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Motherhood:

Restoring Clarity and Vision in a World of Confusing Messages

*I*N 2010, the authors of a premier family science journal article made a statement that culminated a 50-year period of questioning the meaning of motherhood (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Arguing that research does not indicate children’s need for a mother and a father, they concluded that “the gender of parents only matters in ways that don’t matter” (National Council on Family Relations, 2010). The statement suggests a question we may not have ever expected could be asked. That is, “Does having a mother really matter to children and family life?”

Current arguments for “genderless parenting”—parenting that is not defined by the inherent importance of both a father and a mother—are built on a progression of cultural shifts in attitudes about women and motherhood. Arguably, these ideas developed in reaction to traditions that did not recognize women’s capacities and competence outside of traditional roles. In an effort to advocate for women as individuals equal in capacity and competence to their male counterparts, traditional roles that rested upon assumptions of gender differences were questioned and critiqued. Underlying the push for equality was a relentless demand for “sameness.” The need for men and women to be “the same” in order to establish their equality led to a

notion of interchangeability—that one could do what the other could do, and just as well, given the chance. While “equality” may have been the perceived goal of this effort, a less desirable outcome seems to have come with it. That is, if gender itself is not essential, then mothers—or fathers, for that matter—are also not essential. Ironically, the effort to build equality led to the conclusion that the unique contributions of mothers (and fathers) are unnecessary. All that is needed are committed caregivers.

Since the dawn of the Restoration, prophets and apostles have revealed truths regarding the significance and divinity of motherhood and taught eternal patterns that protect the sacred relationship of equality and interdependence between mothers and fathers. These truths are unparalleled in their ability to dispel confusion and rectify distortions inherited by a culture filled with arguments questioning the place of womanhood and the meaning of motherhood. By drawing on the eternal perspective of motherhood, this chapter will address some of the specific issues and dilemmas that have contributed to this confusion. Scientific theories and research that explore the unique significance of motherhood are clarified by revealed truths of the restored gospel.

How Did We Get to This Place?

In 1963, Betty Friedan released *The Feminine Mystique*, her report from the “trenches” of marriage and motherhood. In some ways, Friedan’s book was an expansion of efforts to bring awareness to the invisible experiences of women dealing with challenges of unequal power and opportunity, where men had greater privilege. In the developed world, these unequal privileges were reflected in political, educational, and employment opportunities, economic benefits, and occurrences of domestic violence.

Friedan’s work reacted to the problems of these inequities in the modern world by advocating for the expansion of women’s opportunities in educational and professional work. But it also seriously questioned the meaning and contribution of a woman’s life when she is mainly engaged in child-rearing. The demands of caring for children full-time meant that

women would be dependent on men economically, and hence have less access to the economic, political, and societal power Friedan perceived to matter most. From this point of view, the family—including motherhood and marriage—was a “risky proposition” because it “ranked lowest in terms of prestige” and obligated women “to subordinate their personal objectives . . . devoting themselves to the day-to-day well-being of other family members,” which “may be deemed virtuous,” but was not “a path to power and success” (Polatnik, 1973, pp. 70, 76).

In some ways, these dilemmas were a predictable response to dramatic changes with industrialization and urbanization in the nineteenth century. Prior to industrialization, mothers and fathers worked side by side to build their household economy, represented in the family farm or small artisan shop. With industrialization, the work of production moved outside the home, creating a split between work and home. Fathers were moved to the periphery of family life as they went out into “the world” to establish themselves as earners, while mothers became the primary socializers, educators, and caregivers of their children (Blankenhorn, 1995). Work that had once been shared by family members was now assigned to women, resulting in more burdensome and isolating tasks.

At the same time, an entire code of conduct emerged for women, inflexibly defining their roles and reinforcing the division between men and women in household labor. Because their property and earnings belonged to their husbands, married women could not pursue personal economic interests. Lacking “the means and motive for self-seeking,” cultural ideals prescribed women’s appropriate attitude to be selfless—to absorb and even redeem the home from the strains that resulted from the “evils” of the business world. Women were “to live for others” by giving up all self-interest—and in that way to save the home (Cott, 1977, pp. 70–71). Perhaps predictably, caregiving labor became identified with women’s oppression. Children came to be viewed as a liability—expensive, inconvenient, and an encroachment on personal fulfillment. A simple desire for fairness seemed to demand her liberation from such work and the family responsibilities associated with it.

