

The Blessing of Family Councils

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Wasn't general conference wonderful! We're so blessed. Isn't it a beautiful day? I'm so happy to be with you. (Please don't adjust your TV set . . . this is the way I really look.) I know you have come with the expectation of receiving help with some of the challenges in your lives. I know it's not easy being a parent. I've prayed for help in preparing, wanting this particular workshop to be meaningful and helpful. Most of all, I've prayed that the **Spirit** will be with us, giving us instruction and guidance.

Our topic is "The Blessing of Family Councils." I've chosen to begin with a verse from the Book of Mormon, substituting the word family for the word church. Mornoi 6:5—"And the [family] did meet together oft, . . . to speak one with another concerning the welfare of their souls." This topic is not just for families where there are parents and children living at home. It is my hope that we can all learn some principles and ideas that will make a difference for us, no matter what our circumstance. You might live alone, as I do, or have a family with a single parent, an empty nest, a nest which has been "restocked," mixed-faith and/or mixed-activity situation, a "yours-mine-and-ours" group, or some other interesting combination.

There are three references I have found particularly helpful: One is the *Ensign* for June 1985; it is filled with wonderful articles for parents. Another is the *Ensign* for February 1985 with an excellent article entitled "Working Together in Family Councils." And, of course, there is the inspired book by Elder M. Russell Ballard, *Counseling with Our Councils: Learning to Minister Together in the Church and in the Family*. I also encourage you to talk with others about what they're doing with family council. Share ideas. It's "catching!" From your own experience, you have ideas that are just as good as anyone else's.

I suppose the first family council we know anything about is the one that was held when Heavenly Father's plan of happiness was presented to us. It must have been a wonderful council, because it's reported that the sons of God shouted for joy. In the book of Job (38:4,7), it says, "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" Wow!

As Elder Dallin H. Oaks put it: *We may truly say that the gospel plan originated in the council of an eternal family; it is implemented through our earthly families and has its destiny in our eternal families. Small wonder The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is known as a family-centered church.* (Dallin H. Oaks, "Parental Leadership in the Family," *Ensign*, June 1985, p. 7.)

- **What Is a Family Council?**

Without being misunderstood, I want to say that a family council is a formal family meeting. In using the word *formal*, I certainly don't want to imply stuffy or boring or unpleasant. One of the best descriptions comes from a little booklet called "Family Guidebook," page 7. *Parents may want to call family members together in family council meetings. Families can use these meetings to set family goals, resolve family problems, discuss finances, make plans, support and strengthen each other, and pray for each other. A council can be held whenever a need exists. Families may want to hold a meeting each Sunday or in connection with family home evening. Respect for the opinions and feelings of others is vital to the success of these meetings. Those who hold regular family council meetings say they couldn't get along without them.*

- **How Is a Family Council Different from Family Home Evening?**

"When we gather to learn the gospel and have [activities] together, we call it family home evening. When we gather to discuss, make decisions, and plan, we call it family council." (*When Thou Art Converted, Strengthen Thy Brethren*, Melchizedek Priesthood study guide, 1974–75, p. 167.)

- **What Have Our Church Leaders Taught About the Importance of Family Council?**

President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "I believe the family to be the basic and most important unit in society" (*Ensign*, August 1992, p. 2).

President Spencer W. Kimball: *Concerning the governing of our families, we have been correctly taught that the family council is the most basic council of the Church. Under the direction of the father and mother, who should also counsel together, family councils may discuss family matters, discuss family finances, make plans, and support and strengthen family members. Children participate in family council. The Brethren have stated that "an atmosphere of listening, honest communication, and respect for the opinions and feelings of others is vital to the success of these meetings."* (*The Teachings of Spencer W Kimball*, p. 343.)

Elder M. Russell Ballard: *No longer can any ONE leader or for that matter any parent attempt to provide what is so desperately needed in the lives of our families and Church members. If we are to succeed in leading our Heavenly Father's children toward eternal life, we must counsel together and help each other.* (M. Russell Ballard, *Counseling with Our Councils: Learning to Minister Together in the Church and in the Family*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1997.)

