# Chapter 3: Family Development

This chapter discusses family development and preparing for eternal marriage during young adulthood. It highlights the changing societal attitudes towards marriage and the transition to adulthood, with many people no longer associating marriage with the definitive transition to adulthood. The chapter also reviews prophetic and scholarly principles that can help young adults move toward marriage with faith and confidence. The erosion of traditional dating and courtship patterns is discussed, including a growing pessimism about marriage, a focus on personal independence before and after marriage, widespread sexual permissiveness, and high rates of couples living together before marriage. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the importance of faith and steadfastness in approaching marriage during this time.

### Young Adulthood and Preparing for Eternal Marriage

Jason S. Carroll

Marriage… is ordained by God… God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife…Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan.

In previous generations, marriage was regarded as the definitive transition to adulthood (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). However, recent studies suggest that the majority of young people today in many countries no longer consider marriage and other social milestones (for example, completing school or becoming a parent) to be a necessary part of becoming an adult (Nelson & Barry, 2005). Instead, young people report more personally defined qualities, such as accepting responsibility for one’s self, achieving financial independence, and becoming independent decision makers as the contemporary markers of adulthood (Cheah & Nelson, 2004). With most young people no longer associating marriage with the transition to adulthood and a notable rise in the average age at which people first marry (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010), many people consider marriage to be a part of later adult life rather than an important feature of young adulthood. However, there is growing evidence that young people’s views of marriage—such as their desired age for marriage and the importance they place on getting married—are associated with their lifestyle choices during young adulthood as well as the later success of their marriage and family lives (Carroll et al., 2007).

Although societal attitudes are changing about marriage and the transition to adulthood, the Lord’s prophets have always emphasized the importance of marriage according to God’s plan. Moses recorded that after the Lord placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, He declared “... it was not good that the man should be alone; wherefore I will make an help meet for him” (Moses 3:18). The Apostle Paul taught, “Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:11). In a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith, we learn that “...marriage is ordained of God unto man. Wherefore… they twain shall be one flesh” (D&C 49:15–16). In modern times, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” reaffirms these teachings, stating that marriage “is essential to His eternal plan” for “the eternal destiny of His children” (¶¶ 7, 1).

Despite the emphasis that the Lord’s prophets have placed on forming celestial marriage relationships, we live in a time when many people see the path toward marriage in a different light. Current societal trends reveal that there are a number of pitfalls in today’s dating and courtship culture that require young adults to approach marriage with an even greater degree of faith and steadfastness than was required in previous generations. For some Latter-day Saint young adults today, following prophetic counsel to form an enduring marriage may feel like a daunting task. This first portion of the chapter discusses several of the pitfalls of current dating practices and reviews prophetic and scholarly principles that can help young adults move toward marriage with faith and confidence.

### The Erosion of Traditional Dating and Courtship

One of the most dramatic changes influencing marriage preparation in the United States during the last several decades has been the emergence of a new period in life between adolescence and adulthood. This stage has been labeled as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). This life stage has emerged as a result of the substantial increase in the median age at first marriage in both men and women. Since 1950, the median age at first marriage in the United States has increased and is currently at a historic high of 28.6 years for women and 30.5 years for men (U. S. Census Bureau). This pattern of delayed marriage has created an extended period of nearly 10 years in the family life cycle where many young adults have left adolescence and are beginning to view themselves as adults, but have not yet entered into the commitments and lifestyle patterns of married adult life. The emergence of this new period in life raises an important question: What impact does this period of extended singleness have on young adults’ preparation for marriage and family life?

One of the best ways to understand how this new period of emerging adulthood is influencing preparation for later marriage and family life is to look at the defining characteristics of the current dating and courtship culture. Numerous scholars have noted that today’s dating culture for young adults is markedly different from the one experienced by their parents and grandparents. In particular, these family professionals have noted an erosion of traditional courtship patterns and a dating culture that lacks socially defined norms (what is viewed as normal), rituals, and relationship milestones to guide young people toward marriage. As a result of these changes a number of pitfalls exist in our current dating and courtship culture, including a growing pessimism about marriage and a focus on personal independence before and after marriage, a primary focus on personal financial independence for both men and women, widespread sexual permissiveness, and high rates of couples living together before marriage.

### Pessimism About Marriage

Despite the growing trend to delay marriage, recent research indicates that having a successful, lifelong marriage is still a highly valued goal for the majority of emerging adults. In fact, a recent study showed that 90 percent of young adults in the United States rate having a good marriage and family life as being quite important or very important to them (Bachman et al., 2009). However, having grown up in a society saturated with divorce many young people have become pessimistic about their chances of a happy marriage. This same study found that more than one-third of emerging adults agreed with the statement that one sees so few good or happy marriages that one questions marriage as a way of life. Simply put, when it comes to marriage many young adults today have high aspirations but low expectations.

Pessimism about marriage and wariness of divorce among young adults is creating a culture of divorce preparation rather than a culture of marriage preparation. The emerging ethic of marriage preparation appears to be that when you are ready to get divorced, you are ready to get married. In this context single life is not only becoming a permissible period for emerging adults, but it is also regarded by some as a necessary period before a person is ready to settle down and get married. Many emerging adults believe that they will be ready for marriage only when they are finished being single. In a recent study, more than half of young adults today rank having “fully experienced the single life” as an important criterion to achieve before getting married (Carroll et al., 2009).

### Getting Ahead Before Getting Wed

The central responsibilities of adulthood in past generations centered on caring for one’s spouse, providing for a family, and nurturing children—all of which involve duties toward others. However as noted previously, recent research suggests that young people today have new visions about what the focus of adult life should be. For the most part these new markers of adulthood carry a theme of personal independence and self reliance. Coupled with a sense of pessimism about their chances for marital success, many young people now see their young adult years as a time to pursue their personal interests and become independent financially. The emerging adult culture today encourages young people to get ahead financially before getting wed and to be careful not to let marriage alter or interrupt one’s educational and career plans.

Both young women and young men frequently identify becoming financially independent as a key to being ready for a contemporary marriage. This ideology is an apparent shift from an interdependence ethic more widely accepted by their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, wherein individuals saw marriage as a foundation for financial stability. In a recent study, 91% of emerging adults reported that in order to be marriage-ready they need to be financially independent from their parents. Forty-three percent said they also needed to be finished with their education and 51% said they needed to be settled into a long-term career. Also, 33% of emerging adults believed they needed to be able to pay for their own wedding, and 24% would need to have to have purchased a house before they would feel ready to get married (Carroll et al., 2009). Given that these financial goals were typically viewed as milestones of married life by previous generations, the greater emphasis on financial criteria for marriage readiness may indicate a need to feel settled as an adult before taking on the responsibilities of marriage. The emerging adults do not want to step into marriage until they are ready for the economic realities of a possible divorce.

Some people also believe that an ethic of personal independence will make marriages more stable because young people enter marriage with more resources and greater maturity. While research confirms that marrying after your teenage years and getting more education are associated with greater marital stability (Heaton, 2002), there is also strong evidence that an attitude of personal independence may weaken some marriages by undermining the need for mutual partnership among couples. This occurs in two ways. First, many young people today enter marriage with a built-in escape route that lessens the likelihood that they will stick with a marriage in periods of trouble that are common early in marriage. Second, emerging adults who endorse economic self-reliance before the wedding rather than building economic stability together after the wedding will most likely put off marriage in order to achieve this goal. As they delay marriage into their late twenties or thirties in an attempt to achieve economic stability, they will increase their chances of participating in risk factors for a future divorce, such as premarital cohabitation and sex (Carroll et al., 2007).

### Acceptance of Cohabitation

Research also indicates that emerging adults are increasingly embracing the idea that a couple needs to live together before marriage to test their relationship and see if they are ready for marriage. In one study, 62% of young adults reported that they believe that living together before marriage is a good way to avoid eventual divorce. More than half of all marriages in America today are preceded by cohabitation (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001). These young adults believe that cohabitation is a good way to take the risk out of marriage and reduce their odds of divorce. However, research shows that this belief is often an illusion. Studies on cohabitation and later marital success have consistently found that couples who cohabitate before marriage are more likely to divorce than couples who do not cohabitate before marriage (Jose et al., 2010). A study using a national sample found that 43.1% of couples who cohabitate before engagement reported lower marital quality and greater potential for divorce than the 16.4% of those who cohabited only after engagement or the 40.5% who only cohabitated after marriage (Rhoades et al., 2009).This suggests that the negative effect of cohabitation comes primarily from precommitment cohabitation, although more research on this point is needed. However, it should be noted that research has identified no disadvantages for couples who follow the prophetically prescribed pattern for dating and mating and do not cohabit prior to marriage.

### Approaches to Dating: Becoming a Right Person for Marriage

Within this new period of emerging adulthood, there are a variety of ideas about how successful marriages are formed. These ideas translate into varied approaches to dating that emphasize different aspects of relationships and criteria for selecting a partner. In particular, there are two common approaches to selecting a partner during the emerging adult years and the approach that young people take will make a difference in their dating experience and success.

The first approach to dating can be called the finding Mr. or Ms. Right approach. This approach is very popular in mainstream culture and is quite common among many young Latter-day Saint’s, too. This approach is emphasized in commercials for dating websites that promise to help single adults find that one special person who is waiting for you. The primary question at the core of this approach to dating is, how do I find the one right person for me? The focus in this style of dating is on finding or matching with the person you are meant to marry. This approach creates feelings of anxiety about dating, as young people feel overwhelmed by the prospect of finding the perfect match.

By contrast, Elder David A. Bednar (2009) warns young people about embracing a finding-focused view to dating and counsels them to practice a different approach. He said,

As we visit with young adults all over the Church, often they will ask, “Well, what are the characteristics I should look for in a future spouse?” As though they have some checklist of, “I need to find someone who has these three, or four, or five things.” And I rather forcefully say to them, “You are so arrogant to think that you are some catch and that you want someone else who has these five things for you! If you found somebody who had these three or four or five characteristics that you’re looking for, what makes you think they’d want to marry you?” The “list” is not for evaluating someone else—the list is for you and what you need to become. And so if there are three primary characteristics that [you] hope to find in an eternal companion, then those are the three things [you] ought to be working to become. Then [you] will be attractive to someone who has those things. . . . You are not on a shopping spree looking for the greatest value with a series of characteristics. You become what you hope your spouse will be and you’ll have a greater likelihood of finding that person.