But rather than challenging the attitudes that had devalued women, the new woman advocated for by radical feminists ironically looked more like “the old man” they had criticized (Elshtain, 1982). By crossing the line into contempt for motherhood, feminist ideas that had intended to elevate women became self-defeating, because they required that women embrace a view of the meaning of life that “had rejected or devalued the world of the traditionally ‘feminine’” (p. 447). An honest evaluation of what has followed since this time would have to acknowledge significant benefits for women in terms of educational, professional, and political opportunities. But it would also have to acknowledge significant challenges for women and mothers—many of which reflect the dismantling of the protections of the institution of marriage and family that had been identified as “the enemy.”

Stevenson and Wolfers’ (2009) recent analysis of changes in women’s reported happiness over time indicates an important paradox. By most objective measures, including a decreased gender wage gap, educational attainment that now surpasses men, unprecedented control over fertility, technology that has freed women from domestic drudgery, and increased freedoms within the family and the market sphere, women’s lives have dramatically improved over the last 35 years. But during that same period, there has been a significant decline in reported happiness among US women and women internationally, especially when compared with men’s reported happiness. This decrease in reported happiness appears across all educational levels, age groups, marital categories, and employment statuses. Further, decreased happiness has been reported across multiple life domains, including marital satisfaction, job satisfaction, family financial situation, and life as a whole.

While it is impossible to definitively explain the causes for this reported decrease in happiness, it is likely that the challenges faced by women today, far less likely for women in the past, could be part of the reported decline. In the year 1970, out of 1,000 unmarried women ages 15 and older, there were 76.5 marriages. By the year 2008, that rate dropped to 37.4 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women. At the same time, the rate of divorce increased. In

the year 1960, out of every 1,000 married women ages 15 and older, there were 9.2 divorces. In 1980, the divorce rate rose to 22.6 per 1,000 married women and then decreased to a current rate of 16.9, which has been a consistent average since 2005.

Ironically, no-fault divorce legislation, first passed in 1968, purportedly sought to benefit women by enabling them to leave destructive marriages without the challenge of establishing fault in their spouse. But by enabling one spouse to dissolve a marriage without establishing any cause, no-fault divorce inadvertently made marriage contractual and allowed one spouse to opportunistically exploit the family. In the decades since, no-fault divorce has arguably contributed to a host of problems for women, including dramatic increases in poverty within female-headed households, greater likelihood of unstable and abusive couple relationships, reduced incentives to marry, and increased marriage age (Allen, 2006).

Partly in response to increases in the likelihood of divorce, rates of cohabitation have also dramatically increased, a change that has also not benefited women. Relative to marriage, cohabiting unions tend to be much less stable, and to have less commitment, trust, and sexual fidelity, as well as more violence. Where 15% of married families may have broken up by the time a child is five years old, 50% of cohabiting families will have broken up (University of Virginia, 2011). At the same time, there have been dramatic increases in the number of women bearing children outside of the stability and support of marriage. In 1960, only 5.3% of births were to unmarried women. But by 2007, that percentage had increased to 40%, bringing with it the attending challenges of poverty, instability, and dramatically increased risks for children born in this situation (University of Virginia, 2011, p. 92).

These changes have contributed to significantly greater reliance on women's participation in the workforce in order to provide essential family income. As a positive outcome of feminist advocacy, women today have increased opportunities for diverse and fulfilling employment opportunities. But perhaps unexpectedly, many women today are employed for far



Many women today are employed for far more hours than they would like. © Iakov Filimonov.

more hours than they would like to be. Consistent with numerous other surveys, the 2005 nationally representative Motherhood Study found that although 47% of mothers were working full-time, only 15% wanted to be. Those who were working their preferred work hours felt less depressed and stressed, and more appreciated, confident, and content than those working more than they wanted to be (Jacob, 2008, 217).

