁸

May we be faithful to this great obligation of parenthood, this sacred obligation, that we may build our homes solidly upon eternal principles, that we may have no regrets. May we never be recreant [unfaithful] to the great trust which has been imposed in us. May we always keep in mind that these spirits that have entered our homes are choice spirits.²⁹