Within this approach to dating, the primary question is, how can I be prepared to form and nurture an enduring marriage? The difference between the finding Mr. or Ms. Right approach and this approach is that the becoming approach primarily emphasizes personal readiness, maturity, and growth. While a becoming approach to dating still recognizes the importance of finding a good person to marry, finding is not the primary focus. The main emphasis is on becoming ready for marriage and then committing to that relationship when you have made the decision to marry. The remainder of this chapter will discuss principles that can assist young adults in becoming a right person and finding a right person, two essential parts of forming a loving and lasting marriage.

### Sacred Perspectives on Marriage Readiness

In many societies today, marriage is viewed almost exclusively as a couple relationship. When viewed as a couple relationship, marriage is seen as a personal expression of love between two people who want to share their lives together. This view of marriage typically emphasizes personal happiness, emotional gratification, physical attraction, good communication, pleasurable intimacy, and couple compatibility as the essential elements of a good marriage. Most of us would agree that, to some degree, these are parts of the marriage relationship we hope to have someday. However, for many people this relationship view is as deep as their perspective of marriage goes. If young people think of marriage only as a couple relationship, they miss out on the sacred aspects of marriage that emphasize the need for commitment, sacrifice, selfless caring for one’s spouse, and the benefits of marriage for children. Most importantly, when marriage is viewed only as a couple relationship, couples will lack the needed foundation in the divine institution of marriage that grounds the couples’ relationship in the principles of discipleship, covenant making, cleaving, equal partnership, the sacred responsibilities of husbands and wives, and the eternal purposes of marriage.

To be clear, viewing marriage as a couple relationship is not wrong—it is just incomplete. Such views lack a doctrinal foundation, emphasizing the fruits of marriage that all desire to experience without tying the outcomes to the true roots that create loving and lasting marriages. As young adults strengthen their testimonies of marriage as a divine institution, they will have a deeper foundation of true doctrine upon which to build effective skills related to communication, intimacy, and other relational aspects of marriage.

When we view marriage as a divine institution, we understand that the practices and patterns of successful marriage are not created nor defined by the spouses themselves. This view teaches us that one of the keys to lasting marriage is to not seek just compatibility with one’s spouse, but also to seek alignment with God. When spouses build their marriage according to the Lord’s pattern and seek to contribute to His divine purposes, their relationship with each other is endowed with the Holy Spirit of Promise, which blesses them with a greater love for each other, a deeper meaning in their lives, and an enduring sense of oneness with God.

### Faith and Discipleship in Marriage

For some young people, however, the thoughts of becoming ready for marriage, finding someone to marry, and making a marriage work evoke fears and concerns. Sometimes these fears are grounded in poor family experiences while growing up that leave individuals feeling unprepared or poorly taught about healthy marriage. Some young people understandably worry about repeating the pattern of their parents’ divorce (Wolfinger, 2005). Others have anxiety about attracting a high-quality spouse and fear that their efforts at dating will not be successful. Many young people focus on their personal faults and worry that no one will want to marry them. Others fear the responsibilities of marriage, particularly marriages entered into during the young adult years. Issues of schooling, employment, finances, and some cultural expectations create an anxiety suggesting that marriage must be pushed further and further down the life path. Whatever the reasons may be, there seems to be a growing fear among some young people that forming a loving and lasting marriage is something they may not be able to do.

Given the prevalence of these types of fears about dating and marriage, the starting point for becoming ready for marriage is to develop faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His divine plan for marriage and families. In 1 Nephi 3:7 we read, “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commanded them.” Although this scripture is not typically viewed as a marriage preparation scripture, its principles are applicable to the modern dating context. Through young adults’ faithfulness, the Lord endows them with what they need in order to live His divine plan of happiness.

As young adults strive to become the people our Father in Heaven wants them to become, they will increase their readiness for marriage in the future. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (2003, pg. 8) has taught,

Do you want capability, safety, and security in dating and romance, in married life and eternity? Be a true disciple of Jesus. Be a genuine, committed, word-and-deed Latter-day Saint. Believe that your faith has everything to do with your romance, because it does. You separate dating from discipleship at your peril.

### Social Science Perspectives on Marriage Readiness

Scholars have found that there are certain personal characteristics or traits that happily married spouses have developed (Carroll et al., 2006). These personal characteristics begin to be developed during adolescence and young adulthood and continue to be refined during the transition to marriage. Scholars have found that a young adult’s readiness for marriage is largely determined by their ability to love and communicate.

#### The Ability to Love

The ability to love is defined by how one asserts, expresses, and defines his or her importance, and the importance of others, in intimate and non-intimate relationships (L’Abate & Baggett, 1997). Within this context, love could defined as the ability to be emotionally available to self and others, especially in times of need—that is, when loved ones are hurting or are fearful of being hurt—without requirements of performance, perfection, problem-solving, or production. Thus, the ability to love requires a combination of a sense of self-worth or personal security plus intimate regard for others.

The ability to love consists of two aspects, personal security and other-centeredness. The term personal security refers to a person's sense of self importance, which involves perceptions of self worth, the ability to regulate negative emotions, and feelings of secure attachment (Carroll et al., 2006). Personally secure people rely on sources of internal validation such as the love of God, a sense of personal worth, and personal optimism. They don’t seek external validation of their worth, for example, through accomplishment, physical appearance, material possessions, or unhealthy relationships. Personal security is the foundation for several key attributes that are needed in dating and marriage relationships. These include courage, vulnerability, and a willingness to trust other people. Without personal security, vulnerability in close relationships feels threatening and the fear of rejection will often dictate how people behave in dating situations. When this happens, there is less authenticity, disclosure, and mutual reliance in couple relationships—all necessary ingredients to forming an intimate and supportive relationship. Thus, seeking a romantic relationship means having the courage to be open and even vulnerable to being hurt.

Other-centeredness reflects an orientation toward the importance of others and is embodied in traits such as kindness, commitment, fairness, sacrifice, forgiveness, and other personal virtues. Other-centeredness is the capacity to care for others and the maturity to allow others’ needs to become equal or greater in priority than one’s own. In recent years, marriage researchers have begun to conduct studies on forgiveness, sacrifice, commitment, and other aspects of marital relationships that were previously considered to be the content of Sunday School classes and sermons (Fincham et al., 2007).

#### The Ability to Communicate

Communication is defined as the ability to bargain, problem-solve, and make decisions (L’Abate & Baggett, 1997). In particular, the ability to communicate involves interacting with others in a way that consensus can be reached while respecting the rights of each individual. Because of this, competence in communication is founded upon and becomes an outward expression of one’s ability to love. Effective communication is a set of skills that is grounded upon the foundation of the first dimensions—personal security and other-centeredness. While the first two aspects of personal maturity, personal security and mature love, typically influence our motives and intentions in relationships, the third aspect, effective communication, deals more with our behaviors and actions. When our hearts are in the right place, we are ready to learn skills that can help us effectively express our love toward others.

Effective communication involves two primary skills—empathic listening and clear-sending communication. As young adults develop these skills, they are better prepared to establish healthy and productive couple interactions in dating and marriage relationships. The goal of empathic listening is to help another person feel understood and valued. It is a vital and necessary skill needed in dating, courtship, and marriage. To be an empathic listener, young adults must communicate in ways that help others believe that they really want to listen to them. Those who are speaking must feel that when they tell you something, you really care about what they are saying. If we do not really care what others are saying, then there is no set of skills or techniques we can use to convince them that we do.

In addition to empathic listening, effective communication is built upon clear messages sent to others. This is the talking part of communication. However, most unclear communication in close relationships has very little to do with partners having actual difficulties in talking or forming words. Messages become unclear because of background issues that prevent people from being direct, open, and authentic in their statements to others. In order to be effective communicators, we have to be authentic in our conversations with others. We have to say what we mean and mean what we say while still respecting the feelings and perspectives of others. In dating relationships, when young adults do not state their true feelings or perspectives or when they lie about them, trust and intimacy cannot develop or be maintained. When the purpose of communication is to cover up, mislead, deceive, intimidate, threaten, disapprove, hurt, fault-find, or make someone feel guilty, relationships are damaged. Furthermore, if young adults allow their emotions or personal insecurities to overwhelm them, they tend to communicate in less authentic ways—thus sending less clear messages.

### Conclusion

The fundamental purposes of this life remain the same as they have always been—to receive a body, to believe in Christ, to progress spiritually, and to form an eternal marriage and family. As today’s young adults prepare for eternal marriage, they must have faith that God will help them become ready for marriage, find a wonderful person, and establish a happy family—in His way and in His time. Despite the challenges of the modern dating context, young adults can find confidence in the divine patterns of dating, courtship, and marriage. President Henry B. Eyring (1998) promised, “As we read what the [proclamation] tells us about the family, we can expect—in fact we must expect— impressions to come to our minds as to what we are to do. And we can be confident it is possible for us to do according to those impressions.”

Elder Richard G. Scott (2004, pg. 100) further advised, “You have a choice. You can wring your hands and be consumed with concern for the future or choose to use the counsel the Lord has given to live with peace and happiness.” Although current dating trends may look discouraging, the Lord has provided the ways for young adults to form loving and lasting marriages.

### The ABCs of Successful Romantic Relationship Development: Meeting, Dating, and Choosing an Eternal Companion

Thomas B. Holman, Frank Poulsen, and others

### Marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God

“The Family: A Proclamation to the World” states, “Marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God” (¶1) and that “marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan” (¶ 7). The importance of this solemn proclamation is not lost on Latter-day Saint single adults.