These outcomes provide evidence for the significant challenges women and mothers face as the institution of marriage and family—identified by some as “the enemy”—has been dismantled. Perhaps ironically, research results garnered over the last 35 years of experimentation with new family structures consistently indicate that the safest and most facilitative structure of healthy thriving for women (as well as men and children) is within the structure of marriage and family. This is not to suggest that traditional patterns of family life adhered to in the past did not need changing. But it does clearly suggest that the dismantling and replacing of traditional structures of

marriage and motherhood is not the path to better outcomes and satisfaction for women.

Prophetic Teachings about the Eternal Significance of Motherhood

Teachings of the restored gospel provide further clarity in resolving the complexity of these issues and establishing the significance and blessings of motherhood. A First Presidency statement in 1942 declared, “Motherhood is near to divinity. It is the highest, holiest service to be assumed by mankind. It places her who honors its holy calling and service next to the angels” (Clark, 1946, p. 178). The calling of motherhood has been identified as the most ennobling endowment God could give his daughters, “as divinely called, as eternally important in its place as the Priesthood itself” (p. 801).

This endowment of motherhood enables women to be a uniquely profound influence in the lives of those around them, particularly their children. By giving birth to and nurturing the souls of the children of God, women perform an incomparably sacred role in which they become partners with God (Kimball, 1976). As President Thomas S. Monson (1998) eloquently explained, “May each of us treasure this truth: . . . One cannot remember mother and forget God. Why? Because these two sacred persons, God and mother, partners in creation, in love, in sacrifice, in service, are as one” (p. 6).

These statements give motherhood—and hence, womanhood—an unparalleled position of significance in Heavenly Father’s plan of happiness. The divine nature of women is defined by motherhood, the eternally appointed identity of all women. Thus, the significant identity of mother is not restricted to those who bear children in mortality. Some women may not experience motherhood in this life, but the premortal, mortal, and eternal identity of women as mothers with the call to nurture life has been established. As clarified by General Relief Society Presidency member Sheri Dew (2001): “Of all the words they could have chosen to define her role and her essence, both God the Father and Adam called Eve



Motherhood is a divine calling, the most ennobling endowment God could give his daughters. Mothers are of utmost significance in Heavenly Father's plan of happiness.
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‘the mother of all living’ and they did so *before* she ever bore a child. . . . Motherhood is more than bearing children. . . . It is the essence of who we are as women. It defines our very identity, our divine stature and nature, and the unique traits our Father gave us” (pp. 96–97).

In their divine identity as mothers, all women have been called to partner with God in providing mortal bodies to his children and doing all they can to help guide those children home to him. As Sister Dew (2001) continues, “Every one of us can show by word and by deed that the work of women in the Lord’s kingdom is magnificent and holy. I repeat: *We are all mothers in Israel*, and our calling is to love and help lead the rising generation through the dangerous streets of mortality” (p. 97). In light of the divine identity of all women as mothers, the First Presidency declared in 1935, “The true spirit of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gives to woman the highest place of honor in human life” (Grant, p. 276).

Demeaning this divine identity of motherhood has been identified as a diabolical tactic that takes from women and men the true sources of happiness. Elder Richard G. Scott (2000) explained, “Satan has unleashed a seductive campaign to undermine the sanctity of womanhood, to deceive the daughters of God and divert them from their divine destiny. He well knows women are the compassionate, self-sacrificing, loving power that binds together the human family. . . . He has convinced many of the lie that they are third-class citizens in the kingdom of God. That falsehood has led some to trade their divinely given femininity for male coarseness” (p. 36).

These prophetic statements establish the foundational truth that fulfilling the eternally divine calling of motherhood provides unparalleled opportunity for joy and meaning in both this life and eternity. They also clarify why rejecting, distorting, or demeaning the eternally significant calling of motherhood has contributed to decreased happiness among women, men, and children. Of course that does not mean that motherhood will always be a blissful experience. Indeed, the stated significance of this calling underscores its potential to facilitate growth by developing a more divine nature—which is inherently a stretching and humbling process.

