

# Family Councils: A Heavenly Pattern

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*"And now come, saith the Lord, . . . and let us reason together, that ye may understand" (D&C 50:10).*

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*Family councils can increase unity, communication, spirituality, and love among family members.*

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## **Family Councils Bring Many Blessings to Families**

President Ezra Taft Benson explained: "I mention family councils because of our persistent emphasis on family unity and family solidarity. By encouraging parents to hold family councils, we imitate in our homes a heavenly pattern" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1979, p. 124; or *Ensign*, May 1979, p. 88).

A family council is "the most basic council of the Church. Under the direction of the father and the mother, this council can meet to discuss family problems, work out finances, make plans, support and strengthen each other, and pray for one another and the family unit" (*Our Family* [pamphlet, 1980], p. 6). These same principles apply to single-parent families and to couples without children in the home.

Family councils can help a family work, play, and grow together. They help family members become more sensitive to the needs of others, set goals, and evaluate progress. They can create an atmosphere of respect, understanding, order, and harmony. Children can be more committed to family plans and goals because they have helped to formulate them. All family members can grow in spirituality, unity, and love for one another.

Family councils can also help parents build strong, personal relationships with their children. These relationships provide the foundation on which parents can build as they teach their children the gospel. Family councils also establish habits of communication and mutual respect on which both children and parents can rely when serious and difficult problems arise within the family or in the lives of individual family members.

Although given originally about the building of a temple, a scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants casts further light on what can be accomplished in family councils.

“Organize yourselves; prepare every needful thing; and establish a house, even a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God;

“That your incomings may be in the name of the Lord; that your outgoings may be in the name of the Lord” (D&C 88:119–20).

President Ezra Taft Benson said the following about Church councils, among which he included the family council:

“There is a principle cited in the Doctrine and Covenants which, though directed specifically to the leading quorums of the Church, applies to all councils in Church government. I quote from section 107: . . .

“ ‘The decisions of these quorums [or councils] . . . are to be made in all righteousness, in holiness, and lowliness of heart, meekness and long suffering, and in faith, and virtue, and knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness and charity; “ ‘Because the promise is, if these things abound in them they shall not be unfruitful in the knowledge of the Lord.’ (D&C 107:27, 30, 31.)” (in Conference Report, Apr. 1979, pp. 124–25; or *Ensign*, May 1979, p. 89).

### **Individual Family Needs Determine the Procedures Used in Family Councils**

The following story illustrates what can be accomplished in a family council. One family’s farm was threatened by several years of drought. Many crops failed, and those surviving were infested with insects. Years later a daughter recalled:

“One evening in the spring, my father and mother called the family together for a family council. We sensed the seriousness of it immediately. We gathered in our front room, and Father took charge. Calling the family to attention, he said that we were meeting about a very serious matter and asked Mother to open with prayer. He then told us of our financial difficulties.”

The father further explained how their income could not possibly meet their needs. Before the family council meeting, the parents had met with the banker who held the mortgage on their home and had worked out a plan whereby their home could be saved from foreclosure. “We would have to pay the interest payment each month until fall and then make a larger payment with our

cash crop in November. The monthly milk check had to cover these interest payments as well as provide the money to be sent to our missionary.

"Mother and Father presented two options to us as a family. First, we could let the bank take over our home, find some place to live, and continue to run the farm. Second, we could meet these monthly interest obligations with nothing left over for other family expenses. Through the summer we could not buy clothing, we could spend no money on recreation and almost nothing on gas for the car; in fact, it would be difficult to get food staples needed to supplement our garden produce. Since the payment in the fall would leave us again with no extra money, we would have to continue this tight economy for at least a year, maybe more.

"After presenting our problem, Father asked each of us to express our thoughts. He wanted us to be part of the decision making. Each of us in our turn answered that we would like to save our home, and we all pledged ourselves to sacrifice our wants; even the smallest children said they would not ask for anything that was not absolutely necessary. Mother and Father said that they wanted the same thing that we wanted, and with tears in their eyes thanked us for being such good, cooperative children, and also thanked us for the hard work that we had done on the farm.