Indeed, Church presidents have noted the absolute importance of the decisions surrounding marriage. President Thomas S. Monson (2004, pg. 4), speaking of his decision to ask his future wife for a date, said, “That decision, I believe, was perhaps the most important decision that I have ever made.” Speaking of the marriage decision, President Gordon B. Hinckley (Hinckley, 199 C.E.) said, “This will be the most important decision of your life, the individual whom you marry.” The difficulty for many single adults is how to do it.

The purpose of this portion of the chapter is to present research and prophetic and scriptural guidance to help young Latter-day Saints be successful in finding an eternal companion. We do so within the framework of the ABCs, or more correctly, the ABCDEs of mate selection. George Levinger (Levinger et al., 1983) postulated a five-phase development of heterosexual romantic relationships:

A. Awareness of or Acquaintance with another person;

B. Buildup of the relationship;

C. Continuation following Commitment to a long-term relationship (which may result in marriage for many couples);

D. Deterioration or Decline in the interdependence of the couple;

E. Ending of the relationship.

These phases are not always sequential, and few relationships go through all five phases. Many relationships don’t even make it into the acquaintance phase, if they do they can quickly go straight to the ending, or E, phase. Relationships can terminate in any phase, and indeed most should. In some instances, couples double back to a previous phase because of unfinished business, an event, or new knowledge suggests that they need to back up.

The issue for single Latter-day Saints is how to enter into phase A and move progressively through phase A into phase B and then into phase C, with the end point being a temple marriage that will grow into an eternal and celestial marriage. Once in a relationship, another issue may arise when one becomes aware that a premarital relationship is not progressing or should not progress (phase D). One must then figure out how to move into phase E, while doing as little damage as possible.

Levinger’s model neglects one essential phase—preparing for success, the pre-A phase. We turn first to this important phase.

### Preparing for Success

President Thomas S. Monson (Monson, 2004, pg. 4) noted, “Decisions determine destiny. That is why it is worthwhile to look ahead, to set a course, to be at least partly ready when the moment of decision comes.” Thus, we must look ahead to the type of marriage we want, set a course toward that goal, and then “prepare every needful thing” (D&C 88:119; D&C 109:8) so when the opportunity for establishing a relationship that could lead to an eternal marriage arises, we are ready to move forward with faith.

Consistent with gospel principles, research suggests that our whole life plays a part in our preparation for marriage. Your family experiences; your relationships with significant other adults and peers; and your personality, attitudes, and emotional health are just a few of the factors that influence how well you master the ABCs of mate selection.

### Family Experiences: Coming to Terms with the Past, Moving Forward with Faith

Research shows that your family background has an influence on success in finding an eternal companion. However, the effect of family is not simple. Researchers (Sroufe et al., 2005) suggest that many experiences exert an influence on your success in meeting and choosing an eternal mate, including family experiences throughout childhood, adolescent experiences with other significant people in your life (such as teachers, Church leaders, or peers), and things that are happening in your current environment. They conclude that “nothing is more important in the development of the child than the care received, including that in the early years,” and that “individuals are always impacted by the entire history of cumulative experience” (pg. 19). However, these researchers note that current circumstances combine with cumulative history, and this allows for change. We are not condemned by our past. It is always there, but things that happen to us in the present and what we choose, in the present, to do about the past determine who we are and what we will do in the search for an eternal companion. For example, someone may have had a difficult childhood involving abuse and parental divorce. However, this doesn’t mean the person is “doomed” to suffer from emotional problems, abuse their own children, or have a poor marriage. If the person, as a child, adolescent, and young adult has good friends, teachers, Church leaders and advisors, and so on, and develops a desire to change the path that seems laid out, the young person can look forward to a good marriage. But the poor childhood is still there and may have to be dealt with over and over again—depending on ongoing circumstances, such as stress in some part of life.

One set of researchers studied three groups of young adults—(a) those with healthy family background experiences, (b) those with unhealthy family background experiences who had not come to terms with those experiences, and (c) those with unhealthy family background experiences who had come to terms with those experiences (Martinson et al., 2010). Group A, who came from strong, healthy family backgrounds, had the highest quality pre marital or marital relationships. Group B, those with unhealthy family backgrounds who had not come to terms with these negative experiences, had the lowest romantic relationship quality. But the most interesting results were that the individuals from group C, those with unhealthy family backgrounds who had come to terms with these experiences, had romantic relationship quality scores very similar to those from healthy family backgrounds. This suggests that even if some negative things have happened to us in our families, we can recover and still build strong marriages.

How do we come to terms with negative experiences in our families? While therapy, good books, and good role models outside the family are helpful, ultimately, the doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ, especially the plan of salvation and the Atonement of Jesus Christ, are the most powerful agents of change (Packer, 2004). The power of Christ’s Atonement works changes in our hearts that can come in no other way. One woman, whom we will call Jenna, tells us how the Atonement of Christ worked in her life,

After realizing all the different ways that my family of origin had altered the way I viewed the world and the things I was doing, I decided to make some changes. It was soon after that I realized that in order to really become the person that I wanted to be, I had to be able to use the Atonement of my Savior, but I had no idea how to use it. I went to a religion teacher, and he gave me the following two steps for applying the Atonement: Pray to get rid of all of the hurt and pain, and protect myself from further harm to allow for proper healing. He likened the Atonement process to the cleaning and healing of a bad scrape. First, I needed to get rid of all of the gravel and debris left in the injury; then I had to bandage the wound so that it could be restored. I struggled for some time with this concept; I knew the Lord would take away my pain, but for some reason I was resisting. I was afraid that if my pain were gone, there would be nothing left and I would be empty. I finally decided to just trust God and give Him everything. When I did this, my pain was taken away and replaced with joy and love such as I had never felt. I had a purpose, and I knew the Lord would help me overcome every trial. . . . Above all the other things that I have tried (forming attachments, therapy, setting goals, etc.), it has always been the Lord who has helped me through.

So, after taking care of issues from your family and peer relationships and any personal emotional issues, what do you do next? You make efforts to initiate relationships with the opposite sex. How to do this is the topic of the next section of this chapter.

### The Awareness and Acquaintance Phase

Most contemporary research on relationship formation suggests that appraisal of attraction is one of the first steps in the awareness and acquaintance phase (Bredow et al., 2008; Cunningham & Barbee, 2008). We ask ourselves a question like, is he/she attractive to me? Certainly physical attractiveness is one of the things both men and women look for. And there is nothing wrong with that. Elder Bruce R. McConkie (McConkie, 1955) said, “The right person [for you to marry] is someone for whom the natural and wholesome and normal affection that should exist does exist.”

Although physical attractiveness is a necessary part of attraction (Li et al., 2002), it is not the most important factor. Researchers Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, and Larsen (Buss et al., 2001) found that physical attractiveness was not even in the top five most important qualities people sought in a long-term relationship. Jake, a research participant in a recent study, helps us see the importance of physical attractiveness in addition to other things,

I was actually a little bit infatuated with her. I remember listing some things off just after talking to her. . . . I guess in church when she would make comments, she was actually quite proficient in speaking. She showed a level of intelligence. I’m very, very attracted to intelligence. She has a beautiful face. That’s actually one of the first things I look for. . . . She appeared a little bit shy. I don’t know, I kind of like that. I’m [also] attracted to an open mind.

Beyond physical attraction, what are the qualities that people should look for in a long-term relationship and how do young people find them? In addition to temple worthiness, Elder Richard G. Scott (Scott, 1999) suggested several essential attributes that bring happiness that we should look for in a potential mate. A possible mate should have “a deep love of the Lord and His commandments [and] a determination to live them.” They should also be “kindly understanding, forgiving of others, and willing to give of self, with the desire to have a family crowned with beautiful children and a commitment to teach them the principles of truth in the home.”

One question young people may ask is, how can I discern these qualities in others before I approach them and run the risk of embarrassment or failure? Although these qualities might seem difficult to discern from a distance, there are means of gathering this information; most people do it intuitively. Berger and Perkins (Berger & Perkins, 1978) found that simple observation is an effective means of appraising these more important qualities of attractiveness. Furthermore, “the most information-rich environments for observing others are those in which the target person is interacting with others . . . and those that present relatively few social constraints on behavior” (Afifi & Lucas, 2008).

Asking someone to go on a date is easier if one has realistic and positive expectations and perceptions of others. These feelings and expectations develop over time when a person has a history of positive experiences with parents, peers, and others who are accessible and responsive to one’s need for closeness and comfort. Those who question their own worth as a potential eternal companion or have negative evaluations of others will often avoid relationships for fear of being hurt, or, conversely they may anxiously and inappropriately pursue relationships too vigorously (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This points again to the importance of good quality family and peer relationships while growing up or coming to terms with hurts and fears from the past.

Research conducted at BYU shows that this acquaintance and awareness stage is one of the particularly frustrating parts of dating. Annette, one of our research participants, expressed that “The initial asking out, I can understand, can be hard for guys. So . . . that’s frustrating, . . . like you’re sending signals, ‘It’s okay if you ask me out,’ . . . but it doesn’t happen because they’re not picking them up.” And from a male perspective, Joseph says simply: “It would be nice if girls were clear about whether they like or don’t like you.” These real life responses indicate that both males and females wish the other gender would be more straightforward in their dating strategies.

### Transition from Acquaintance to Buildup

How does one move from the acquaintance stage to building a relationship? This varies from person to person, from couple to couple, and from culture to culture. Most Americans find this transition confusing and ambiguous (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001), and Latter-day Saint young adults seem to feel the same way. In research conducted at BYU, respondents speak of the difficulty of moving to the next level. Guerrero and Mongeau (2008) discuss research showing that those who successfully progress in their relationships from acquaintance to build up use prosocial maintenance behaviors. These behaviors include things like high levels of routine contact and activity (calling, texting, going places together, and just spending lots of time together), providing emotional support and positivity (comforting each other, being optimistic), talking about the relationship (sharing feelings about the relationship and feelings of love), and instrumental support (such as sharing tasks or giving advice).