Prophetic Teachings about the Eternal Significance of Nurturing Work

Prophets of the restored gospel have also consistently affirmed and elevated the work of nurturing inherent to motherhood. The countless acts of selfless service mothers perform are recognized as expressions of the highest love and noblest of womanly feelings (Faust, 1986). The work of nurturing, including the temporal caregiving of feeding, tending, bathing, clothing, wiping, and cleaning, is viewed as a holy work. Through the sacrificing love of nurturing life—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—a mother creates a foundation from which self-confidence and integrity are woven into the fabric of her children’s character (Scott, 1996). As Elder Bruce C. Hafen and Sister Marie K. Hafen (1993) explained, “Just as a mother’s body may be permanently marked with the signs of pregnancy and childbirth, [the Savior] said, ‘I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands’ (1 Nephi 21:15–16). For both a mother and the Savior, those marks memorialize a wrenching sacrifice—the sacrifice of begetting life—for her, physical birth; for him, spiritual rebirth” (p. 29).

These truths provide the foundation for understanding why investing her life in nurturing work does not inhibit a woman’s individual development. Rather, it enlarges it. Elder Robert D. Hales (2008) clarified, “The world would state that a woman is in a form of servitude that does not allow her to develop her gifts and talents. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could be further from the truth. Do not let the world define, denigrate, or limit your feelings of lifelong learning and the values of motherhood in the home” (pp. 8–9). He added, “Motherhood is the ideal opportunity for lifelong learning. A mother’s learning grows as she nurtures the child in his or her development years. They are both learning and maturing together at a remarkable pace. It’s exponential, not linear. . . . In the process of rearing her children, a mother studies such topics as child development; nutrition; health care; physiology; psychology; nursing with medical research and care; and educational tutoring in many diverse fields such as math, science, geography,



The countless acts of selfless service mothers perform are recognized as expressions of the highest love and noblest of womanly feelings. The work of nurturing, including the temporal caregiving of feeding, tending, bathing, clothing, wiping, and cleaning, is viewed as a holy work. © Tomwang.

literature, English, and foreign languages. She develops gifts such as music, athletics, dance, and public speaking. The learning examples could continue endlessly” (p. 8).

Thus, where voices questioning the significance of caregiving work have tied it to the diminishment and even “death” of the self, prophets have clarified how motherhood enables the birth of a new and fuller self. By participating in the sacred work of nurturing mothers open the door to unparalleled growth and learning.

Scientific Research Confirming the Importance of Motherhood

The unique significance of motherhood and nurturing work bears out in research studies exploring influences on children’s development. Findings

from these studies seem to confirm what President David O. McKay (2003) declared: “Motherhood is the greatest potential influence either for good or ill in human life. The mother’s image is the first that stamps itself on the unwritten page of the young child’s mind. It is her caress that first awakens a sense of security, her kiss, the first realization of affection; her sympathy and tenderness, the first assurance that there is love in the world” (*Teachings . . . David O. McKay*, p. 156).

John Bowlby’s (1944) attachment theory provides some of the first theoretical underpinnings for evidence of the significant influence of the relationship between mother and child from infancy. Bowlby’s exploration of the importance of this bond started after he observed a consistent pattern of disrupted mother-child relationships and later adult psychopathology in research with homeless and orphaned children after WWII (pp. 107–127). Children who had been deprived of maternal care during extended periods in their early lives seemed to develop into individuals who “lacked feeling, had superficial relationships, and exhibited hostile or antisocial tendencies” (Kobak, 1999, p. 25). This led Bowlby to conclude that the attachment between mother and child is critical for a child’s healthy social-emotional development.

