



# For Newlyweds and Their Parents

*When children marry, a fundamental shift should occur in their relationship with their parents.*

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I know a couple who recently had a significant disagreement. Things said during the argument hurt both partners. But the problem was compounded when the wife called her parents and told them about the incident. She disclosed details of the argument, as well as some of her husband's faults. The parents, feeling protective of their daughter, reacted negatively toward their son-in-law. While the wife received comfort and support from her parents, she unwittingly created a larger problem.

Shortly afterward, the husband and wife cooled down, took shared responsibility for the argument, and apologized to each other. They forgave each other and became close again. The negative actions of the day would have been forgotten except for the continued negative feelings of the wife's parents. Not being part of the "making-up" process between the couple, the parents were still upset with their son-in-law. Their negative feelings toward him continued to

be a distress in the marriage long after the couple had resolved the argument.

## **Establishing Marital Boundaries**

It is important that newly married couples learn to develop appropriate relationships with their parents. Appropriate, in this sense, involves establishing definite marital boundaries. President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) taught that couples should protect their marriage relationship by not disclosing private marital issues to their parents—or anyone else. He said: "Being human, you may someday have differences of opinion resulting even in little quarrels. Neither of you will be so unfaithful to the other as to go back to your parents or friends and discuss with them your little differences. That would be gross disloyalty. Your intimate life is your own and must not be shared with or confided in others. You



will not go back to your people for sympathy, but will thresh out your own difficulties.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes, one spouse may confide in his or her parents even when there hasn’t been an argument. When making decisions, a husband or wife may confide in parents and rely more upon their advice than upon the spouse’s. Again, President Kimball taught that husbands and wives need to maintain appropriate boundaries around the marriage. He said: “Your married life should become independent of her folks and his folks. You love them more than ever; you cherish their counsel; you appreciate their association; but you live your own lives, being governed by your decisions.”<sup>2</sup>

One couple struggled in their relationship because the husband valued his father’s opinions more than he did his wife’s. When the couple was in the process of making a decision, such as buying a new car, they would discuss it together, but then the husband would

talk to his father and invariably follow whatever counsel his father gave, regardless of his wife’s opinion. This created tension in their marriage because she resented him for caring more about his father’s opinion than about hers.

President Gordon B. Hinckley taught that we need to “be fiercely loyal to one another” in marriage.<sup>3</sup> Over the years I have found it helpful to ask myself the question, “Deep down inside, am I more concerned about my parents’ feelings about this issue than my spouse’s feelings?” In a united marriage the husband and wife are always most concerned about each other’s feelings. As we prayerfully seek help from our Father in Heaven, problems can often be resolved without hurting anyone’s feelings. However, if a choice must be made, the spouse must take priority. President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) said: “Nothing except God Himself takes priority over your [spouse] in your life.”<sup>4</sup>

**L**atter-day prophets have taught that couples need to maintain appropriate boundaries around their marriage and be fiercely loyal to one another.

## Financial Independence

Another aspect of creating a strong marriage is becoming financially independent from both sets of parents. Although parents may choose to assist their newly married children in becoming established, perhaps by helping finance a college education or contributing to a down payment on their first home, married children should strive to become financially independent as soon as possible.

There are times when married couples may need financial assistance. It is important, though, not to provide too much aid and overindulge adult children. Church welfare principles enunciated nearly 70 years ago provide important guidance to help parents who are wrestling with the issue of providing financial assistance to their married children. President Heber J. Grant (1856–1945) taught that the welfare program was designed so that “independence, industry, thrift and self respect be once more established amongst our people.”<sup>5</sup>

When parents give assistance to married children, the primary objective should be to encourage and facilitate independence. Providing long-term financial assistance that creates dependence is not consistent with Church welfare principles. On the other hand, short-term assistance providing a bridge to adult children’s independence is consistent with these principles.

One couple, married 15 years, enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle until the husband was laid off from his job. Hoping that it was just a temporary setback, they relied on their savings and food storage for a few months. When he was unable to find employment, though, their situation became dire. Faced with losing their home, taking their children out of school, and moving to another location, they reluctantly asked their parents for help. Their parents,

after prayerfully considering the situation, paid part of the mortgage, covered the utility expenses, and shared generously from their gardens. Consistent with welfare principles, during this time of unemployment the husband repainted the inside of his in-laws’ house. After several months he was able to find stable employment, and the couple reestablished their independence, grateful for loving parents who helped them through a difficult period.