Some young men go straight to asking young women out for a date to accomplish these tasks, and this is encouraged by Latter-day Saint Church leaders (Oaks, 2006). For most Americans (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001), and many Latter-day Saints, hanging out is a frequent way of going through the acquaintance process. Most Latter-day Saint young adults know that Church leaders discourage hanging out, and we have found in our current research that the kind of endless, making-no-progress-toward-a-relationship hanging out is indeed frustrating to both men and women. However, spending time together in the company of several potential eternal companions that is clearly directed toward finding out if the person could be a good possibility for marriage, has a short time limit, and doesn’t take advantage of anyone (for example, mooching free meals) is probably not the negative kind of hanging out that Church leaders discourage.

### The Buildup Phase

Probably the best marker of having moved into the B or buildup phase is a first date. Elder Dallin Oaks (2006) defines a date as, “(1) planned ahead, (2) paid for, and (3) paired off.” Most people seem to prefer being friends before moving into a possible romantic relationship (Guerrero & Mongeau, 2008). Therefore, success in the buildup phase for Latter-day Saint young adults will include dates and will be entered into by two people who have developed a friendship, and especially a friendship that does not include any inappropriate expression of physical attraction (Pugmire, Martinson, & Holman, 2007).

In this section we will discuss two processes that, while occurring in other phases, are particularly significant in the relationship buildup phase and lead to successful mate selection: seeking mutual influence and developing mature love.

#### Seeking mutual influence

In a unique longitudinal study of Latter-day Saint women, Pugmire and others (2007) discovered a process they called mutual influence.

Our LDS females sought what we called mutual influence, which is different from the 50/50 equality often sought in so called equalitarian relationships. Their desire was to have an equal relationship in which they contributed fully to all aspects of the relationship, while expecting the same from their dates/fiancés/ husbands. They sought a relationship in which both partners were contributing fully, caring wholly, and bringing their particular strengths to the relationship (pg. 69).

The Latter-day Saint females interviewed in this study (Pugmire et al., 2007) noted that a mutual influence relationship was difficult if not impossible if the relationship started out as physical. However, once a friendship based on mutual influence was established, physical affection consistent with Latter-day Saint standards was a natural and beautiful part of relationship development. Pugmire and her colleagues also learned that women who were in relationships with men with whom they could have mutual influence had higher quality and more stable relationships than couples in more physically based relationships or unequal relationships (where power and control were exercised disproportionately by either the man or woman).

#### Developing mature love

Noller (Noller, 1996) reviewed a great deal of the research on love and suggested that there are two types: mature and immature. Mature love leads to success in marriage and family life while immature love does not support success in marriage and family life. Love expresses itself through our emotions, beliefs, and behaviors. Noller identified immature and mature aspects of love within each of those categories. The table below summarizes her findings about immature and mature love.

Characteristics of Immature and Mature Love (based on Noller, 1996).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Aspects of Love** | **Immature Love** | **Mature Love** |
| Emotional Part of Love | Possessiveness | Lasting Passion |
|  | Jealousy | Desire for Companionship |
|  | Infatuation | Warm Feeling of Contentment |
|  | Preoccupation |
|  | Anxiety |
| Belief Part of Love | “Love is Blind” | Love is Something You Have to Decide |
|  | Love is External to Us | Love Means: Commitment, Trust, Sharing, Sacrifice |
|  | Cupid’s Arrow |
|  | Love is Beyond Our Control |
| Behavior Part of Love | Selfish | Creates an Environment of Growth and Development |
|  | Lustful | Allows Partner Space for Growth |
|  | Concern Only for Satisfying Own Needs |
|  | Clinging |
|  | Over-Dependent |
|  | Demanding Obedience from Partner |

Notice that Noller’s mature love is similar to what Church leaders have said for years. For example, Elder Marvin J. Ashton (Ashton, 1975, pg. 2) put it this way,

True love is a process. True love requires personal action. Love must be continuing to be real. Love takes time. Too often expediency, infatuation, stimulation, persuasion, or lust are mistaken for love. How hollow, how empty if our love is no deeper than the arousal of momentary feeling or the expression in words of what is no more lasting than the time it takes to speak them.

Many processes are involved in building up a new, budding relationship, but the development of respect as illustrated by developing mutual influence—type relationships and the development of mature love are two of the most important processes.

#### Dealing with Deterioration of and Ending a Relationship

Before our discussion of the transition to a serious relationship, engagement, and marriage, we think it is wise to discuss the deterioration and ending parts of most romantic relationships. Research shows that most people have several breakups before finding the person they marry. Therefore, understanding these phases is just as important as understanding the process of progressing toward marriage. Furthermore, how people break up at whatever point in a relationship probably says a lot about how they will find, relate to, get serious with, and eventually marry their eternal companion.

The Deterioration and Ending phases of relationship development are possibly the most difficult to face. Of course, relationships can deteriorate and end at any stage of development. But breaking up relationships where love was present and marriage was contemplated is particularly difficult. A study on premarital breakups in which 70 percent of the sample were Latter-day Saints is informative (Holman, 2001). These seriously dating or engaged couples all completed questionnaires when they were dating and then about five years later. Those who broke up before marriage had poorer relationships with parents as children and as adults, lower levels of emotional health, and less support for the impending marriage from family and friends. Also, they had poorer communication, conflict resolution skills, and sense of couple identity than those who eventually married and had very satisfying marriages. Interestingly, their premarital scores on these factors were not much different from those who married but eventually divorced or who married but were very unhappy. Clearly, they were wise to break up their premarital relationships since they appeared to be on course to end up divorced or in unhappy marriages.

Great learning and maturity can come from surviving a premarital breakup. If one initiates or goes through a breakup with as much Christlike feelings and behavior as possible, allowing oneself to be healed by the peace of the Spirit, that person is then better prepared to move on to a relationship that can result in an eternal marriage.

### The Transition from B to C

During the transition from the buildup phase to the commitment phase, couples will be asking themselves and each other things like: Do we know enough about each other? Do we like what we have learned? Do we communicate well enough to want to spend more time together? As they think about and talk about their relationship, they find themselves becoming more future oriented and imagining a joint future. They are moving out of initial falling in love and are developing characteristics of sincere, mature love. These kinds of behaviors and attitudes make the transition to deeply committed relationships possible.

### Commitment and Continuation—Into a Successful Eternal Marriage

For many, the marriage decision is particularly anxiety provoking because of our understanding of marriage as an eternal commitment coupled with the tugs and pulls of a secular world and the intense emotions associated with romantic relationships. Here we would like to offer some research-guided suggestions and some prophetic counsel as it applies to the decision to marry.

#### Sliding versus deciding

Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) found that people who make relationship transitions (such as dating exclusively or engaging in sexual intimacy) without thorough deliberation ran the risk of sliding into the next stage of a relationship rather than deciding to move forward. Without a deliberate discussion and decision, the couple is likely to slide through transitions into a marriage that they did not really commit to. Based on these research findings, individuals who do not thoroughly discuss the status of their relationship as it progresses and where they see the relationship going in the long run might be putting themselves at risk for an unhappy (if not short-lived) marriage.

Furthermore, Surra, Arizzi, and Asmussen (1988) found that those individuals who were frequently going back and forth or indecisive about whether or not the relationship measured up to their standards were more likely to end up in an unhappy marriage. This research emphasized that in addition to deliberate communication about the relationship’s progress, individuals should be open with each other about their doubts and insecurities. Otherwise they will likely find that their premarital doubts become marital regrets.

In addition to being decisive about the relationship and open about reservations, modern prophets have counseled individuals to seek guidance in this important decision. President Thomas S. Monson (Monson, 2004) counseled: “In making a decision as momentous as whom you will marry, I suggest you seek the help of your parents.” He promised that “our Heavenly Father will also bless you and guide you in your decision.” This final counsel to seek the guidance of our Heavenly Father identifies another area that is often disconcerting for Latter-day Saints as they progress in the relationship.

#### Spiritual confirmation

The scriptures and Church leaders demonstrate that in this most important decision of choosing an eternal companion, several factors need to be kept in mind as we seek spiritual confirmation. First, President Boyd K. Packer (Packer, 1973) reminds us that if we “desire the inspiration of the Lord in this crucial decision, [we] must live the standards of the Church.” Second, Elder Bruce R. McConkie notes that we need to understand the balance between agency and inspiration. On the one hand, we have been given the power to choose and we are expected to exercise that right. But we have also been told to seek guidance from the Lord in all things. The fundamental principle, he says, is this: “We’re supposed to learn correct principles and then govern ourselves. We make our own choices, and then we present the matter to the Lord and get his approving, ratifying seal” (McConkie, 1975). Third, we must believe that the Lord answers such petitions. Oliver Cowdery was told that he would receive an answer if he asked in faith, with an honest heart, believing he would receive, and if he studied the matter out in his mind and then asked if the decision was right (D&C 9:7–9).

Some people expect this confirmation to come in a powerful way, but the typical workings of the Spirit are a still, small voice that whispers truth to our hearts and minds. One young man’s experience illustrates this (Holman, 2000):

[As I prayed about marriage,] I didn’t feel like I was getting a response. I prayed, “Heavenly Father, this is so important, I need to know whether or not it’s right.” Then toward the end of our courtship, I went to the temple. I was so frustrated because I wasn’t getting an answer either way. After praying and waiting for an answer, I got more frustrated and gave up. That was when an impression came to me: “You already know the answer.” Then I realized that God had answered my prayers. The decision to marry Becky always made sense and felt right. I can see now that God had been telling me in my heart and in my mind that it was a good decision. And later, at the time of the ceremony, I had another confirmation that what I was doing was right.

Consider Elder David A. Bednar’s (2001) experience:

Sister Bednar and I knew each other for 19 months and dated for 15 months before we were married. I do not recall ever receiving a single, overwhelming spiritual confirmation that she was "the one." I do recall that as we dated, as we talked, as we became better acquainted, and as we observed and learned about each other in a variety of circumstances, I received many small, simple, and quiet reassurances that she was indeed a remarkable and spiritual woman. All of those simple answers over a period of time led to and produced an appropriate spiritual reassurance that indeed we were to be married. That reassurance did not come all at once; rather, it was spiritually subtle and gradually distilled upon our minds as the dews from heaven.