Mary Ainsworth (1978) expanded on Bowlby’s ideas by exploring how the quality of the attachment between mother and child influenced the child’s development. She found that children seemed to thrive when they had an emotionally secure attachment with their mothers. Using Bowlby’s early formulation, she conducted numerous observational studies on infant-parent pairs during the child’s first year for hundreds of children in Scotland and Uganda. In order to evaluate the quality of the attachment she devised a laboratory procedure known as the Strange Situation Protocol to evaluate how infants and toddlers experienced separation and reuniting with their parents after a brief period. The infants’ and toddlers’ responses during this procedure provided the basis for identifying the security of the parent-child attachment. The security of the attachment was related to how mothers interacted with their children, which Ainsworth labeled *maternal sensitivity*.



The attachment between mother and child is critical for a child's healthy social-emotional development. Christina Smith, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

According to Ainsworth, maternal sensitivity is a measure of how a mother detects, interprets, and responds appropriately to her child's needs, how positive and kind she is in her interactions, and how much she respects her child's autonomy in exploring and growing (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). When a mother is consistently available and supportive, the child receives the physical and psychological security necessary to foster play, exploration, and appropriate social behaviors (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). If this security is threatened, fear activates the attachment system to help restore access to the attachment figure. Fear that is not appropriately addressed seems to lead to feelings of depression, anxiety, aggression, and defensive distortions of vulnerable feelings (Kobak, 1999). In contrast, a secure attachment enables an infant to develop feelings that he or she deserves love, feelings that help the infant learn to appreciate, understand, and empathize with the feelings of others and appropriately regulate relationship closeness and conflict resolution (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). These findings did not suggest that every child with an insecure attachment necessarily experienced problems. But the insecure attachment seemed to initiate pathways associated with later pathology (Sroufe, Carlson, & Shulman, 1993).

Further studies led researchers to conclude that the way a mother interacts with her child, her maternal sensitivity, is the strongest, most consistent predictor of her child's cognitive, social, and emotional development (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2003, p. 994). Neuropsychological studies of infant brain development provided additional evidence supporting the importance of mothers' interactions. Mothers seem to have a unique ability to sensitively modify the stimulation they give to their infants. Through finely tuned perceptions, they match their infants' intellectual and emotional state and provide the optimal "chunking" of bits of positive interaction needed for the child's developing brain (Schore, 1994). In speaking of this finely tuned process, three scholars from the University of California at Berkeley concluded, "Whether they realize it or not, mothers use the universal signs

of emotion to teach their babies about the world. . . . Emotionality [love] gives the two of them a common language years before the infant will acquire speech. . . . It isn't just his mother's beaming countenance but her *synchrony* that he requires—their mutually responsive interaction” (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000, pp. 61–62).

Such attentive, loving interactions are not only important during infancy. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the quality of a mother's relationship with her child is associated with her child's social interactions and behaviors across development (Buehler, 2006; Gilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus, & Bouris, 2006). Children seem to do best when mothers show love by communicating about and being aware of their activities and behaviors. Expressing love through listening, communicating, and monitoring enables a mother to be warm and supportive while setting and enforcing appropriate limits. Studies consistently indicate that adolescents who report telling their mothers where they are going and what they will be doing after school and on weekends also report lower rates of alcohol misuse, drug use, sexual activity, and delinquency (Barnes, Hoffman, & Welte, 2006). Children's academic success and healthy behaviors have also been tied to their mothers' involvement in talking with them, listening to them, and answering their questions (Luster, Bates, Vandenberg, & Nievar, 2004).

Scientific Research Exploring the Unique Contributions of Motherhood

The relationship formed through a mothers' attentive love provides the foundation for all of the other unique contributions of motherhood. Mothering scholar Sara Ruddick (1983) has identified these unique contributions as reflections of three central tasks for which attentive love provides the foundation. These mothering tasks include: (a) Preserve children's lives and well-being, (b) foster children's growth and development, and (c) enable children to become acceptable contributors in their societies (pp. 213–231).