And I've included one reference from more than 30 years ago (1969) to show that the idea of family council isn't new.

Elder Mark E. Petersen: *The Church has always advised family council meetings as well as home evenings, when family matters may be discussed plainly and frankly, but in a spirit of love and cooperation.* (*The Way to Peace*. Bookcraft, 1969. pp. 252–253.)

- **Some General Comments About Family Council**

Parents need to give instruction on the purpose of the family council and how it's different from family home evening. It's also helpful to explain the difference between *council* and *counsel*.

Council—An assembly called together for any purpose; an assembly or meeting for consultation or advice.

Counsel—Take counsel with others; deliberate; give or offer advice; recommend.

Alma 37:37 (Alma's counsel to his son Helaman): "Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good. . . ." (An important way to look at the blessing of prayer).

I've talked to enough families to recognize that from very informal to very formal, there are all kinds of ways to organize and carry out a family council. You can go from a discussion in the car or around the dinner table to Roberts' Rules of Order! Many have found that it's effective to do some organizing. For example, someone could be assigned to keep minutes. It's helpful to have a record of what was discussed, what was decided, any assignments given, and so on. Some actually have the minutes available before the next council and give everyone a chance for "additions or corrections." (Think what everyone's learning!)

Elder Dallin H. Oaks: *The stresses and problems of modern living pose great problems for parents. These are suggested by the bittersweet definition of a family as "a group of people who have keys to the same house." One of the great influences that unified families in prior times was the experience of struggling together in pursuit of a common goal— such as taming the wilderness or establishing a business. This principle is so important that one commentator suggested, "If the family lacks a common crisis, hire a wolf to howl at the door" (Time, Dec. 15, 1967, p. 31). Most parents have enough crises without hiring any more. But they may need to identify them and organize their families in unified efforts to resolve them.* (Dallin H. Oaks, "Parental Leadership in the Family," *Ensign*, June 1985, pp. 7, 9).

Family council is a way to anticipate—to look ahead and prevent (or at least minimize) some of the problems that might come from a lack of planning (or thinking ahead). Parents need to counsel together ahead of time so that they come to the family council united. It makes a difference. It's important for them to pray together for inspiration about family needs and priorities, and to receive guidance in leading the family and using the family council as a helpful tool to accomplish important goals. Parents can discuss and decide ways in which they can give love, help, and encouragement to individual family members. They can decide which matters will be **negotiable**—which matters will come up for a family vote. To negotiate is to confer together for the purpose of arranging some matter by mutual agreement.

The Parents Who Let the Children Help Name the Babies (I've wondered what it was like to go through life as Spot, Fido, Lassie, or Big Duke.)

The Elder Whose Father Was Offered a Promotion

Parents need to determine which items are better handled in individual (private) discussions or some other setting rather than in a family council. For example, some situations or topics may concern just one child.

The council should be held often enough to meet the needs of the family. Most people whom I talked to felt that Sunday was the best day to meet. Others said it worked to hold family council right before family home evening; although as the children grew older and there was more to discuss and decide, it seemed better to separate the two activities so neither got "lost."

- **What Are Some Strategies That Can Help Families Hold Effective Councils?**

The family needs to decide when, where, **why**, and how often to hold family council.

Ground Rules

The family needs to set some "ground rules" for how to proceed. My friend Peggy says the two rules for their family council are that everyone has a chance to speak, and everyone is respected. The family needs to decide how voting should take place. They need to decide whether voting should be unanimous, or whether a simple majority is sufficient. Some families say they have "secret ballots" when issues are sensitive. Make sure participation is **voluntary**. Respect for each individual's agency is critical in counseling together.

Prayer

Through prayer, the family should invite the Spirit to be present. The council should be opened and closed with prayer.

Agenda

It's helpful to have an agenda so everyone can keep track of what's going on (or an easel or white board or some other way of having topics written for everyone to see). The family discusses and decides: What will our family council agenda consist of? What are the "standing items?" (hymn, prayer, minutes, calendar, and so on). An agenda can help the family choose which items to focus on. All family members should be able to suggest agenda items. Perhaps there could be a place designated in the home where suggestions could be written and collected.

