

# Building Relationships

“One of the paramount duties, I might say the paramount duty, of parents is to win and merit the confidence and respect of their children.”

—David O. McKay<sup>1</sup>

Successful fathers build strong, lasting emotional bonds with their children. Such relationships benefit both father and child. Urie Brofenbrenner, former child development psychologist, explained:

Every child should spend a substantial amount of time with somebody who’s crazy about him or her. . . . There has to be at least one person who has an irrational involvement with that child, someone who thinks that kid is more important than other people’s kids, someone who’s in love with him or her, and whom he or she loves in return. . . . You can’t pay a [person] to do what a [parent] will do for free.<sup>2</sup>

In order for fathers to connect with their children, of course they must know their child, but they must also love their child the way he or she wants to be loved. In other words, it’s not enough for fathers to attempt to connect with their children by doing only what they like to do. Fathers must also attempt to connect with their

children in the manner the child prefers. For example, some fathers may try to connect with a child by shooting guns or playing a sport. However, if the child would rather attend a concert or build something with tools, then a father wanting to bond through shooting or sports will gain little traction with that child. Hence, fathers *must* connect with their children at their level. Psychologist Madeline Levine explained:

There are no shortcuts to knowing our children well. Warmth is cultivated when we take time, when we linger with our children, when we get to know them in the most intimate and specific ways we can. Know what delights your particular child or what disappoints her and what turns her off. Does your daughter love poetry and hate science fiction? Does your son keep the television on all night because he likes the background noise or because he's afraid of the dark?

Being truly connected with our children means knowing and valuing the unique, idiosyncratic, one-in-a-trillion child who stands in front of us. Reinforce your love and appreciation as often as you can. Make sure your child knows that, if given a choice of all the children in the world, he or she is the one you would choose.<sup>3</sup>

To connect with a child is “to form healthy lasting attachments with a child.”<sup>4</sup> A father cannot connect with his children unless he understands his children and seeks to meet their needs. Successful fathers establish bonds with their children by doing things with them.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, “Father-child relationships are strengthened when fathers competently respond to a child’s needs.”<sup>6</sup> When there is connection between fathers and their children, there is also the opportunity to influence, teach, and guide them. A father who has no relationship with his children will have little ability to influence them for good or teach them the things that matter. David O. McKay was a father who was connected to his children both emotionally and spiritually. The deep connection he had with his children serves as an example to all fathers on how to build strong parent-child relationships.

## A Sixth Sense

David O. McKay seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to his children. As was mentioned in a previous chapter, when something was wrong with them, he seemed to be able to detect it—regardless of how far away he was from his family. For example, on his world tour, when he was over five thousand miles away from home, he awoke on the morning of 30 December 1920 concerned about the health of his young daughter Emma Rae. He wrote in his diary later that evening, “Awoke this morning with depressed feeling regarding my little sunshine Emma Rae. Have tried in vain to throw it off, thinking it the result of a fitful sleep.”<sup>7</sup> As it turned out, nothing was wrong with Emma Rae. She wasn’t sick after all, but another child was. In fact, David received two letters from his wife, Emma Ray, informing him that “Neddy Boy” had been quite sick. Upon hearing this news, David recorded in his diary, “The news of Neddy Boy’s illness made me quite downhearted; but I found relief in a supplication to the Lord, which, I feel sure he would answer in blessings on my Little Ones.”<sup>8</sup> When things were not right at home, David sensed it.

As an Apostle many miles from home, often all David could do was rely on the Lord for peace and comfort when his children were sick. Aside from the many emotions this may have stirred, it must have been a helpless feeling to say the least. When they were sick or otherwise afflicted, David was affected as well. He once reported in his diary that it was a gloomy day for him because Ned was sick.<sup>9</sup> David had such a strong relationship with his children that he actually suffered when they suffered. His concern toward his suffering children, as well as his joy in their happiness, is evidence of a strong bond.

## Homesick Traveler

While on the world tour in Tonga, David had several bouts with severe homesickness. It was something he struggled with constantly while he was away from his loved ones. Because of his strong connection with his family, there was deep and significant emotional pain when he was

far away from them. On 2 June 1921, he spent most of the day in the mission home, writing letters to home and fighting homesickness—he had not heard from Emma Ray since March. He wrote, “Ray promised to cable if anything should go wrong at home, so I conclude that no word is good word.”<sup>10</sup> Apparently, the theory that “no news is good news” didn’t hold much water. When he went for long periods of time without hearing from Emma Ray, it was very difficult for him. Especially on these long trips, David constantly thought of his wife, his children, and Huntsville. His homesickness is a continual theme in his diaries.