The quality of a mother's relationship with her child is associated with her child's social interactions and behaviors across development. Children seem to do best when mothers show love by communicating about and being aware of their activities and behaviors.
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Preserving Life

From the moment of her child's birth, a mother faces the realization that a fragile life depends on her (Stern & Bruschiweiler-Stern, 1998). The physical connection inherent in the biological relationship between mother and child seems to make mothers particularly sensitive to responsibility for the child's protection and well-being (Doucet, 2006). Her fear for the baby's survival and growth may also make her vigilant and attentive to finding the best food, care, and medical help and to avoiding possible dangers. These natural attunements, especially when shared with the father, serve important constructive and protective functions for a child (Stern & Bruschiweiler-Stern, 1998). Studies consistently indicate that mothers have a significant role in influencing their children's health and well-being throughout their development.

Nurturing Growth and Development

The desire to sustain the life of the child is part of the second central task of mothering, that of nurturing growth and development. Research findings suggest that the ways mothers nurture their children's individual growth is the critical influence on their development. Although men can and do take on this work of nurturing, there are important and useful differences between men and women. Further, much of the day-to-day work and responsibility for this nurturing care continues to "rest with women." As a result, mothers are more often identified in research studies as central to these nurturing processes (Doucet, 2006, p. 111).

Rituals and routines. One of the primary ways mothers nurture growth and development is through helping create an environment of safety, peace, and learning. A central part of creating that environment is through organizing the home and family so that routines and rituals are carried out effectively. A range of studies indicate that having ordered and predictable routines (waking up, getting dressed, taking vitamins or medications, brushing teeth,

going to school, doing homework, eating dinner, going to bed, and so on) is central to children's healthy development (Fiese, 2006). Furthermore, mothers have the primary role in carrying out family rituals and traditions (such as Christmas, Easter, the Fourth of July, family celebrations including birthdays, and distinctive family traditions such as Sunday night sing-alongs or periodic service projects).

For preschool and school-age children, routines and rituals are especially important in helping with self-regulation, skill development, problem solving, and development of good academic habits. For adolescent children, routines and rituals have been associated with a sense of identity and family belonging, warmth in relationships with parents, fewer risk behaviors, and better psychological health (Fiese, 2006). Mothers significantly influence the environment in which their children grow and develop through the routines and rituals they ensure are carried out (Ring, 2006).

Emotion work. A second critical way that mothers influence development is through the *emotion work* they perform to maintain and strengthen individual well-being and family relations. Mothers do this emotion work by facilitating conversations about feelings, listening carefully to family members' feelings, recognizing the importance of feelings and offering encouragement, expressing appreciation, and asking questions to elicit family members' sharing of feelings. For many mothers, providing this kind of emotion work is integral to their efforts to nurture the growth and development of children (Erickson, 2005). While a father may be oriented towards fixing the problem that arises, mothers often seem particularly adept at helping children to express and provide comfort regarding feelings (Doucet, 2006).

Mothers' emotion-comforting work may be especially effective if they are available when children are most willing to share their thoughts and feelings. Research findings suggest that the hours after school may be particularly important for mothers in sharing experiences and monitoring children (Aizer, 2004). During these moments at "the crossroads," children may be more inclined to share feelings experienced during the day. Children also seem to be more inclined to open up and share when working



Children seem to be more inclined to open up and share when working alongside parents in household responsibilities. Craig Dimond, © Intellectual Reserve Inc.

alongside parents in household responsibilities. Washing dishes, preparing food, folding laundry, and doing other household tasks provide opportunities for thoughts and feelings to be shared while hands are busy working.

Teaching. A third critical way in which mothers influence development is through teaching. Mothers are a critical influence on intellectual development and children's learning in part because of the relational bond they develop with their child and in part because they often spend the most time with the child. During a child's infancy, the cognitive stimulation and emotional

support mothers provide lays the foundation for intellectual and linguistic functioning throughout development. As mothers talk to their infants, direct their attention to objects in the environment, and label the objects they see, they provide cognitive stimulation that enhances their infant's language skills and intellectual abilities (Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 1989).