One last point is that the spiritual confirmation needs to come to both parties involved. A person should not feel that if his or her partner receives a confirmation, that he or she is therefore released from the necessity of seeking a similar confirmation. Elder Dallin H. Oaks discussed this issue:

If a revelation is outside the limits of stewardship, you know it is not from the Lord, and you are not bound by it. I have heard of cases where a young man told a young woman she should marry him because he had received a revelation that she was to be his eternal companion. If this is a true revelation, it will be confirmed directly to the woman if she seeks to know. In the meantime, she is under no obligation to heed it. She should seek her own guidance and make up her own mind (Oaks, 1981).

#### Wedding Preparation versus Marriage Preparation

We began our discussion with the need to prepare for the process of finding your eternal companion and becoming someone else’s eternal companion. We end with one last thought about preparation. In all the preparations to get acquainted, build up a relationship, commit to marriage, and especially to get married, do not forget to continue to prepare for marriage. Your temple marriage is infinitely more important than all that surrounds the wedding itself. Elder Richard G. Scott (1999) said this, “Do not let receptions, wedding breakfasts, farewells, or other activities overshadow the sacred temple experience.” A recently married young woman learned the truth of Elder Scott’s counsel:

Some advice that was given to me by my bishop when I was engaged was to forget everything. Forget the world, forget that my mother wanted different flowers than I did, forget that my bridesmaids are fighting over what dresses to wear, forget that the reception center is overpriced, just forget everything. I had been under a tremendous amount of stress, and I realized after that conversation that I had lost my focus on the temple and I paid dearly for it. When I followed my bishop’s advice, things started to go in the right direction.

### Conclusion

We have shared some research, counsel from Latter-day Saint Church leaders, and experiences of young adults on how to successfully prepare for a good relationship, initiate a relationship, build up a relationship, and perhaps appropriately end a relationship or move toward deeper commitment and marriage in the temple. The process of going from first acquaintance and attraction to making covenants together across the altar of the temple can be challenging, even a nightmare at times. But when done according to true principles, it can be a dream come true.

### The Foundation of Enduring and Healthy Marriages

Stephen F. Duncan and Sara S. McCarty Zasukha

### Husband and Wife have a Solemn Responsibility to Love and Care for Each Other

In an address President Spencer W. Kimball first delivered to BYU students at a devotional in September 1976 (Kimball, 2002), he stated, ”While marriage is difficult, and discordant and frustrated marriages are common, yet real, lasting happiness is possible, and marriage can be more an exultant ecstasy than the human mind can conceive. This is within the reach of every couple, every person”.

This prophetic statement creates a high ideal for all married couples to strive for in a world where marital distress and divorce are commonplace. In a consumer culture where “people have learned to discard everything from paper plates to spouses” (Bateman & Bateman, 2003), many are understandably fearful of marriage. Fear of divorce, being an inadequate spouse, financial needs, and lifestyle changes may compound sufficiently to deter singles from marriage (Howell, 2006). They may doubt they can have the kind of exultant ecstasy in marriage envisioned by President Kimball. Still others may wonder, what are the tried and true tools needed to build the foundation of a successful marriage?

This section explores the work of leading scholars who study healthy marriages, and the teachings of Latter-day Saint Church leaders on these foundational processes. Foundational processes are actions couples take in relation to each other to help their marriage flourish. We first provide an overview of the emphasis in marital processes research, and then follow with a discussion of several specific foundational processes important in a healthy marriage. The elements discussed in this section include personal commitment to the marriage covenant, love and friendship, positivity, accepting influence, handling differences and conflict respectfully, and continued courtship.

Some of the most careful and influential research programs on what makes marriages work have been led by John Gottman, one of the world’s leading marriage researchers. In addition to his scholarly work, he has published several books for the public based on this research, including the best-selling The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work (Gottman & Silver, 1999). While we incorporate the work of other scholars, we acknowledge Gottman’s influence in delineating several of the foundational processes.

Research on healthy marital processes has largely been conducted in North America using white, well-educated, middle-class couples. That reality may limit its application. However, aspects of the processes can be seen in multicultural marriage research (Sharlin et al., 2000). Church leaders, also, have added commentary about these processes that apply to everyone. We believe the principles involved are probably universal, but the processes manifest differently across cultures. For example, while the principle that spouses need to feel loved by their partners is likely true everywhere, how love is shown in Latin America will possibly be different in North America, the Orient, or in different African countries. And even within the same culture, people will differ in how they show love.

### Marital Processes Research

Marital processes research is essentially threefold. One aspect places emphasis on marital disruption and understanding the processes that lead to marital breakdown (Gottman & Silver, 1994). This area of research often focuses on communication processes, how conflict is managed, and how problems are addressed. A second major emphasis looks at the characteristics of individual spouses and positive couple processes in relation to establishing and maintaining a strong, healthy marriage. According to some observations (Holman et al., 2008), evidence suggests that researchers increasingly are investigating these elements, often referred to as marital virtues or “spousal strengths.” These virtues or strengths include positivity, friendship, generosity (Fowers, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2007), and fairness (Fowers, 2001). A third major emphasis attends to elements some scholars call transformative processes in marriage (Fincham et al., 2007), which are efforts at self change that spouses make to heal a relationship rift or forge a deeper connection. These elements include forgiveness (Fincham, 2000; McCullough et al., 1998), commitment (Fowers, 2000; S. Stanley, 2005), sacrifice (Whitton et al., 2002), and sanctification (Mahoney et al., 2003). Gottman (Gottman, 1999) has also begun to highlight individual aspects of couple interaction, such as fondness, admiration, affection, and respect. These factors within each person become the basis for couples’ efforts to communicate well and handle issues between them respectfully (Carroll et al., 2006).

### Foundational Process #1: Personal Commitment to the Marriage Covenant

“The Family: A Proclamation to the World” declares that “marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God,”, and that “husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other.” Furthermore, it emphasizes that “marriage . . . is essential to His eternal plan.” These statements make clear that marriage is a purposeful, divinely created relationship, not merely a social custom, and that couples have God-given covenant obligations to one another. A correct understanding of these doctrines should set in motion the attitudes and behaviors that nurture covenant commitments (Packer, 2004).

While serving as a member of the Seventy, Elder Bruce C. Hafen (Hafen, 2005) clarified the nature of a covenant relationship by contrasting it with a contractual relationship,

When troubles come, the parties to a contractual marriage seek happiness by walking away. They marry to obtain benefits and will stay only as long as they’re receiving what they bargained for. But when troubles come to a covenant marriage, the husband and wife work them through. They marry to give and to grow, bound by covenants to each other, to the community, and to God. Contract companions each give 50 percent. But covenant companions each give 100 percent. Enough and to spare. Each gives enough to cover any shortfall by the other.

Successful covenant marriages are founded on the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and tied to our discipleship. Elder David A. Bednar (Bednar, 2006) beautifully described how being focused on Jesus in a covenant marriage relationship influences marital progress,

The Lord Jesus Christ is the focal point in a covenant marriage relationship. Please notice how the Savior is positioned at the apex of this triangle, with a woman at the base of one corner and a man at the base of the other corner. Now consider what happens in the relationship between the man and the woman as they individually and steadily “come unto Christ” and strive to be “perfected in Him” (Moroni 10:32). Because of and through the Redeemer, the man and woman come closer together.

#### Social Science Perspectives on Covenant Commitment

While not directly researching marriage as a covenant relationship, some scholars in the social sciences have also noted the importance of commitment in marriage. For example, marriage scholar Scott Stanley (2005, pg. 2) has identified two kinds of commitment: constraint commitment and personal dedication. Constraint commitment comprises a sense of obligation, “forces or costs that serve to keep couples together even if they would rather break up” (Stanley et al., 2004). For example, couples may stay together because of social pressure, the high expense of divorce, or for the sake of the children. Personal dedication, on the other hand, is an intentional decision and desire to stay in a marriage for mutual benefit. You “sacrifice for [the relationship], invest in it, link it to personal goals, and seek the partner’s welfare, not just your own” (Markman et al., 2001). Each type of commitment is important, like epoxy glue, “Mixing the two components gives married couples a superstrong bond” (Stanley, 2005). Constraint commitment is helpful for the stability of a relationship, and couples can lean on it to weather the storms that are a part of every marriage. However, personal dedication is essential for fulfillment in marriage. Research shows that personally dedicated couples show a greater priority for the relationship, feel greater satisfaction with giving, and are less likely to seek greener marital pastures (Stanley, 2005).

#### Marital Processes that Nurture Covenant Commitment in Marriage

What marital processes show a covenant commitment? Religious leaders and scholars are remarkably consistent in their suggestions. Here are some ideas:

##### Intentional Personal Dedication

To nurture their covenant commitments to one another and God, couples will wisely make a decision to be intentionally and personally dedicated. This involves a commitment to sacrifice for and organize one’s life around the companion spouse; it also means a willingness to change any and all behaviors and attitudes for the good of the relationship. This might involve learning to resolve differences in a more healthy way, overcoming tendencies toward impatient listening, moderating unrealistic expectations, spending an evening alone together each week, or resolving personal problems. As marriage scholar Blaine Fowers (Fowers, 2000) has observed, one of the basic ways for a person to have a good marriage is to be a good person. Couples who are personally dedicated will continually strive for individual improvement in their conduct as a partner, realizing that eternal marriage blessings are not automatic. Such conduct might also emphasize the active development of virtues that especially benefit marriage, such as being more tolerant and accepting of imperfections, being fair, or being more patient, courteous, kind, and generous. Elder Robert D. Hales (1996) explained,

An eternal bond doesn’t just happen as a result of sealing covenants we make in the temple. How we conduct ourselves in this life will determine what we will be in all the eternities to come. To receive the blessings of the sealing that our Heavenly Father has given to us, we have to keep the commandments and conduct ourselves in such a way that our families will want to live with us in the eternities.