"After the decision was made, we all knelt together and Father said a prayer. He thanked the Lord for our many blessings and asked his help in carrying out the plans we had made that evening. We felt that the Lord would indeed help us if we would do our part. That night our love for each other was surpassed only by our love for our Heavenly Father" (Thora B. Watson, "The Meeting That Saved Our Home," *Ensign*, Feb. 1985, pp. 26-27).

Family councils are not often held to consider a major crisis such as the one in this example. However, this family's meeting contained the important elements of a good family council. The father and mother first met together to consider alternatives. Then they unitedly presented to the children the best of the alternatives. The entire family openly shared their feelings, making plans and decisions together. They all committed themselves to the best resolution of the family problem. The family then asked for the Lord's help.

When should a family council be held? "There are, of course, no set guidelines on how often a family should meet together. Family councils should be held often enough to meet the needs of the individual family, but not so often that they become meaningless. Some families have a council every week after family home

evening. Others hold them every Sunday or on fast Sunday, and still others hold them when there is a special need" ("Handbook for Families: Working Together in Family Councils," *Ensign*, Feb. 1985, p. 28).

How a family council should be held varies from family to family. Parents are fully authorized to direct the affairs of their families according to the inspiration they receive and their own best judgment. The following guidelines might be considered when planning family councils:

1. Before the council meeting, parents may want to determine what will be discussed. The privacy of each family member should be given the greatest respect so that embarrassing subjects or experiences are not unnecessarily brought into the open. In advance, parents may want to talk privately with individual children when they need personal or confidential information about subjects to be considered by the family.
2. "Because it is a *family* council, *all* family members should participate. Each should be encouraged to express ideas and offer suggestions. One father recalls: 'At first I had to call on the quiet ones. "Greg, what do you think about it?" "Sylvia, how do you feel?" As soon as they realized that we really wanted to hear from them and that their opinions were valued, they participated freely' " ("Handbook for Families," p. 29).

Extended family members, such as grandparents who live in the home, should also be included in family councils.

3. "After each family member has expressed opinions or feelings, ideally all will agree on the decision to be made. If they cannot agree, parents may ask them to further consider and pray about it. If they still don't agree, the parents make the final decision as the presiding authorities. The parents should do this by carefully weighing everyone's suggestions, along with using their own experience and the inspiration they are entitled to receive" ("Handbook for Families," p. 29).

What should be on the agenda for family council is also determined by the needs of each family. Appropriate matters for a family council might be subjects like these: How can we divide up the work so that everyone shares home responsibilities and feels good about what they are doing? How much television should we watch, and which programs should we select? Where should we go for our vacation? How can we afford to buy some much-needed furniture? How can we have a more orderly home? What can we do as a family to eliminate quarreling? What family rules should

we establish about school homework and social activities? What activities will encourage us to keep the Sabbath day holy? Who is responsible for care of our family pet?

A family council is *not* the place to solve every family problem. There may be matters that parents, as the leaders of the family, should decide without family discussion. Family councils should not be used to decide whether to keep the commandments or follow the prophet.

Sisters living alone can bring greater order into their lives if they set aside a time for regularly evaluating their circumstances. They can make plans for such things as recreation and service projects, and they can review their financial needs and progress toward goals. They can counsel with the Lord about their concerns.

Roommates may also hold a council-type meeting as the need arises. The guidelines and format outlined in this lesson could be used effectively.

A family council can help to build and maintain close, loving relationships between parents and between parents and their children. It can more fully turn the hearts of the children and the hearts of the parents to each other in love.

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### **Suggestions for Teachers**

1. Ask: What are some of the benefits that a family receives from regular family councils? Doctrine and Covenants 88:119–20 explains some of the things that could be accomplished in family councils.
2. Review the example of a family council included in the lesson, or present another example. Ask the sisters to identify the elements that could be present in most family councils. Doctrine and Covenants 107:30–31 presents the feelings and attitudes that should be present in these councils.
3. Ask sisters to share experiences they have had with holding family councils. Ask them to explain what things worked well and what things could be improved.
4. Ask the sisters to evaluate the communication and decision-making procedures in their own families. Suggest that they review the principles of this lesson with their families and decide how best they can apply the principles. Helpful suggestions can be found in the *Family Home Evening Resource Book*, pages 89–91.