

Bahá'í Family Life

INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold...*

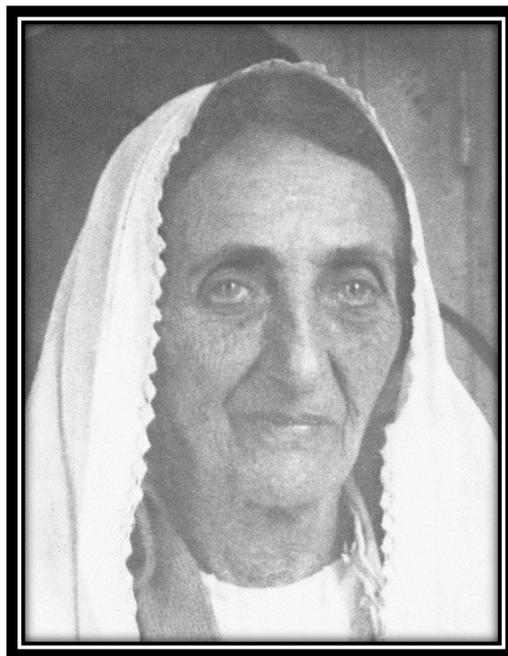
The Bahá'í Teachings assert the oneness of humankind and affirm the station of the family as the foundational unit of human society. Whatsoever is built and developed on a secure and firm foundation is sure to endure and flourish. Consequently, the dynamics of family life, and the prioritization of family values, must be founded on firmly established principles to help consolidate this very basic unit of society.

Marrying and raising a family is highly recommended in the Bahá'í Writings, but not obligatory. Bahá'u'lláh advises His believers: *“Enter into wedlock, O people, that ye may bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants. This is My bidding unto you; hold fast to it as an assistance to yourselves.”*¹ This directive upholds marriage and family life as the most desirable environment for the spiritual development of individuals and society, and assures the advancement and perpetuation of the human race.

Bahá'u'lláh further clarifies: *“He that bringeth up his son or the son of another, it is as though he hath brought up a son of Mine; upon him rest My glory, My loving-kindness, My mercy, that have compassed the world.”*²

This assures us that the family unit is not merely a material unit dependent upon blood or genetic relations, but also, a spiritual unit, composed of souls interacting with one another and developing toward their intended spiritual destiny.

This study explores Bahá'í principles that guide relationships among family members and identifies basic values that best establish and maintain love, unity and peace in the family. This lesson is not a complete presentation of Bahá'í family values and guiding principles, but is a primary overview of the basic fundamentals.



Bahíyyih Khánum, daughter of Bahá'u'lláh, entitled, the *Greatest Holy Leaf*

OBJECTIVE: *A look to the horizon...*

Facilitator

Review the following objective with the participants:

The objective of this study is to understand the fundamental verities or basic truths about Bahá'í family life.

¹ KA, p. 41

² KA, p. 37

THE STUDY PROCESS: *Attaining the water of life...*

Facilitator

Review the following study process with the participants. Then study the numbered quotations on the following pages, one at a time as described below.

1. **READING:** *A drink from the cup of guidance...*
Have two participants take turns reading the quotation out loud so that it is read twice.
2. **CONFIRMING MEANING:** *A spray from the fountain of light...*
 - A. If anyone would like to have better understanding of a word used in the quotation, now is the time to refer to its substitute phrase, definition or synonym, which can be found in the boxes below each quotation. Read the substitute phrase, definition or synonym out loud so everyone can hear.
 - B. Read the sentence again that contains the word you selected, while **substituting for that word**, its given phrase, definition or synonym from the box below the quotation.
 - C. If anyone would like a better understanding of another word, repeat the process above until everyone is satisfied with their understanding of the words in the quotation.
3. **FINDING VALUE:** *Mining the gems of truth...*
Take turns stating each basic fact or truth you can find in the quotation about Bahá'í family life.