##### Exclusive Cleaving and Unity

The Lord declared, “Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shall cleave unto her and none else” (D&C 42:22). In explaining this passage of scripture, President Spencer W. Kimball (Kimball, 1972) taught, “ The words none else eliminate everyone and everything. The spouse then becomes preeminent in the life of the husband or wife, and neither social life nor occupational life nor political life nor any other interest nor person or thing shall ever take precedence over the companion spouse.”

In a related verse, the Lord also states, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). President Henry B. Eyring (Eyring, 1998) explained the importance of this verse, “At the creation of man and woman, unity for them in marriage was not given as hope; it was a command! . . . Our Heavenly Father wants our hearts to be knit together. That union in love is not simply an ideal. It is a necessity.”

##### Eliminate Destructive Interaction Patterns

We need to work to eliminate destructive interaction patterns from our relationships so they don’t creep in and influence the nature of our discussion of issues. Gottman (Gottman & Silver, 1994) has identified four of these and labeled them the four horsemen of the apocalypse, as they progressively lead to the downfall of a relationship: Criticism, an attack on one’s personality; contempt, criticism mixed with sarcasm, name-calling, eye-rolling; defensiveness, not taking responsibility for change; and stonewalling, unwillingness to discuss or withdrawal from an issue. Other major patterns (Markman et al., 2001) include escalation, upping the ante on a discussion; invalidation, putting down the other’s opinions; and negative interpretations, assigning a more negative view than what was meant. Couples are wise to identify the degree to which any of these patterns are present in their current relationship and resolve to eliminate them.

##### Calm Yourself First

When issues arise, couples need calm, respectful discussion. Before approaching your spouse on an issue, ask yourself am I in control of myself? The Lord has made it clear that contention is of the devil (3 Nephi 11:29–30). Alma taught us to “bridle all [our] passions,” including those leading to contention. Why? “That [we] may be filled with love” (Alma 38:12). Contention results in anger escalation, hostility, and hurt feelings that can seriously harm relationships. If you cannot approach an issue without contending about it, it is better to deal with it later, after you have calmed yourself. Do whatever calms you: pray, listen to peaceful music, walk around the block, take a shower.

##### Bring up the Concern Softly, Gently, and Privately

Set the stage for a discussion by bringing up issues softly, gently, and calmly, remembering that “a soft answer turneth away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1). Gottman’s research (1999) labeled this the “softened start-up.” Avoid negative, accusatory remarks, sarcasm, and critical or contemptuous statements. Complaining is okay, but don’t blame. Speak for yourself. Use “I” statements to communicate your feelings (“I felt hurt when you left me alone at the party”), not “you” statements (“You are so inconsiderate”). Describe what is happening; don’t evaluate or judge. Be clear. Be polite. Be appreciative. Don’t store things up—remember D&C 121:43: “Reproving betimes [without delay] with sharpness [clarity, openness], when moved upon by the Holy Ghost.” Bring up the issue privately with the person concerned “and not before the world” (see D&C 42:88–89).

##### Learn to Make and Receive Repair Attempts

When a discussion on an issue gets off on the wrong foot, put the brakes on before disaster strikes and things get contentious. Gottman (1999) calls this a repair attempt. Ultimately, a repair attempt is anything in a discussion that deescalates tension so discussion and problem solving can proceed. It might include apologies, “I’m sorry, please forgive me, I didn’t mean that”; acknowledgement of actions,“Yes, you do help with the laundry on occasion”; or taking breaks,“Whoa! This is getting out of hand. Let’s take ten minutes and cool off. ” Because we love our spouse, we will want to work hard at receiving repair attempts rather than coldly rejecting them.

##### Soothe Yourself and Each Other

Gottman (1999) observes that taking breaks may be essential if repair attempts are unsuccessful or if you begin to feel out of control or flooded physically and emotionally. Even if you calmed yourself prior to discussing an issue, you may need to continue to do so during the discussion. Self-soothing may be accomplished by using one or more relaxation techniques. After you’ve spent about 20 minutes calming down on your own, you can help soothe each other by talking about what produced the flood and what each of you can do to calm one another. Some people need a longer time to become calm enough to resume the discussion.

##### Reach a Consensus about a Solution

Most issues need only to be discussed and not solved (Markman et al., 2001); in fact, many issues are not solvable but perpetual (Gottman & Silver, 1999). However, after a full discussion of an issue has occurred and it is classified as a solvable problem, it is time to counsel together to find a solution that you both feel good about. Reaching a consensus is the ideal (see D&C 107:27–29). Let your spouse influence you as you arrive at a mutually agreeable solution. Steps to reaching agreement might include brainstorming possibilities, evaluating alternatives, choosing one you feel good about, putting the solution into action, and following up (Markman et al., 2001).

#### Continuing Courtship through the Years

What is entropy? Yes, it is a physical science concept. So it may surprise you to learn that this concept has application in marriage, too. A good definition of entropy is “the tendency of a physical system to lose energy and coherence over time, such as a gas that expands and dissipates until there is little trace left” (Doherty, 1997).

How does this apply in marriage? Years ago, President Spencer W. Kimball taught that “many couples permit their marriages to become stale and their love to grow cold like old bread or worn-out jokes or cold gravy” (See Kimball, 2002). More recently, scholar William Doherty (1997) commented about the entropic family, and by extension, the entropic couple who, through a lack of attention to their inner life, gradually loses a sense of cohesion over the years. Couples gradually drift apart because they lack infusions of bonding and intimacy. They become victims of the cold gravy syndrome.

Research suggests that all marriages are subject to this kind of entropy, erosion, or disenchantment if neglected. The stress of unresolved issues and grievances and damaging communication and conflict resolution skills can pile up over time until couples have had enough and want their marriage to end (Gottman & Silver, 1994).

How does a couple keep their marriage entropy-resistant through the years? President David O. McKay (McKay, 2003) taught, ”I would like to urge continued courtship, and apply this to grown people. Too many couples have come to the altar of marriage looking upon the marriage ceremony as the end of courtship instead of the beginning of an eternal courtship.”

What are some things couples can do to keep courtship alive through the years?

#### Attend to the Little Things

President James E. Faust (2007) taught, “In the enrichment of marriage, the big things are the little things. There must be constant appreciation for each other and a thoughtful demonstration of gratitude. A couple must encourage and help each other grow. Marriage is a joint quest for the good, the beautiful, and the divine.”

#### Be Intentional About Doing Things Every Day to Enrich the Marriage

Couples who are continuing courtship have special activities they purposefully engage in to continue to build and maintain their relationship. Some scholars call these activities rituals. Doherty (1997) has suggested three kinds of rituals to help couples: connection rituals,to maintain the bond between two people; love rituals, to keep the romance alive in marriage; and celebration rituals, to show honor, love, and respect for each other. An example of a connection ritual is time set aside for a couple’s validating conversations, mentioned earlier; an example of a love ritual is an annual private getaway for the couple’s wedding anniversary; a celebration ritual could be an exciting and creative gift each spouse gives the other on birthdays every year.

#### Spend at Least Five Hours a Week Strengthening your Relationship

In his studies, Gottman found that couples spending at least five hours a week on their relationship fared the best over time (Gottman & Silver, 1999). However, in order to succeed it is important for the couple to accomplish these four things during those five hours: (a) learn one thing that happened in your spouse’s life each day, (b) have a stress-reducing conversation at the end of each day, (c) do something special every day to show affection and appreciation, and (d) have a weekly date.

### Conclusion

With the various foundational processes of successful marriage working together, couples are more likely to experience the kind of marriage that President Kimball (2002) described as “more an exultant ecstasy than the human mind can conceive.” Deliberate, careful attention to these marital processes assures that marriage—a relationship central to Heavenly Father’s plan—receives the care and attention it deserves. While a member of the Seventy, Elder F. Burton Howard (2003) underscored the kind of treatment marriage deserves if it is expected to last indefinitely:

If you want something to last forever, you treat it differently. You shield it and protect it. You never abuse it. You don’t expose it to the elements. You don’t make it common or ordinary. If it ever becomes tarnished, you lovingly polish it until it gleams like new. It becomes special because you have made it so, and it grows more beautiful and precious as time goes by. Eternal marriage is just like that. We need to treat it just that way.

### Equal Partnerships in Marriage

Valerie M. Hudson and Richard B Miller

By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners.

### The Doctrinal Concept of Equal Partnership between Men and Women

The restored gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims a doctrine that is not widely held in the fallen world, even among certain Christian sects, and that is the doctrine of sincerely equal partnership between men and women, here and in the eternities. Indeed, from our extensive research and reading, we may go so far as to say that this doctrine, mentioned explicitly in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” is revolutionary and distinguishes The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a unique belief system.

### What Is Meant by the Term Equality?

Before we delve into that rich doctrinal context, it is important to understand what Latter-day Saints mean by the term equality. Equality is all too often used to mean identity; that is, that two equal things must be identical to each other. Such usage represents a fallen and harmful understanding of equality that is espoused by Lucifer, who passionately wants all to be “like . . . himself ” (2 Nephi 2:27). In contrast, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin taught:

The Lord did not people the earth with a vibrant orchestra of personalities only to value the piccolos of the world. Every instrument is precious and adds to the complex beauty of the symphony. All of Heavenly Father’s children are different in some degree, yet each has his own beautiful sound that adds depth and richness to the whole (Wirthlin, 2008).