As children grow, mothers provide essential stimulation when they ask questions or give suggestions that invite the child's thinking or when they provide conceptual links among objects, activities, locations, persons, or emotions (Hubbs-Tait, A. Culp, R. Culp, & Miller, 2002). Mothers continue to provide cognitive stimulation for preschool and school-age children when they read to their children and teach them concepts; encourage them in hobbies; take them to libraries, museums, and theaters; and expose them to books and other sources of learning in the home (Votruba-Drzal, 2003). Dinnertime conversations, car rides, and shared work also provide opportunities for engaging children in important developmental processes. The significant influence of this cognitive stimulation is enhanced through the emotional support she provides by being positive, particularly when a child is trying to learn a task or solve a problem. Her expression of positive emotions without inappropriately intruding or restraining fosters a secure environment for children to learn and grow (Hubbs-Tait, A. Culp, R. Culp & Miller, 2002).

Perhaps even more significant than the cognitive stimulation a mother provides is her teaching of wisdom and truth to guide her children's development. Research findings consistently indicate that children whose mothers openly discuss the risks of behaviors such as illicit sexual activity, alcohol and substance abuse, and smoking are less likely to engage in dangerous behaviors (Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus, & Bouris, 2006). Further, children whose mothers pass on their religious beliefs and facilitate their children's involvement with religion report the lowest levels of delinquency among adolescents (Pearce & Haynie, 2004). These findings indicate that her teachings become a key ingredient in preparing her children to live fulfilling and contributing lives.



Mothers who pass on their religious beliefs and facilitate their children's involvement with religion report the lowest levels of delinquency among adolescents. Christina Smith, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

In summary, research findings have supported the truth that a mother's loving, attentive relationship with each child becomes the foundation by which all other mothering tasks become effective. From the foundation of love, mothers significantly influence children's development by creating an environment in which their growth and development can flourish. Consistent routines and rituals are important in creating this kind of environment. Mothers also significantly influence development through strengthening emotional well-being and relationships among family members. Finally, research indicates that mothers are a critical influence on children's development through the cognitive stimulation and teaching they provide.

Scientific Evidence for the Importance of Nurturing Work

In spite of widespread recognition that responsive, instructive interactions between a mother and child are the most consistent predictors of a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development, the ordinary caregiving work (feeding, clothing, bathing, etc.) through which these interactions occur has consistently been belittled. Summarizing prevailing attitudes about ordinary caregiving work, Shehan, Burg, and Rexroat (1986) concluded, "much of the existing literature concerning the impact of women's work roles . . . has assumed that the nature of *housework* is inherently isolating, restrictive, unskilled, repetitive, devalued, low in status, and consequently, not very rewarding" (p. 407).

What this orientation fails to recognize, however, is the inherent and irreplaceable value of the work being devalued—for women as well as men and children. Ahlander and Bahr's (1995) review of research exploring the role of caregiving work in family life identified some of the profound meanings and moral implications of this ordinary work for families and the wider society (pp. 54–68). The interactions associated with household work "provide an area of teaching and learning that is part of everyday

life, salient to parents and children alike” (Goodnow & Warton, 1991, p. 27). In contrast to work in the marketplace, which is defined by the individualistic goals of personal recognition, wages, opportunities, and self-fulfillment, work in the family context is distinctly defined by stewardship and solemn obligations, intense loyalties, and moral imperatives (Blankenhorn, 1990).

For mothers as well as fathers, caregiving work becomes the critical medium through which children develop the trust and security on which their development and wellbeing depend. As philosopher Wendell Berry (1987) explains, the multitudinous acts of caregiving in family life “give the word love its only chance to mean, for only they can give it a history, a community, and a place.” Through ordinary caregiving work, “love become[s] flesh”—made real to parents and children through its constant physical expression (p. 10). The bonds of love forged through such caregiving become the foundation for all the other tasks of parenting.

Thus, ironically, the ordinary family work that has been tied to women’s oppression provides the key opportunities needed to bond parents to children and children to parents through recognizing and filling one another’s needs over and over again. Precisely because it is menial work, each member of the family, regardless of age, can feel like they are making a meaningful contribution. Its relentless repetition is what creates daily invitations for each member to “enter the family circle” and experience what it means to belong to something bigger than one’s self. Ordinary chores thus “become daily rituals of family love and belonging” (Bahr & Loveless, 2000, “For Our Sakes,” para. 4).