QUOTATIONS: *Within the meadows of Thy nearness...*

1. The relationship between husband and wife must be viewed in the context of the Bahá'í ideal of family life. Bahá'u'lláh came to bring unity to the world, and a fundamental unity is that of the family. Therefore, one must believe that the Faith is intended to strengthen the family, not weaken it, and one of the keys to the strengthening of unity is loving consultation. The atmosphere within a Bahá'í family as within the community as a whole should express “the keynote of the Cause of God” which, the beloved Guardian has stated, “is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation”.

(From a letter of the Universal House of Justice, cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, p. 221, #734)

arbitrary: absolute authority; willfulness in one's preference or opinion
atmosphere: surrounding or pervading influence or condition
authority: exercise of power over thought, opinion, or behavior
consultation: “...true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *PUP*, pp. 72-73); “The ideal of Bahá'í consultation is to arrive at a unanimous decision.” (UHJ, *LOG*, p. 47)
context: light of meaning cast by interrelated passages
dictatorial: domineering, oppressive, or an arrogant overbearing [kind of]
Faith: the Bahá'í Faith

fellowship: companionship, friendly association, and mutual sharing
frank: free, straightforward, open, and sincere expression
fundamental: basic and essential
humble: free of pride, arrogance, and assertiveness [in]
ideal: standard of perfection or moral excellence
keynote: leading idea in a course of action
loving: feeling and expressing love, affection, and kindness [in]
power: to control, force, or decide
unity: (a) spiritual condition of harmony, agreement, peace and accord in human relations, free of conflict, dissension, contention and strife

2. The House of Justice suggests that all statements in the Holy Writings concerning specific areas of the relationship between men and women should be considered in the light of the general principle of equality between the sexes that has been authoritatively and repeatedly enunciated in the Sacred Texts. In one of His Tablets `Abdu'l-Bahá asserts: “In this divine age the bounties of God have encompassed the world of women. Equality of men and women, except in some negligible instances, has been fully and categorically announced. Distinctions have been utterly removed.” That men and women differ from one another in certain characteristics and functions is an inescapable fact of nature; the important thing is that `Abdu'l-Bahá regards such inequalities as remain between the sexes as being “negligible”.

(*Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986: The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*, p. 470, #272.2)

asserts: states positively
authoritatively: with rightful power
bounties: generous gifts and favors
categorically: absolutely, without qualification
characteristics: identifying traits and features
distinctions: differences in station or quality
encompassed: surrounded and included
enunciated: definitely stated and announced
equality: being identical in rank, quality, value, ⇨

and status
functions: naturally and properly intended purposes and activities
instances: cases or exceptions
negligible: unimportant enough to warrant little or no attention [type]
principle: governing truth or standard
utterly: to the fullest extent; totally

3. According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the family, being a human unit, must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother—none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father, likewise, has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honor of one, the honor of all.

(`Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 168)

arbitrary: ruled upon by one with absolute authority; determined by willfulness in one's preference or opinion
bond: uniting force
conserved: kept in a safe condition
considered: thought about carefully
honor: distinguished reputation for morality, nobility, and excellence of character
integrity: condition of remaining intact
obligations: moral duties and responsibilities
prerogatives: exclusive and special privileges

rights: powers or privileges to which one is justly entitled
sanctity: holiness of life and character
sustained: upheld and maintained
transgressed: passed over or violated
unit: part that makes up the whole
unity: spiritual condition of harmony, agreement, peace and accord in human relations, free of conflict, dissension, contention and strife
virtues: morally excellent qualities or traits

4. O ye who have peace of soul! Among the divine Texts as set forth in the Most Holy Book and also in other Tablets is this: it is incumbent upon the father and mother to train their children both in good conduct and the study of books; study, that is, to the degree required, so that no child, whether girl or boy, will remain illiterate.

(*Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 127)

conduct: manners of acting and behaving
illiterate: unable to read or write; uneducated

incumbent: imposed as a duty
train: direct the development by educating

5. The mother is the first teacher of the child. For children, at the beginning of life, are fresh and tender as a young twig, and can be trained in any fashion you desire. If you rear the child to be straight, he will grow straight, in perfect symmetry. It is clear that the mother is the first teacher and that it is she who establisheth the character and conduct of the child.

