

Uniting the Extended Family 9

"Having their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another" (Mosiah 18:21).

We can strengthen our extended families in many ways.

Introduction

All of us, regardless of differing circumstances, belong to a family unit. Immediate families usually consist of parents and children. Other relatives that are included in the extended family are grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, foster family members, and stepfamily members.

Latter-day revelation teaches that family relationships can be eternal. Because we know this, we realize that we must work to build loving and lasting family relationships in this life. The Lord restored the sealing power to bring families together eternally. We need to do all we can to bring families together now.

In many families, children grow up and leave their home locations because of employment opportunities or other reasons. Of this President Spencer W. Kimball said: "The very mobility of our society means that our children are often moved from place to place and lose close contact with the extended family of grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and longtime neighbors. It is important for us also to cultivate in our own family a sense that we belong together eternally, that whatever changes outside our home, there are fundamental aspects of our relationship which will never change" ("Ocean Currents and Family Influences," *Ensign*, Jan. 1984, p. 4).

We Need to Strengthen Our Extended Family Relationships

When members of our families marry, new relationships with in-laws widen our family circles. We need to strengthen these new relationships. Eternal family ties build and continue, as Elder Marvin J. Ashton expressed: "Certainly a now-married man should cleave unto his wife in faithfulness, protection, comfort, and total support, but in leaving father, mother, and other family members,

it was never intended that they now be ignored, abandoned, shunned, or deserted. They are still family, a great source of strength, a refuge, a delight, and an eternal unit. Wise parents, whose children have left to start their own families, realize their family role still continues, not in a realm of domination, control, regulation, supervision, or imposition, but in love, concern, and encouragement" (in Conference Report, Oct. 1973, pp. 130–31; or *Ensign*, Jan. 1974, p. 104).

Parents and the spouses of their children may have problems getting along together, and this can place strain on the children's marriages. In some cases, parents-in-law make unrealistic demands upon their children. In other cases, children continue to be dependent upon their parents and rely on them instead of on each other. Families can strive to minimize differences and strengthen similarities. Consider the biblical account of Ruth, found in Ruth 1.

READ: Ruth 1. In what ways were Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi different? The same? What choice and sacrifice did Ruth willingly make? How did Ruth and Naomi rise above differences in religion and nationality and become unified?

Some may have new extended family roles because of a second marriage or because of a foster child. The stepfamily has a unique structure. The children, in the case of divorce, have a natural parent living elsewhere. The stepparent will not be just the same as the natural parents. Many stepchildren need time to develop close feelings for their new stepparents and siblings. Similar challenges may confront the parents of a foster child. Though adjustments may be difficult, the rewards are worth the sacrifice.

Too often, petty grievances are allowed to interfere with loving family relationships. We should remember that families provide the best environment in which to learn to forgive. Joseph who was sold into Egypt by his brothers is an example of how a forgiving attitude can bless and save lives. Rather than seeking revenge, Joseph saved his brothers and their families. (See Genesis 45–46.)

READ: Genesis 13:8–12; Exodus 18:13–27. In what ways do the examples of Abraham and Lot and of Moses and Jethro show how the Lord expects us to love and respect our extended families?

Extended families strengthen each other by working together towards common goals and by trying to meet the needs of other family members. Extended family members can offer support and unconditional love to those within the family who are struggling to overcome a debilitating habit, to meet a serious challenge, or to strengthen their testimonies. By serving each other, they can learn to have their "hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another" (Mosiah 18:21).

We Can Strengthen Family Relationships through Activities and through Prayer

Some extended family members live close together, but others do not. Some may be members of the Church while others may not be. Individuals and families can prayerfully select activities that will best help them develop loving relationships within their families.

When someone is the only member of an extended family to join the Church, she may feel isolated from her family. She should make efforts to include her relatives in activities. She could invite them to attend family events such as blessings of babies, baptisms, and ordinations.

When family members live far away from each other, they could remember birthdays and graduations and correspond through cards and letters.

Some extended families draw closer together through planned activities such as the following:

- Family organizations
- Family traditions
- Service or work projects to benefit each other
- Family reunions
- Family newsletters
- Family histories

Regardless of our locations or circumstances, there are ways of communicating that are unbounded by time and space. One of these is prayer. As Elder John H. Groberg stated, "I know of no single activity that has more potential for unifying our families and bringing more love and divine direction into our homes than consistent, fervent family prayer" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1982, p. 75; or *Ensign*, May 1982, p. 50).

Elder Groberg had to travel for three months from Salt Lake to Tonga to reach the mission field. He was filled with fear when he reached a stopping point at Suva, Fiji. The two elders who were to meet him and put him on a boat to Tonga did not arrive when expected. Elder Groberg was placed alone in a shed by immigration officials since he had no visa or onward ticket. He was homesick and afraid. As the sun lowered, he tried to lie down on the dirty, uneven cement floor. He prayed for guidance. Suddenly he felt "transported." He described his experience: "I didn't see anything or hear anything, in a physical sense; but, in a more real way, I saw a family in far-off Idaho kneeling together in prayer;

and I heard my mother, acting as mouth, say as clearly as anything can be heard, 'And bless John on his mission.' "

Elder Groberg felt peaceful relief and met the elders shortly thereafter. His family had prayed for him and strengthened him in his hour of need. We can call upon the same powers of heaven for our extended family members who may be far away from us, or who may not be members of the Church. Elder Groberg said: "Think of the power of the thousands of prayers of parents and grandparents and back and back even to Jacob and Isaac and Abraham and beyond, all requesting essentially the same thing: 'Bless my children. Bless my children. Bless my children.' Can you hear it as it rolls and echoes throughout all eternity?

"Let us all be part of that great power for good" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1982, pp. 77-79; or *Ensign*, May 1982, pp. 51-52).

Through extended family relationships, children and others can learn about the gospel. Consider an experience shared by Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone: "I have a sweet Aunt Beryl Hollindrake. She told me that when she was just three or four years old that my great-grandmother, her Grandmother Featherstone, would hold her on her lap and tell her about the Savior, all the beautiful stories. . . . She said, 'As my grandmother would tell me these stories, tears would stream down her cheeks.' And she said, 'It was on the lap of my grandmother that I learned to love the Savior with all my heart and soul' " (in Conference Report, Oct. 1974, p. 39; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1974, p. 30).

The Lord will help us as we strive to strengthen our extended family relationships. As we grow closer in mortality, we will know something of future eternal joy when we will live together "having [our] hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another" (Mosiah 18:21).

Additional Resource for Personal and Family Use

"Handbook for Families: Extending Family Relations," *Ensign*, Oct. 1986, pp. 56-59.

Suggestions for Teachers

1. You may wish to draw three circles on the chalkboard (the smaller ones inside the larger) to represent immediate, extended, and eternal families. Identify who might be found in each circle. Emphasize that every person is a member of a family unit.
2. Assign a sister to share positive experiences she has had in developing relationships with foster children, adopted children, or stepchildren or stepparents. Ask sisters to share ways to build relationships with in-laws.

How can extended family members offer support and unconditional love to those who are in difficult circumstances? Why is forgiveness so important in strengthening and unifying a family?

3. Discuss ways to strengthen extended families when members live close to each other, when they live far apart, or when they are not all members of the Church. Ask sisters to share how they use family organizations, traditions, work projects, newsletters, reunions, and other activities to bring families together. Use the stories by Elder Groberg and Elder Featherstone as illustrations.
4. Discuss ways to teach our children a greater appreciation and love for their extended family. (See *Family Home Evening Resource Book*, pp. 95–97.)