The fact that it is mundane is also what allows the mind to be free to focus on sharing and learning from one another while hands are busy working for the well-being of the family. In doing so, feelings of hierarchy are dissolved, opening the way for concerns to be discussed among children and parents. Family work thus invites more intimate conversation between parents and children than other kinds of interactions that might come from physical activities such as play.

Beyond the bonding that can result, household work develops moral identity and responsibility through the emotional connections and kinship obligations that grow out of participating in the essential work of family life (Harris, 1990). Working together with those for whom they share a uniquely strong obligation fosters helpfulness and a cooperative spirit in children (Goodnow, 1988). Through shared participation in the ordinary tasks of family life, children develop the social definition of self that is core to self-control and family commitment—altruistic and prosocial behavior (Wallinga, Sweaney, & Walters, 1981; White & Brinkerhoff, 1981). The civic virtue that forms the basis for the thriving of all societal institutions depends on children’s development of this kind of moral obligation and responsibility. Thus, the profound implications of ordinary caregiving work for the family as well as society at large.

Conclusion

In response to the question, “Does having a mother really matter to children and family life?” scientific studies consistently support what prophets since the Restoration have taught. That is, women have an unparalleled, profound influence as they fulfill their calling to nurture in the divine role of motherhood. Although the Prophet Joseph F. Smith (*Teachings . . . Joseph F. Smith*, 1998) lost his mother, Mary Fielding Smith, when he was only 13 years of age, his teachings were replete with conviction of the endless influence of mothers on the eternal lives of their children. His statements reveal in prophetic vision what the research studies identified above can only begin to show: “Sisters, you do not know how far your influence extends. A mother that is successful in raising a good boy, or girl, to imitate her example and to follow her precepts through life, sows the seeds of virtue, honor and integrity and of righteousness in their hearts that will be felt through all their career in life; and wherever that boy or girl goes, as man or woman, in whatever society they mingle, the good effects of the example of that mother



Working together with those for whom they share a uniquely strong obligation fosters helpfulness and a cooperative spirit in children. © Iakov Filimonov.

will be felt; and it will never die, because it will extend from them to their children to generation to generation” (p. 32).

Such profound influence invites the fullest consecration of one’s self. Yet it is precisely such full consecration that defines ultimate meaning and joy, for there is no more sacred purpose to which one can be consecrated. In speaking of such consecration Elder David A. Bednar (1999) affirmed: “The word consecrate means to develop and to ‘dedicate to a sacred purpose.’ Sacrifice is what I offer, surrender, yield, or give up. Consecration, on the other hand, is to fully develop and dedicate to a sacred purpose . . . The best application of the principle of consecration that I can think of, being developed and dedicated to a sacred purpose, is motherhood. . . . [A mother] has not given up anything; rather, she has been dedicated and consecrated to a holy purpose. She has developed herself and applied those skills as God has directed in the most important undertaking of a lifetime” (“Consecration,” paras. 1, 8).



Motherhood can lead to overwhelming joy as we reflect on the blessings our children and grandchildren are in our lives. John Luke, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

One mother's words looking back on a lifetime of consecrated work describe the feelings of so many who feel the joy of the late harvest as they invest their lives in the nurturance of our Father's children. Her words transform worldly distortions of the work of motherhood by acknowledging the privilege God has bestowed upon his daughters in enabling them to participate in this sacred work:

I awoke early this morning and could not go back to sleep. It must be that my 60 years is finally leading me to those days when you can't sleep in. But most of all I was awakened by a profound sense of overwhelming joy. Those feelings seem to come upon me more and more—and they are always accompanied by images and pictures of our children. As I picture them—their lives, their spouses, their children—I marvel at what has come of the union of Jim and me. What a remarkable journey! What a remarkable gift! There

have been seasons of sorrow and seasons of struggle—those too I remember. But the joy in what God has enabled through us seems to eclipse those struggles that seemed and sometimes even now seem so difficult. As I see it all in a picture before me, I can't help but simply feel gratitude—gratitude for the precious privilege of being a nurturer, a mother. (LaDawn Jacob, personal interview)

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