Wherefore, O ye loving mothers, know ye that in God's sight, the best of all ways to worship Him is to educate the children and train them in all the perfections of humankind; and no nobler deed than this can be imagined.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, p. 288, #639)

character: distinguishing traits, qualities, and nature
conduct: manners of acting and behaving
establisheth: originates and makes permanent

nobler: more superior, honorable, or excellent
perfections: highest qualities and attributes
rear: foster and raise
trained: directed in development by education

6. ...the father also has the responsibility of educating his children, and this responsibility is so weighty that Bahá'u'lláh has stated that a father who fails to exercise it forfeits his rights of fatherhood. Similarly, although the primary responsibility for supporting the family financially is placed upon the husband, this does not by any means imply that the place of woman is confined to the home.

(*Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986: The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*, pp. 472-73, #272.6)

confined: bound by limits
exercise: carry out and perform
fatherhood: being a father
financially: in matters pertaining to income and sustenance
forfeits: loses through neglect
imply: express indirectly
primary: first in order of

responsibility: role for which one is morally accountable
rights: powers or privileges to which one is justly entitled
supporting: providing a basis for the existence and subsistence of
weighty: serious and greatly important

7. *Beware lest ye commit that which would sadden the hearts of your fathers and mothers. Follow ye the path of Truth which indeed is a straight path. Should anyone give you a choice between the opportunity to render a service to Me and a service to them, choose ye to serve them, and let such service be a path leading you to Me. This is My exhortation and command unto thee. Observe therefore that which thy Lord, the Mighty, the Gracious, hath prescribed unto thee.*

(Bahá'u'lláh, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, p. 387, #824)

beware: be on guard and cautious
command: authoritative order and direction
commit: do or perpetrate
exhortation: word of advice and encouragement
Gracious: One abounding in grace and mercy
lest: for fear that

observe: conform your actions and comply with
prescribed: laid down authoritatively as a guide, direction, or rule of action
render: give in obligation
service: performance of beneficial deeds and works

8. *One of the distinguishing characteristics of this most great Dispensation is that the kin of such as have recognized and embraced the truth of this Revelation and have, in the glory of His name, the Sovereign Lord, quaffed the choice, sealed wine from the chalice of the love of the one true God, will, upon their death, if they are outwardly non-believers, be graciously invested with divine forgiveness and partake of the ocean of His Mercy.*

(Bahá'u'lláh, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, p. 386, #823)

characteristics: traits and qualities
dispensation: religious System that regulates human affairs under divine authority
distinguishing: set apart from others by prominent qualities [type of]
embraced: take to heart and accept readily and gladly
forgiveness: pardoning of sins and misdeeds

graciously: kindly and mercifully
invested: enveloped and infused
kin: relatives
mercy: kindness and compassion toward the condemned, the distressed, and the unfortunate
quaffed: drank deeply of
recognized: formally accepted and acknowledged

SHARING: *A breath from the spirit of inspiration...*

Facilitator

Ask the participants to complete the statements below. When everyone has finished, have each person share, in a round, the one thing that was most outstanding or inspiring and how it made him or her feel. Please remind everyone not to remark on the comments of others.

The one thing from the quotations that was the most outstanding or inspiring to me was _____

 It made me feel _____
 Explain _____

SOME QUESTIONS: *A gentle breeze from the testing winds...*

Facilitator

Ask the participants to answer the following questions. They can usually find answers in the quotations just studied or in the introduction. When everyone has finished, review the questions, then share and discuss the answers.

1. Hand of the Cause of God Abu'l-Qásim Faizi said parents should first strive to make their young children feel infinitely safe and secure. He further noted that, according to `Abdu'l-Bahá, we should gather the children together at the age of five and begin to teach them manners, politeness and love.¹ Which parent has the **primary** responsibility of providing this training during the early years of a child's life? _____
2. A state of harmony, agreement, peace and accord in human relations, free of conflict, dissension, contention and strife is the central theme of the Bahá'í Faith and the ideal of every Bahá'í family. We call it _____ .
3. Relationships between men and women should be considered in light of the general principle of _____ .