Record (Minutes or Notes)

It may help to have someone take notes on the discussions, decisions, activities, assignments, and plans so that there is a record. It can become part of the family's history.

Planning and Keeping a Calendar

A family council is an ideal time to schedule and correlate individual and family activities. A calendar can help keep track of all events and avoid conflicts. As family members list coming activities, the events are recorded on the master family calendar. Have squares on the calendar

large enough to record appointments, activities, events, birthdays, and other special family occasions. It's helpful to have a central place for this calendar (as well as a place to leave notes for each other).

Decisions and Voting

All family members need to be involved in discussions and decisions. After each family member has expressed opinions or feelings, it's time to vote. One family had a proposal come up from their teenagers to change their curfew from 10:00 to 10:30 p.m. There was a chance for anyone who wished to comment to do so, and then a vote was taken. The proposal passed unanimously. The curfew in that family for the teens is now 10:30 p.m. There may be issues on which the family cannot agree. Parents can suggest that each family member take more time (if there is no urgency to the decision) to further consider an issue and pray about it. If the family still can't agree, the parents, with their wisdom, inspiration, and experience, may need to make the final decision. As they carefully consider all the input from all family members, children can hopefully see that their input is valued. A family council is not the place to solve every single family problem. There may be matters that parents should decide even without family discussion. And there are things about which a vote would be inappropriate (such as "can we drop some of the Ten Commandments?").

Inclusion

Make sure each family member feels included and important, respected, and appreciated. There may be times when assignments would be appropriate for reports at the next family council. Assignments could include things such as suggestions for solutions to a family challenge, or ideas on where to go for a family vacation. Sometimes it's easier to participate when you have a chance to think ahead of time about what you want to say. There may be some good questions to get discussions started.

- Is there anything you can think of which can make things better here at home?
- What are some things we're doing well?
- What are some ways in which we've improved?
- What would you like our family to do to help bring us closer together?

It may take some experience before all family members learn to respect each others' opinions. Let's say a younger child in a family suggests going to leggo land for the family vacation. The older children need to learn not to say things like "That's a stupid idea!" Opening up things for a vote may mean some family members end up doing things that may not have been their first choice.

The Family Vacation

I remember a missionary telling me that his parents had made the annual vacation a matter on which the family voted. The parents were always "voted down" by the children. But as the children grew older, they realized what was happening, and conspired together to vote for whatever the parents suggested. **Funny!** Allowing everyone to give input before deciding on an issue will help family members become more courteous and help them see that there is more than one way of looking at things.

Confidentiality

Some matters discussed in family council may be confidential. Family members need to know that these items are confidential and should not be discussed outside the family. When this rule is strictly observed, feelings of loyalty and unity within the family increase.

Extended and Blended Families

Adjustments and accommodations are needed depending on who's living at home (grandparents, for example). Some discussions and decisions are made by and about family members (including extended family) who are not currently living in the home. Include information and plans about family members who may be away from home (mission, school, etc.). Include information and ideas about keeping in touch with and helping extended family members. Family council can help blended families to become closer and bring a sense of belonging and unity.

Mini-Council

Each day, perhaps at breakfast [what's that??] or just before family prayer or scripture study, the family can hold a mini-family-council to make sure everyone knows what's happening that day and to see if plans have changed. This is a time to make needed adjustments, and to make sure everyone knows about them.

• Some Things Which Can Be Included in the Family Council

Determine the family schedule for family prayer, family scripture study, family home evening, mealtime, regular family activities, and service.

Discuss and determine family values. (For example, the family could discuss together how to keep the Sabbath Day holy, or how to more effectively live the law of the fast.)

Develop family/home rules and procedures and decide on the consequences for ignoring or breaking the rules.

- How can we have a more orderly home?
- How much television should we watch and which programs should we select?
- What can we do as a family to eliminate quarreling?
- How can we divide up the work so everybody feels good about it?

Discuss family challenges and options for solutions, resolve differences. Go over plans and goals for the family. What are our priorities? Some families have a motto or even a mission statement.