The only remedy for this weary traveler, short of taking a transcontinental jet straight to Ogden, was a message he received from Emma Ray just a few days later. On 28 June 1921, he received a cablegram from Emma Ray that simply read, “Letter received—Have written—I miss you very, very much.” In response to this short message, David recorded in his diary,

As this was the first word from my Loved Ones since I left home, March 26th, it seemed the dearest message I’ve ever received in my life. “Everybody all well!” What more comforting words would a traveler have than these? Unless it be those from his sweetheart, “I miss you very, very much”! I felt it no weakness to let tears of joy express my appreciation.<sup>11</sup>

## Connection through Emulation

President McKay observed, “Children are more influenced by sermons you act than by the sermons you preach.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, strong fathers will recognize that how they live is their most powerful sermon. Since children are always watching, how a father acts is much more significant than what he preaches or teaches. Usually, evidence of a strong, healthy relationship between a father and his children is emulation. Most of us want to be like the people we love and admire. Emulation implies admiration and relationship, and David’s children wanted to be just like him. He taught, “Our debt to our parents is unpayable except in

one way, and that is by emulating their ideals and bringing joy to them in their old age.”<sup>13</sup>

For example, one of David’s young sons was visiting the home of his grandfather. It was springtime, and workmen occupied the home as they were cleaning the house and hanging wallpaper. A particular workman asked the young McKay, “When you are a man, would you like to be a painter and paper-hanger?” Without any hesitation, the child answered, “No, sir.” The workman then asked, “Then what would you like to be?” The boy promptly responded, “I should like to be a ‘Twelve Apostle.’”<sup>14</sup> Obviously this young boy looked up to his father, who at the time was serving in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

## Connection with Humor

Another way through which a father can connect with his children is with humor. A successful father will not take himself too seriously. Moreover, he will create a fun, enjoyable, happy atmosphere in the home. David O. McKay loved to laugh, and he forged family relationships through the medium of humor. Daughter Lou Jean recalled: “Father was not at all serious. . . . He was fun at the dinner table. When I was at the University, father would come home for dinner. He wanted a happy dinner, no sad stories. At the office he would get a Scottish joke. He would come home and have us laughing. He wanted us to be happy. When he came home, he played games with us. We loved that. We loved our father, he was such a darling with us. He wasn’t strict. He taught us lessons. He meant what he said and we obeyed him.”<sup>15</sup>

Lawrence remembered that his father always seemed to have a humorous story to tell, but he was careful not to use humor inappropriately, especially at the expense of another family member. However, there was one exception to this rule. When the family was in Huntsville one summer, David sent Lawrence out to the garden to get a head of lettuce. Instead, Lawrence returned with a head of cabbage. His father said, “That’s not the only cabbage head you brought back.”<sup>16</sup> Lawrence may have been the only one not laughing after that.

Even when President McKay became older, his humor never left him. Lawrence had shoveled some snow off the walks at the cottage in Huntsville. As he was assisting his father down the sidewalk, President McKay slipped, bumped into Lawrence, and took them both down like bowling pins. Both President McKay and Lawrence were laughing hysterically. Lawrence said, “Father was like a boy in his ability to enjoy such things.”<sup>17</sup>

President McKay once taught, “The dearest possession a man has is his family. In the divine assurance that family ties may transcend the boundaries of death, and may continue throughout endless ages of eternity, I find supreme consolation and inspiration.”<sup>18</sup> David certainly treated his children as his dearest possessions. He must have believed that laughing together was one way to make lasting memories.

## One on One

Speaking of the importance of one-on-one relationships in the family, Dr. Stephen R. Covey pointed out that “these one-on-ones are where most of the real work of the family is done. This is where there is the deepest nurturing of heart and soul. This is where the most significant sharing, the most profound teaching, the deepest bonding takes place.”<sup>19</sup> David learned from his educational career that a parent must have a relationship with his or her children if he or she wants to teach or influence them. The future prophet also understood how important it is to have a significant relationship with each child individually. Often, these bonds were revealed through many of the letters that David wrote to his children, especially as they left for college, went on missions, and got married.

