

# MORMON FATHERHOOD: CAN I REALLY SUCCEED?

by Eric Barton

I REMEMBER WELL my oldest son's first day of school. The event stands out so well because I had purposely planned it to be ostentatious, as it represented an occasion as memorable for me as I believed it was for him. I had taken the day off from work purchased two rolls of color film to record him dressing in the new clothes, eating breakfast, etc. By the time he finally entered the bus I had finished off the film—over fifty exposures in three hours.

However compulsive they appeared, my actions represented much more than excessive parental dotting. As my son left on the bus that day, I felt overwhelmingly proud because my wife and I had prepared him against the "ways of the world." We had read him the children's version of the Book of Mormon so often the page were worn through. We had coached him on what to expect in class. In general, we believed he was about as well prepared to resist drugs, sex, or profanity as a five year old could possibly be. We documented his first day out in the world to record the auspicious occasion when Mormon ideals and our effectiveness in teaching them went on trial. I knew we would win.

At the end of the first week I talked briefly with my son, looking for a report from the front line on just how successful I had been in preparing him. He said little until I finished the interrogation. At that point he queried "Do you know the F word?"

My thoughts bore out my compulsive nature as I said to myself: *He's ruined. How can we ever afford a private school?*

During the first month he mastered a variety of obscene gestures and catalogued swear words by their first letter. This process was perfected by constant rehearsal at the dinner table and was shown with pride by the boy to visiting relatives. His quick start in reading is probably due more to exposure to such words than to the picture book we had purchased. If there was a saving element during this dreary time, which usually found me sulking, it was that he understood little of the words' meaning.

I frequently puzzled over what had happened during these early months. The only

choice we had was to ignore him and hope his actions would disappear. And after a short time they did. But the concern began to haunt me that a time might well come when one of the children would choose to embrace such aberrant behavior with full understanding of its significance. My constant companion became the question: "How can I ensure that my children will accept and live the Gospel?" Mormonism is replete with scriptural and contemporary reminders of the great responsibility parents have to raise their children righteously. But it doesn't stop there. The consequences of failing are also described to a degree which leaves no room for partial success. President McKay's observation that "no success compensates for failure in the home" has left me with the feeling that the consequences of failure are so great, Mormon parenthood should not be attempted; at least it ought to be accompanied with a warning to "enter at your own risk."

During the April 1986 General Conference, President Benson seemed to speak to my concerns. He stated that regular study from the Book of Mormon with our families each day would ensure family spirituality and direct each member toward an adherence to long-term gospel living. For so long I had felt incapable of fulfilling my responsibilities that these words brought me relief and comfort. It seemed I had found my weapon against future filial reprisal. And it also seemed to be something realistic for the family. Isaiah and the olive trees might prove a little rough to explain, but there are so many action-oriented wars I was fairly certain the kids could do it.

As the conference talks continued, I listened more closely. For the first time in my life I took notes and resolved to list the various duties of fatherhood that, according to the speakers, would ensure happy homes, spirituality, etc. It seemed these people were telling me that in my domestic life, I could have it all. The directions were there. I merely had to follow them. I became convinced I could actually be successful in all areas of parenting, that the only possible reason for a wayward child in my family would be my failure to carry out the counsel I had received.

Shortly after that conference I completed the following detailed list of the various admonitions:

- 1) Family Night every Monday, one hour preparation time with children on Sunday.
- 2) Read scriptures nightly for 10-15 minutes with children.
- 3) Personal scripture reading daily—15-30 minutes.
- 4) Morning family prayer.
- 5) Morning personal prayer.
- 6) Nightly family prayer.
- 7) Nightly personal prayer with each child.
- 8) Nightly prayer with wife.
- 9) Nightly personal prayer.
- 10) Daily exercise—30-50 minutes.
- 11) Weekly date with wife.
- 12) Weekly interviews with each family member—30 minutes each.
- 13) Daily journal writing.
- 14) Help children with personal journals—daily.
- 15) Weekly family activity.
- 16) Visit family, friends, sick each Sunday.
- 17) Home teach monthly.
- 18) Make informal visits 2-3 times monthly to home teaching families.
- 19) Build food storage.
- 20) Attend temple monthly.
- 21) Increase professional competence through one night course per quarter.
- 22) Watch children while wife attends night school to complete degree and ensure family financial security.
- 23) Establish missionary fund for each boy.
- 24) Help boys in finding work to fund their missionary bank accounts.

At this point in making the list I could no longer even theorize how I could do it all. I had become so depressed I could hardly contemplate a successfully completed family night lesson. All the positive, energetic enthusiasm left immediately as I surrendered to the knowledge that I couldn't pull it off.

Each time I realize I cannot accommodate my list I feel guilt. I constantly try to reconcile my belief that these items are divinely inspired with the fact that I can barely do two or three or them adequately. And I live with the feeling that I am not doing all for my children that I should. In the worst of times I have felt I was the wrong "Father in Zion." During the darkest times when I have felt least able, I have even wondered what consequences quitting would have on the family ten or fifteen years from now.

Six months have passed since we implemented President Benson's suggestion. I still don't have a guarantee. I don't believe one exists. There is, however, an atmosphere of greater calm in our home than in the past. We still disagree and argue in our family. But each child seems to show a greater commitment to live the gospel, considering their social development and their exposure to harder pressures of youth. And, perhaps most amazing to me—children of five, seven, or ten enjoy reading verbs unusually conjugated and names which are difficult to pronounce. For me personally, I have been without guilt and learned to stop making lists.