You may include the following:

Have a discussion and decide about dedicating the home.

When and what should our regular family activities be?

Plan activities such as dates and private interviews.

Work and counsel together to make important family decisions.

Recognize successes and achievements of family members as well as upcoming opportunities for attendance at games, concerts, and other activities.

Help all to understand the family budget (Monopoly money).

About 1954 When Mom and Dad Called Us All Together To Tell Us We Were Completely Debt-Free

Would it make a difference in your family if you were to help each member understand what our donation slip represents? Do they pay their tithing and understand why? Do all family members

join together in living the law of the fast? How about donations to the missionary fund and for sharing the Book of Mormon? To the building of Temples, Humanitarian Aid, and the Perpetual Education Fund?

Discuss how to share the work and responsibilities in the home (I've always loved the word *chores*.) Beverly Neuer Feldman notes that “when you let children accomplish small chores, you provide pure, unadulterated ego gratification: they feel capable and essential to the well-being of your family.” As they grow older, they gradually develop the self-discipline to complete “not-so-fun” jobs. This self-discipline also aids them as they work outside the home and as they manage their own finances. (See “Raising Money-Wise Kids,” *Reader's Digest*, Nov. 1991, pp. 147–50.)

Plan for family service opportunities

Establish family traditions

Karen Ashton said they established a tradition in their family of “tuck-in time,” where they spent some time with each child as they got ready to go to sleep. It was a wonderful chance to talk with and listen to each one.

Discuss how to celebrate Christmas and other holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries

Hero Dinners

Give encouragement and help to one another.

Share expressions of praise and gratitude.

Consider spiritual, temporal, emotional, social, and economic needs.

The family can discuss ways in which counsel from the prophet and other Church leaders will be followed/implemented. What a wonderful way to help family members realize the importance not just of hearing or reading, but also of **doing**.

• Seeking First the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness

A final purpose of family councils is to further the work of the gospel within the family unit—to live the gospel in the home.

President Spencer W. Kimball: *Church programs strengthen individuals and families. Our success, individually and as a church, will largely be determined by how faithfully we focus on living the gospel in the home, priesthood quorums, and auxiliary organizations. Even wards and stakes exist primarily to help members live the gospel in the home. People are more important than programs, and Church programs should always support and never detract from gospel-centered family activities.*

The family council can be an opportunity to discuss and make plans for family history work, trips to a temple as a family, personal and family journals and histories

The family can work together on **preparedness** and **provident living**, including education, food storage, family finances, and well-being.

The family can make specific plans and fast and pray together about fellowshipping and missionary opportunities, including preparing for missions.

There are probably times when it would help to have the family discuss ways in which they can support each other in Church callings.

Perhaps councils can be arranged around the six areas listed in *Providing in the Lord's Way*. Don't stop just because you've left home (or moved). Have a council on a conference call or in a chat room (is that possible?). A family newsletter can be a form of a family council. We still gather from time to time. My assignment—to help Mom and Dad plan their funerals

- **What Are Some of the Blessings and Benefits of Family Councils?**

A deeper sense of belonging, involvement, and responsibilities

Stronger bonds of unity and love

An atmosphere of respect, understanding, and appreciation

Increased skills in many areas

Increased sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others

Ability to set and reach goals, evaluate progress, work through differences, and solve problems

Family members are more committed to family plans and goals because they have helped to formulate them. And all family members grow in spirituality, unity, solidarity, and love for one another. As the children see parental commitment to holding family councils, involving them in family decisions and plans and recognizing their achievements, they will begin to feel a sense of belonging and unity.

I know our Heavenly Father will bless our sincere, diligent efforts to call our family members together for the purpose of creating an honest and loving environment. The magnitude of our responsibilities as parents is made clear by a statement from President Spencer W. Kimball: *The time will come when only those who believe deeply and actively in the family will be able to preserve their families in the midst of the gathering evil around us* (*Ensign*, Nov. 1980, p. 4).

I am convinced the **family council**—the most basic council in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—can be a wonderful tool to bring and keep our families together, headed in the right direction—headed HOME. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.