For example, in a letter he wrote to Emma Ray regarding their daughter Lou Jean’s upcoming marriage, he related: “I have just finished a letter to Lou Jean. Tears began to blur my eyes, so I had to bring it to an abrupt close. As I began writing, the full realization of the fact that the first one of our darlings to leave us to make a home for herself flooded my soul to overflowing—I confess that this first break in our lovely, charming family group, gives me a feeling in my heart akin to a pang.”<sup>20</sup>

In another letter from Tucson, Arizona, in 1925, David wrote to Emma Ray, “Thus far, at least we have had no reason to be ashamed of any of our Treasures. From David L. to ‘Bobbie,’ they are all Jewels of the finest grade. Thanks to their perfect little Mother!”<sup>21</sup> He highlighted the word “treasures” in the letter—a term of endearment from a father who deeply loved his children.

On a trip to southern Arizona, David advised Emma Ray, “Keep the boys busy, and in your company as much as possible, especially Lawrence. He needs more of our companionship. I wish he were with me on this trip. He would enjoy it and profit by it, and I should not be so lonesome.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, David was connected to his children emotionally, and it pained his heart to be gone from them as often as he was.

His children shared this same bond or connection with their father. For example, when Lawrence was a teenager, he wrote a letter to his father and gave him the entire play-by-play, inning-by-inning performance of a baseball game between Murray and Ogden, with a complete description of a fight that broke out after the game.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Llewelyn once wrote his father and reported that since both David and Emma Ray were gone on this particular trip, the children had “cake” for dinner. He closed his letter with a postscript: “Please write and tell us about the first time you play golf.”<sup>24</sup> It appears that part of David’s relationship with his sons was built on sports talk—a language they all understood. Perhaps there were many discussions on the farm in Huntsville about baseball and other sports.

## Heart Petals

The year 1922 was a busy time for the McKay clan. Lawrence was serving as a missionary in France, and Llewelyn had just commenced his service in the Swiss-German Mission. Meanwhile, the rest of the family was in Liverpool after David accepted a call from President Heber J. Grant to serve as the president of the European Mission. The McKays had sold their longtime home in Ogden, and now it appeared that stability had left them. Llewelyn was extremely homesick and wrote a rather sad letter to David about his feelings. One day, while



*David O. McKay as president of the European Mission. (Courtesy of Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)*



David O. McKay was riding a train between Liverpool and London, he penned the following poem for Llewelyn:

Dear Llewelyn:

'I'd give part of Germany; yes, all of it, too,  
For just one wee hug of dear Bobbie and you';  
So runs your letter to Mother this day,  
The first she's received since you sailed away.  
You'd have thought that a rainstorm had burst, as she read,  
So fast down her sweet face the large teardrops sped.  
'Twas her love sending answer in reciprocal joy,  
Saying, 'I'd give the world to hug you, my boy!' . . .  
Old Time passes quickly—too quickly, my lad,  
As into our lives he throws good and bad;  
'Twill be but a span ere your wish you'll possess,  
And Mother and 'Bobbie' you'll fondly caress.  
Be yours then to say, in that moment of bliss,  
As loved ones you greet with a pure loving kiss:  
'Though waves of temptation around me did roll,  
They but tempered my manhood; untainted's my soul!'<sup>25</sup>

In this case, although busy with mission responsibilities, David O. McKay took the opportunity to connect with his son through a poem. For Llewelyn, it was not only the poem that helped him through his homesickness but the fact that his father took the time to write it made all the difference. The strong ties between father and son got Llewelyn through a difficult time in his life. His father was always his anchor.

## Spiritual Connections

It is not enough, however, for successful fathers to be simply emotionally linked to their children. They must also be spiritually connected. Strong fathers can bond with their families through family rituals and practices such as family prayer, family scripture study, father-child interviews, and worshipping together. Furthermore, the Holy Ghost

can teach men what their children need and when they need it. Lawrence shared the following experience to illustrate this point:

[My father] may have saved a life by his sensitivity to the Spirit on another occasion. I was hauling a load of beet pulp from west Ogden over the viaduct when Father, who was having a rare moment's leisure to read at home, suddenly closed the book and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Mother called as he hurried down the hall.