Even though we all aspire to be of “one heart and one mind” (Moses 7:18), apparently that does not mean that we will all be identical. Since the proclamation teaches that gender is “an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose” (¶ 2), gender or sex presents at least one way we will differ in the eternities. Indeed, as we will explore in a moment, without gender difference there could not be divinity. Yet, Latter-day Saint theology does not teach that gender difference superimposes a hierarchy between men and women. Think of all we believe to be true about the equality, both here and in Zion, of men and women in God’s kingdom: equal in blessings; equal in power, intelligence, wisdom, dignity, respect, giving counsel, giving consent, agency, value, potential, authority, exalted fullness, virtue, spirituality, and spiritual gifts; equal in temporal things in Zion; and equal heirs with Christ. When we read this list, do we unconsciously redefine equality as identity and thus struggle with these concepts? If so, it is time to work on a personal definition of equal that eschews both intimations of identity or hierarchy. One gender does not have greater eternal possibility than the other (Moses 2:26–27; 2 Nephi 26:28, 33). While serving as a member of the Seventy, Elder Earl C. Tingey said:

You must not misunderstand what the Lord meant when Adam was told he was to have a helpmeet. A helpmeet is a companion suited to or equal to us. We walk side by side with a helpmeet, not one before or behind the other. A helpmeet results in an absolute equal partnership between a husband and a wife. Eve was to be equal to Adam as a husband and wife are to be equal to each other (Tingey, 2008).

As this passage suggests, without understanding the story of Adam and Eve in light of the restored gospel, much that we understand about God’s plan for the equal relationship between the genders is apt to go awry. For this reason, we turn to the story of our first mortal parents.

### Eve and Adam and the Plan of Happiness

Adam and Eve and all their descendants were created spiritually and physically, male and female, in the image of our heavenly parents. The proclamation states: “All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents” (¶ 2). Indeed, the restored gospel teaches us that the term “God” means an exalted man and exalted woman united in the everlasting covenant of marriage. Heavenly Father is no bachelor; indeed, Heavenly Father could not be a god if he were unmarried (D&C 132:19–20). Therefore, Eve was not created in the image of a divine man and was no deformed or inferior version thereof: Eve was created in the image of a divine woman. The body, parts, and passions of a woman, then, are as divine as the body, parts, and passions of a man. A woman’s body is no curse, but rather the fullest material expression of her divine potential.

Many religions and sects have interpreted the story of the Garden of Eden as the story of Eve’s spiritual inferiority and venality (Young, 1999). However, the Latter-day Saint view rejects this interpretation in wholesale fashion. Indeed, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks has declared, “Some Christians condemn Eve for her act, concluding that she and her daughters are somehow flawed by it. Not the Latter-day Saints! Informed by revelation, we celebrate Eve’s act and honor her wisdom and courage in the great episode called the Fall (Oaks, 1993).”

To understand what Elder Oaks meant by this, we have to remember that Latter-day Saints do not view the Fall as a tragedy. Yes, the Fall brought the possibility of evil and affliction into the world, but, as the proclamation teaches, gaining a body and earthly experience are necessary for progression toward our eternal destiny to become like our heavenly parents. The only failure in the Garden of Eden would have been if Adam and Eve had not partaken of the forbidden fruit. When we picture our great ancestors Adam and Eve partaking of the fruit, with the whole host of heaven watching, likely we envision shouts of joy among that host, not tears of grief. Furthermore, Elder Oaks teaches that partaking of the fruit was not a sin, but a necessary transgression “[Eve’s] act, whatever its nature, was formally a transgression, but eternally a glorious necessity to open the doorway toward eternal life. . . . [The Prophet] Joseph Smith taught that [Eve did not] sin, because God had decreed it” (Oaks, 1993).

As we step back and contemplate that there were two trees in the Garden of Eden, we might begin to see how this suggests a strong and equal complementarity between the divine responsibilities of men and women in the great plan of happiness. If the fruit of the tree of life represents those ordinances of salvation and exaltation that are given to the worthy sons and daughters of God by the sons of God, perhaps the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is a special gift as well, a special gift given to all worthy sons and daughters of God by God’s daughters. If we view the fruit of the first tree as representing the passage of a soul into mortality and full material agency, we notice the similarity to the great gift of birth given by women to those who kept their first estate, as echoed in the Spanish phrase for giving birth, dar a luz, meaning to give the light.

Eve was not created second to show that she was an appendage or afterthought to the man Adam. Eve also had an essential role in inaugurating the plan of happiness. Only a daughter of God could open the door to mortal life for God’s children. Eve was no airhead, no evildoer; no, Eve perhaps was the most courageous and wise of all God’s daughters, and as Elder Oaks (Oaks, 1993) has said, she is to be celebrated for this wisdom and courage.

When viewed in the light of the restored gospel, we see that not only was God not unhappy with Eve’s choice, we also see that God approved her choice. And so God pronounced that, yes, she would enter mortality and she would have children. These are great blessings, just as were the blessings to Adam of having to work instead of having Eden provide for all his needs. And then God reassured Eve that Adam would play his role in administering the fruit of the second tree, by telling Eve that Adam would rule with her—meaning that he would prove himself worthy to be her equal companion. As Elder Bruce C. Hafen, a member of the Seventy at the time, and his wife, Marie, explained,

Genesis 3:16 states that Adam is to rule over Eve, but this doesn’t make Adam a dictator. . . . Over in rule over uses the Hebrew bet, which means ruling with, not ruling over. . . . The concept of interdependent, equal partners is well-grounded in the doctrine of the restored gospel. Eve was Adam’s [help meet] (Genesis 2:18). The original Hebrew for meet means that Eve was adequate for, or equal to, Adam. She wasn’t his servant or his subordinate (Hafen & Hafen, 2007).

Just as Adam hearkened first to Eve, accepted from her the fruit of the first tree, and entered into mortality, so Eve would hearken to Adam, accept from him the fruit of the second tree, and enter into eternal life. When viewing the entire plan of happiness, we see that the man and the woman play equally powerful and equally important roles in the plan. Each is to hearken to the other for the plan to work. Each stands before the other in the sight of God as equals.

### Equality and Love in Latter-Day Saint Doctrine

In Latter-day Saint theology, there is a crucial relationship between equality and love, which we must not overlook. Think about the love of God and our Savior. We readily acknowledge that we are not their equals. But, heretical as it is to many other faiths, we believe that God ultimately hopes, plans, and acts to create a path for his children to become as He is. In the end, God hopes we will become His friends, not His servants or perpetual inferiors (D&C 84:77). The truest, most noble love is the love of a superior for an inferior where the superior makes every sacrifice so that the inferior might, if willing, rise to become an equal. And that is the wonder of the Savior’s Atonement: He, a superior, suffered and died so that all who will, males and females, may become equal heirs with Him (D&C 88:107) and receive all power and the fullness of God (D&C 76:54–56, 94–95; 132:20). In this highest realm, the Savior “makes them equal in power, and in might, and in dominion” (D&C 76:95). Parental love in mortality emulates godly love. Those with healthy parental love make sacrifices so that their children may one day stand as their equals, and be not only their children, but also their friends.

There are also relationships in which people come together not as superiors and inferiors with the hope that the inferiors might be made equal; there are relationships in which people are to come together as presumed equals. The terms used in the scriptures help us understand that equality is a commandment: “It must needs be that there be an organization of my people . . . that you may be equal in the bonds of heavenly things, yea, and earthly things also” (D&C 78:3, 5; see also 38:24–27). And why is the presumption of equality necessary? That we may truly love our neighbors, for if we cannot envision them as our equals—as ourselves—we cannot really love them. A Zion community lives the fullness of this commandment. Zion, as we know, is a place where the Saints are equal in both heavenly and temporal things, as noted above (D&C 70:14; 78:5–7). Zion must come together presuming the equality of each person and then acting on it to remove any discordance between the ideal and the lived situation.

Thus it is in the units of Zion—the marriages in that community. Spouses are to enter their marriage relationship convinced of each other’s equality. They cannot form a relationship that will be blessed by God if they come to the marriage altar unsure of each other’s equality, doubting it, or not even thinking about how it should order their relations. According to Latter-day Saint doctrine, the first utterance after God married Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was Adam’s bold declaration of Eve’s equality with him—that they would be “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Adam even put in an injunction against patrilocal marriage, where wives live with their husband’s family. Such a living situation has an inherent ability to turn a marriage into an unequal one favoring the husband (Genesis 2:24).

### Stewards in Equal Partnership

Family stewardships should be understood in terms of their responsibilities—obligations to one’s spouse, not power over one’s spouse. As we noted above, according to the Hebrew translation, Genesis 3:16 is more accurately understood to mean Adam ruling with, not ruling over Eve. President Hunter said: “The Lord intended that the wife be . . . a companion equal and necessary in full partnership. . . . For a man to operate independent of or without regard to the feelings and counsel of his wife in governing the family is to exercise unrighteous dominion” (Hunter, 1994). Gender equality is not some gratuitous element of God’s vision of marriage; we are commanded to presume the equality of our spouse as we approach the marriage altar, for otherwise we cannot truly love her or him. It is hoped that we then deepen that vision of our spouse’s equality in the divine work that is procreation and parenthood. Indeed, given that we believe Adam and Eve lived by this law, a marriage reflecting the equality of the spouses is the ultimate traditional marriage.

We acknowledge that different cultures across the globe and across time have viewed the relationship between husbands and wives in many different ways, often at odds with the true doctrine of equal partnership. But General Authorities have stated explicitly that priesthood holders must reject hierarchical marriage. In a conference address, Elder Richard G. Scott (2008) made this plain:

In some cultures, tradition places a man in a role to dominate, control, and regulate all family affairs. That is not the way of the Lord. In some places the wife is almost owned by her husband, as if she were another of his personal possessions. That is a cruel, mistaken vision of marriage encouraged by Lucifer that every priesthood holder must reject. It is founded on the false premise that a man is somehow superior to a woman. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Tradition is not something to be blindly revered in the Latter-day Saint Church. The Book of Mormon is replete with the phrase “the foolish traditions of the fathers,” lamenting their falseness and the lasting harm done thereby to societies. Where tradition is at odds with Latter-day Saint doctrine, the tradition must be relinquished. According to Elder Scott, there are traditions of marriage in the world that are wrong because they deny the equality of women.

Moreover, contrary to scripture and the teachings of Latter-day prophets, some men and women have interpreted presiding to mean that after equal counsel, equal consent is not necessary because the presider,or husband, has the right of final say. But President Boyd K. Packer (1998) explained: “In the Church there is a distinct line of authority. We serve where called by those who preside over us. In the home it is a partnership with husband and wife equally yoked together, sharing in decisions, always working together.”