## Adult-to-Adult Relationships

Marrying and leaving the parents’ home requires a fundamental shift in the relationship between children and parents. While parents of young children have a divine mandate to supervise and discipline their children, it is not appropriate for parents to control their adult children. Instead, the hierarchy of supervision and control dissolves so that parents and their adult children are on equal footing. This shift allows parents and adult children to develop relationships that are built on mutual respect and friendship.

How do adult children and their parents create this fundamental shift in their relationship? I learned a key principle

in this process several years ago when I was teaching a workshop for married couples in our stake. I taught the workshop three consecutive times as participants rotated among various classes. The first two times I taught the workshop, the primary audience was young couples in their 20s and early 30s. When I taught the principle that relationships between adult children and parents should be nonhierarchical, with parents no longer controlling their children, the members of the class became very enthusiastic. A number of them raised their hand and said, “I want my parents to treat me like an adult, but they won’t.”



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The third workshop included a different group of participants. Instead of people in their 20s, the class consisted almost exclusively of middle-aged adults who had adult children of their own. Being in my late 20s myself, I was worried about how the middle-aged parents would respond to the principle that parents should allow their adult children to make their own decisions, become independent, and be treated like adults.

Sure enough, as soon as I started teaching this principle, several hands shot up—just as I had feared. As I called on them, I was somewhat surprised by the first person's comment. She said, "We would love to treat our married children like adults, but they send us very mixed messages." She continued: "Just a couple weeks ago, for example, one of our married children said that we needed to treat her and her husband more like adults. She accused us of still treating them like children. My husband and I agreed to treat them more like adults, but the next day they called up and said that they were out of gas and wanted to borrow \$20 from us. A few days later they again told us to treat them like adults, but they called that very evening saying that they were hungry and wanted to come over for dinner. We would *love* to treat our married children like adults, but they won't act like adults." After she finished her comments, several other people in the audience expressed similar feelings.

### **Reciprocity**

This story reinforces the principle that relationships between adult children and parents don't really change until there is reciprocity in the relationship. Relationships develop an equal footing when both people give to each other, but when only one party gives and the other takes, an unequal relationship develops.

An adult-to-adult relationship can be established only upon the principle of reciprocity.

When children are young, parents sacrifice considerably by giving to their children. Young children and adolescents, of course, should be appreciative and express love and gratitude to their parents, but most of the nurturing and acts of service flow toward the children. The relationship between adult children and their parents, though, needs to shift toward an adult-to-adult relationship in which children can give back.

One couple was fortunate to have the wife's parents come to their home for the weekend to help paint the outside of the house. As a sign of appreciation, the young couple took the parents out to dinner. In another family, the



adult children got together and planned a surprise birthday party for one of their parents. In both cases, the married children acted like adults by treating their parents like adults, thereby fostering adult-to-adult relationships. These relationships are based on friendship and mutual respect, with each being concerned about the happiness and well-being of the other. Most important,

these relationships are satisfying for both the parents and the adult children.

Some married children struggle with the "Santa Claus syndrome," viewing Mom and Dad as Santa Claus figures who are to shower love and gifts on their children with little expectation of reciprocity. These children are often unable to develop mutually satisfying relationships with their parents.

Of course, most young married couples are unable to match the financial resources of their parents, making them unable to reciprocate on a dollar-to-dollar basis. But the principle of reciprocity isn't necessarily about the amount of money exchanged, because

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continued emotional dependence on parents can be just as damaging to a marriage as financial dependence. Rather, reciprocity is based more on mutual acts of service and caring. For example, as adult children have conversations with their parents, they can express interest, ask questions, listen empathetically, and offer encouragement, praise, and support. As adult children nurture friendships with their parents, there comes an emotional reciprocity in the relationship that is largely independent of financial reciprocity.

### **Becoming Independent**

Unfortunately, some parents have a hard time letting their children grow up and become independent. President Kimball said: “Well meaning relatives have broken up many a home. Numerous divorces are attributable to the interference of parents who thought they were only protecting their loved

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children.”<sup>6</sup> He also observed that sometimes parents “will not relinquish the hold they have had upon their children.”<sup>7</sup> Wise parents will honor their children’s adulthood, foster their independence, and respect their marital boundaries, thereby giving their children the opportunity to establish strong marriages.

As married children shift their primary loyalty and strive for independence, they will be able to enjoy satisfying adult relationships with their parents and, having truly left home, experience the joy of being one in marriage. ■

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### **NOTES**

1. *Marriage* (1978), 25.
2. “Oneness in Marriage,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2002, 45.
3. “Life’s Obligations,” *Ensign*, Feb. 1999, 2, 4.
4. “To the Fathers in Israel,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1987, 50.
5. In Conference Report, Oct. 1936, 3.
6. *Marriage*, 17.
7. *Ensign*, Oct. 2002, 45.