"To save Lawrence's life," he called back over his shoulder.

He got into his automobile and met me at the top of the viaduct, just as I was about to start the descent. He reminded me that I was driving a team of four horses abreast (I didn't need a reminder of that!), that they were pulling four tons of beet pulp, and that the wagon had no brakes. While I held the reins, he got out of the car to block a wheel by chaining a spoke to the body of the wagon. Unfortunately, we were holding up traffic, and a car honked behind me. I moved the team to get out of the way, but we had started the descent. The team could not stop. By the time we reached the bottom, the horses were racing out of control on the left side of the road. We hit a car that emerged from behind the candy factory, smashing the motor but sparing the driver. One of the horses slipped and fell down. I seized the momentary check to leap down and sit on his head, keeping him from getting up. We were saved.

If Father had not stopped us and if that car had not come out at that moment, we would have careened onto busy Washington Avenue, Ogden's Main Street, and probably knocked over pedestrians. My feelings of gratitude can only be imagined."<sup>26</sup>

Strong fathers are not only connected with their children, but they are connected to God. They seek for the Spirit in their lives, and that Spirit will lead them to do well. In this example, David may have saved his son's life because he followed the promptings of the Spirit. Similarly, a strong father is also the spiritual leader in his home. He does not shy away from that responsibility; instead, he welcomes the opportunity to bless, serve, and lead his family in righteousness.

From the 1973 pamphlet *Father, Consider Your Ways*, we read:

Fatherhood is leadership, the most important kind of leadership. It has always been so; it always will be so. Father, with the assistance and counsel and encouragement of your eternal companion, you preside in the home. It is not a matter of whether you are most worthy or best qualified, but it is a matter of law and appointment. You preside at the meal table, at family prayer. You preside at family home evening; and as guided by the Spirit of the Lord, you see that your children are taught correct principles. It is your place to give direction relating to all of family life. You give father's blessings. You take an active part in establishing family rules and discipline. As a leader in your home you plan and sacrifice to achieve the blessing of a unified and happy family. To do all of this requires that you live a family-centered life.<sup>27</sup>

David O. McKay was this kind of leader in his home.

### The Law of the Harvest

One of the great joys of David's life was watching his children grow in spirituality and become disciples of Jesus Christ. It appeared that all of the hours he and Emma Ray had spent teaching gospel principles in the home, as well as the time they spent working hard at Dry Hollow Farm, paid off. David's children were becoming great contributors to society and the Church. In 1921, David O. McKay had the opportunity to travel Europe as part of the world tour. When President McKay was in France, he was able to connect with Lawrence, who was serving as a missionary in Germany. For ten days, this father-and-son team visited historical sites as well as Church congregations. David invited Lawrence to speak to the Latter-day Saints in their travels. After spending a joyous time with his son, David wrote in his diary, "Seldom, if ever, have I felt a power of joy than that which I experienced in my son's company that evening and succeeding days. The happiness of parenthood, indeed, success in life is dependent upon the honor, intelligence and integrity of our sons and daughters."<sup>28</sup> After David had to part company with Lawrence after ten days of bliss, he wrote, "It was

almost as hard to say goodbye to Lawrence at the station as it was a year ago when he left home for his mission. Our most memorable ten days together have served only to make him dearer to me than ever, and I would keep him near to me always.”<sup>29</sup> David’s connection with his son brought him deep pride, joy, and happiness. Of course, it was also rewarding for him to see firsthand the kind of man Lawrence was becoming.<sup>30</sup> The years of hard work had paid off.

Fathers can build relationships with their children as they invest time and effort. Relationship expert Dr. Wallace H. Goddard explained:

Children need more than love. They need continuing relationships with the people who love them. People used to talk a lot about quality time with their children. But that seemed to mean, ‘I’m going to do something very nice and maybe even spend some money on you. But I only have half an hour, so enjoy it!’ That is no way to build a relationship. . . . Relationships include taking time to be with each other. They are also about sensing the other person’s unique hopes and wishes. . . . Relationships are not built while running a stopwatch. They grow when people take time to be together. But there is more at issue than time. We need to be in tune with the other person’s needs, feelings, and preferences. Sometimes the opportunity to show our love comes at inopportune times and in unexpected ways. . . . For each person there is a different pattern of hopes, dreams, needs, and preferences. The hard part about building relationships is that we must be sensitive to the unique hopes and wishes of the person with whom we would be close.<sup>31</sup>

David O. McKay was a father who discovered ways to create a lasting bond with each of his children. Despite his busy travel schedule, he was able to connect with them on many different levels. Because of this strong bond, he was able to teach and influence them, and he inspired them to be successful professionally, spiritually, and as spouses and parents. It seemed that his children loved him because he first loved them.