In considering the equal partnership envisioned by the proclamation on the family, Elder L. Tom Perry (2004) puts it eloquently, “There is not a president or a vice president in a family.” We have co-presidents working “together eternally for the good of their family.” In other words, “they are on equal footing. They plan and organize the affairs of the family jointly and unanimously as they move forward.”

The stewardship of priesthood does not superimpose a hierarchical relationship over the God-ordained equality between husband and wife. President James E. Faust (1996, pg. 6) taught that “every father is to his family a patriarch and every mother a matriarch as co-equals in their distinctive parental roles.” We emphasize that the patriarchal priesthood is not so called to imply a hierarchy between men and women. Instead, as President Ezra Taft Benson taught, it is called patriarchal because in ancient days it was handed down from faithful father to faithful son and frequently still is today, Patri is Latin for father. (D&C 107:40–42). President Benson also taught that the patriarchal order is the family order of government, presided over by mothers and fathers (Benson, 1985). One of the most revolutionary aspects of the restored gospel is its ability to help us envision difference without hierarchy, distinctiveness without inequality. This is what the proclamation calls upon us to hold as the ideal relationship between husbands and wives.

A marriage of equal partners will also be one in which the partners help one another in their stewardships, indeed, are obligated to help one another as equal partners (¶ 7). This assistance includes help with housework and childcare. President Boyd K. Packer (1989) said, “There is no task, however menial, connected with the care of babies, the nurturing of children, or with the maintenance of the home that is not [the husband’s] equal obligation.” Likewise, women assist their husbands, directly and indirectly, with the burdens of supporting a family.

Of course, marriage is not only about responsibilities; it is also about dreams, both shared and individual. After his wife’s death, President Gordon B. Hinckley shared some tender moments from their marriage. He described one of the most poignant moments this way: “In our old age my beloved companion said to me quietly one evening, ‘You have always given me wings to fly, and I have loved you for it’” (2004). There must be room enough in a marriage for the dreams of both the husband and the wife and sweet encouragement from each other to follow those dreams.

Among the Latter-day Saints, marriages should not be built around the domination of one partner over the other, whether that domination be male over female or female over male. Such is not the vision of sincerely equal partnership to which we are called of God. Both husband and wife have a sacred obligation to refrain from thoughts and actions that might undermine an equal partnership. Thoughts or actions that tend toward the domineering or the subservient are to be avoided by both spouses.

The doctrine of equal partnership in marriage points powerfully and gloriously to truth. Thus, it should not surprise us that social science research, even with its limitations, confirms the importance and benefits of equal partnership in marital and family relationships. In this next section, we briefly review what social science scholars have learned about equal partnership.

### Social Science Research Findings on Equal Partnership in Marriage

When addressing the issue of partnership in marriage, family scholars use the concept of relationship power, usually defined as the capacity to influence one’s spouse (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983). In a marital relationship that is established on principles of partnership, both partners are able to mutually influence each other. A male-dominated relationship, on the other hand, is characterized by the husband having more influence in the relationship than the wife. A female-dominated relationship occurs when the wife has more influence than the husband.

Historically, most marriages were male-dominated. Women had few rights in society, and it was assumed that the husband had the right to exercise influence over his wife. Most people believed that part of the husband’s role was to make important decisions in the family (Cott, 2000). As he often does, Satan took the divine doctrine of the patriarchal order, which honors both men and women as equal partners, and twisted it so that it was used as a rationalization to oppress women, both in society and marriage. Thus, for most of human history, women lived in a fallen patriarchal society that subordinated them to men. Unfortunately this remains true for many today. The fallen patriarchal society was the prevailing attitude and norm until a few decades ago, when societal changes in many nations began to impact the traditional power structure of marriages. The modern women’s movement, which began in the 1960s and gained considerable momentum in the 1970s, had a major influence on the role of women in society as well as in marriage. This movement motivated many people to consciously question the justification for placing women in a subordinate role (Amato et al., 2007). Outgrowths of the women’s movement were the abilities of women to attain greater education and to work in a wider range of professions and occupations. As women became better educated, they were less willing to accept subordinated positions in their marital relationships. In addition, as women were able to work in more prestigious and higher-paying jobs, they were less dependent upon men for their financial well-being. Hence, women became less tolerant of male-dominated relationships, and they had the financial resources to leave relationships that were oppressive.

Societal attitudes about the power structure of marriage have continued to change over time, and today the majority of men and women in Western cultures believe that marriages should be characterized as a partnership, with both spouses having equal influence in the relationship (Thornton & Young‐DeMarco, 2001). Even in the last few decades, there has been an increase in the proportion of U.S. marriages that are characterized as equal partnerships. A national study in the United States found the percentage of men who reported that they shared decision-making equally with their wives increased from 51% in 1980 to 63% in 2000. In the same study, 47%of women in 1980 reported that decision-making was equally shared in their relationship, while 64% reported equality in 2000 (Amato et al., 2007). And among those 36%who reported that decision-making was not shared, 20% of women reported that they more frequently had the final say, while 16% reported that their husbands more frequently had the final say.

### Benefits of Equal Partnership

Research has demonstrated that couples who have an equal partnership have happier relationships, better individual well-being, more effective parenting practices, and better- functioning children. Researchers have consistently found that couples who share power are more satisfied and have better overall marital quality than couples with a dominant spouse (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983). An important reason for equal partners having greater satisfaction is that they have less negative interaction and more positive interaction in their relationship (Gray-Little et al., 1996). In addition, couples that are equal partners are significantly less likely to experience verbal aggression and physical violence (Sagrestano et al., 1999). Moreover, there is evidence that equal partners are more satisfied with the quality of the physical intimacy in their relationship (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004).

Research also indicates that the personal well-being of spouses is greatest in equal partnerships. There is substantial evidence that spouses who feel that they lack influence in their relationship,those who don’t have a voice, are more likely to experience symptoms of depression (Halloran, 1998). This is especially true among women (Byrne & Carr, 2000).

Equal partners are generally better parents. Parents with less relationship equality are less likely to work together as a team in parenting their children (Hughes et al., 2004). They are less likely to support each other and form a united front when disciplining their children. They are more likely to triangulate their children, which entails bringing one or more children into the parent’s struggles and having the children take sides (Lindahl et al., 2004). With research indicating that couples who have unequal partnerships have more stressful marriages and are less effective parents, it is not surprising that children who grow up in homes where the parents have an unequal relationship are at higher risk for depression, anxiety, drug abuse, and delinquency (Lindahl et al., 2004)

### Assessing Equal Partnership

As we recognize the importance of equality in marital relationships, it is useful to be able to assess the balance of power in relationships. When assessing equality in a marital relationship, scholars have differentiated between power processes and power outcomes (Cromwell, & Olsen, 1975). Power processes are the patterns of interaction among couples, the communication techniques that they use with each other when they are discussing decisions to be made (Babcock et al., 1993). These techniques include their level of assertiveness, listening to their spouse’s point of view, domination, and control. A scale was developed to assess the degree to which a person perceives that his or her spouse tries to dominate the process of decision-making (Miller et al., 2008; see the scale items below).

Notice that the statements refer to assessment of the spouse’s behavior. That is because family scholars have learned that people tend to give more honest answers when they are reporting on someone else’s behavior rather than their own. We are often unaware of some of our own behavior and we often minimize our weaknesses. On the other hand, we are generally very aware of others’ behavior and are quick to recognize their weaknesses. Agreeing with these statements indicates that a marriage (or dating relationship) is characterized by an imbalance of relationship power. Disagreement with these statements indicates an equal partnership in terms of power processes.

Power outcomes refer to which spouse typically makes the final decision when there are differing opinions between the spouses (Babcock et al., 1993). When there is a disagreement, who wins? Which spouse usually has the final say? In an equal partnership, spouses continue to discuss the issue and negotiate until they agree on a decision. They both have veto power, meaning that both have to agree on the decision. In an unequal relationship, on the other hand, one partner tends to have the final say and can make decisions without the spouse’s consent or agreement. A power outcomes scale has been developed that assesses the distribution of power between spouses (Miller et al., 2008). Agreeing with the statements suggests an unequal relationship, while disagreeing with the statements indicates an equal partnership. Readers may want to use these scales to assess their own relationships.

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| --- |
| **Assessing Power in Relationships** |
| Power Processes Scale | Power Outcomes Scale |
| 1. My partner tends to discount my opinion.2. My partner does not listen to me.3. When I want to talk about a problem in our relationship, my partner often refuses to talk with me about it.4. My partner tends to dominate our conversations.5. When we do not agree on an issue, my partner gives me the cold shoulder.6. I do not feel free to express my opinion about issues in our relationship.7. My partner makes decisions that affect our family without talking to me first.8. My partner and I do not talk about problems until we both agree on a solution.9. I feel like my partner tries to control me. | 1. When it comes to money, my partner’s opinion usually wins out.2. When it comes to children, my partner’sopinion usually wins out.3. It often seems my partner can get away with things in our relationship that I can never get away with.4. I have no choice but to do what my partner wants.5. My partner has more influence in our relationship than I do.6. When disagreements arise in our relationship, my partner’s opinion usually wins out. |

### Conclusion

Our Heavenly Parents wish us joy in our journey of becoming as they are. One of the most precious wellsprings of that joy is a sincerely equal partnership between husband and wife. As we have seen, the family proclamation’s exhortation to equal partnership in marriage does not mean that husband and wife are identical, but it does mean that in a very real and meaningful sense they must stand as equals before each other to find the joy that is their heritage in marriage. For Latter-day Saints, equal partnership in marriage is a commandment, not an alternative lifestyle. The reason is simple that men and women might have joy! (2 Nephi 2:25). Social science research findings confirm that better physical and emotional health, better marital relationships, and better parenting and outcomes for children are the fruits of equal partnership in marriage.

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