## Notes

1. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals*, 414.
2. Urie Brofenbrenner, "Nobody Home: The Erosion of the American Family," *Psychology Today*, May 1977, 41–47.
3. Madeline Levine, *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*, (Harper-Collins: New York, 2006), 136.
4. Dollahite, Hawkins, and Brotherson, "Fatherwork: A Conceptual Ethic of Fathering as Generative Work," 32.
5. President Gordon B. Hinckley taught, "Every child is entitled to grow up in a home where there is warm and secure companionship, where there is love in the family relationship, where appreciation one for another is taught and exemplified, and where God is acknowledged and His peace and blessings invoked before the family altar." Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 416.
6. Dollahite, Hawkins, and Brotherson, "Narrative Accounts, Generative Fathering, and Family Life Education," in *The Methods and Methodologies of Qualitative Family Research*, 362.
7. Diaries of David O. McKay, December 1920, MS 668, box 6, folder 1, Marriott Library.
8. Ibid.
9. Diaries of David O. McKay, January to December 1935, MS 668, box 7, folder 13, Marriott Library.
10. Diaries of David O. McKay, May to June 1921, MS 668, box 7, folder 4, Marriott Library.
11. Diaries of David O. McKay, June to July 1921, MS 668, box 7, folder 5, Marriott Library.
12. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, April 1955, 26.
13. David O. McKay, "The True Meaning of Loyalty," *Instructor*, February 1962, 37.
14. Jeanette Morrell, *Highlights in the Life of President David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 42.
15. L. J. M. Blood, interview by Mary Jane Woodger, 8 August 1995.

## No Other Success

16. David L. McKay, interview by Gordon Irving, James Moyle Oral History Program, Salt Lake City, , January–May 1984, 41.
17. McKay, *My Father, David O. McKay*, 73.
18. Llewelyn McKay, *Home Memories of President David O. McKay*, 213.
19. Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families*, 152.
20. David O. McKay to Emma Ray McKay, 22 November 1927, David O. McKay Family Papers, 1897–1954, MS 21606, box 1, folder 1, CHL.
21. David O. McKay to Emma Ray McKay, 20 May 1925, David O. McKay Family Papers, 1897–1954, MS 21606, box 1, folder 1, CHL, underline in original.
22. David O. McKay to Emma Ray McKay, 8 December 1910, David O. McKay Family Papers, 1897–1954, MS 21606, box 1, folder 1, CHL.
23. David L. McKay to David O. McKay, 2 May 1914, David O. McKay Papers, MS 668, box 1, folder 3, Marriott Library.
24. Llewelyn R. McKay to David O. McKay, 1 December 1918, David O. McKay Papers, MS 668, box 1, folder 3, Marriott Library.
25. Llewelyn McKay, *Home Memories of President David O. McKay*, 32–33.
26. McKay, *My Father, David O. McKay*, 94.
27. “Father, Consider Your Ways,” *Ensign*, June 2002, 12–15.
28. Diaries of David O. McKay, October–December 1921, MS 668, box 6, folder 10, Marriott Library.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Of course, David was not only proud of Lawrence, he was extremely pleased with all of his children. Each one of them proved to be successful individuals. At the age of sixty-three, he wrote in his diary that Lou Jean and Russell were in medical school in Cleveland, Ohio; David L. had graduated from Harvard Law School and practiced law in Salt Lake City, Llewelyn finished his PhD at Stanford and was teaching at the University of Utah, Emma Rae taught at Granite High School, Edward was a missionary, and Robert was president of the senior class at his high school. See Diaries of David O. McKay, January to December 1937, MS 668, box 8, folder 2, Marriott Library. One can almost visualize President McKay’s buttons bursting for the pride he had for his children. He raised a wonderful posterity.
31. Goddard, *The Frightful and Joyous Journey of Family Life*, 96–97.