¹ TOE

4. The method for problem solving and decision-making in Bahá'í families is called
- a. voting. d. dictatorial authority.
 b. democracy. e. arbitrary power.
 c. consultation. f. a game of chance.
5. In this dispensation the woman should be the dominant decision maker in the family.
 true false
6. `Abdu'l-Bahá has written about the station of motherhood, saying: "...no nobler deed than this can be imagined." What is this "nobler deed"? _____
7. Service to one's parents may be considered service to _____.
8. In a document entitled, *Summary Policy Statement on Domestic Violence*, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States wrote: "...acts of domestic violence are at complete variance with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and that violence in the family is a practice to be condemned.... It encompasses behaviors in which one person uses coercion, intimidation, threats or violence to control the behavior of another. These behaviors usually escalate over time and may include verbal, physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuses, as well as neglect, property damage, terrorizing, corrupting, and stalking. In addition to the spiritual consequences for one who commits such acts, the above behaviors are violations of Bahá'í standards of conduct and may result in loss of Bahá'í administrative rights."¹ Acts of domestic violence in the family are condemned because they are contrary to the central theme of our Faith, which is _____
9. In consideration of the spiritual principles that are to guide the Bahá'í family, which of the following do you think are true? (Some of the answers are not covered in the quotations or the introduction, but will be affirmed in the closing letter at the end of this study.)
- a. It is a right of the parents to have their children obey them.
 b. It is a right of the mother to be told what to do by the father so she doesn't have to think.
 c. It is an obligation of the father to educate the children and provide for the family.
 d. It is a prerogative of the daughter to be educated, even before the son.
 e. It is a right of the child to be educated.
 f. It is a right of the wife to be supported by her husband.
 g. It is a right of the wife or mother to work outside of the home.
 h. It is a right of the mother and children to be financially supported by the father.
 i. It is sufficient for the father to work, provide for the education of the children, and do what his wife says.
 j. It is a right of the children to engage in consultation with their parents.
 k. It is a right of the children to be taught virtuous character.
 l. It is a right of the children to be provided an education by their parents.
 m. It is an obligation of the children to obey their parents.
 n. It is a right of the parent to verbally or physically intimidate (make timid or fearful) the children to make them obey.
 o. It is an obligation of the mother to educate the children.
 p. It is a right and obligation of family members to acquire spiritual virtues.
10. How do you think the following guidance from `Abdu'l-Bahá is accomplished: "All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained." _____
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¹ DDBC

APPLICATION: *Showing forth divine light...*

Facilitator

Read through the following paragraph together and proceed as stated. Then take time for the participants to write out their individual plans for action. When everyone has finished, move on to the closing reading.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote: *“It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action....”* Imagine how the Bahá'í Teachings in this study class could be translated into reality and action. Take turns sharing the possibilities. Begin your statements with: *“One could....”*

From your experience in this study class on Bahá'í family life, describe what *you* are inspired to put into reality and action. *I will make conscious efforts to...* _____

From a letter of the Universal House of Justice...

The House of Justice suggests that all statements in the Holy Writings concerning specific areas of the relationship between men and women should be considered in the light of the general principle of equality between the sexes that has been authoritatively and repeatedly enunciated in the Sacred Texts. In one of His Tablets 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts: “In this divine age the bounties of God have encompassed the world of women. Equality of men and women, except in some negligible instances, has been fully and categorically announced. Distinctions have been utterly removed.” That men and women differ from one another in certain characteristics and functions is an inescapable fact of nature; the important thing is that 'Abdu'l-Bahá regards such inequalities as remain between the sexes as being “negligible.”

The relationship between husband and wife must be viewed in the context of the Bahá'í ideal of family life. Bahá'u'lláh came to bring unity to the world, and a fundamental unity is that of the family. Therefore, one must believe that the Faith is intended to strengthen the family, not weaken it, and one of the keys to the strengthening of unity is loving consultation. The atmosphere within a Bahá'í family as within the community as a whole should express “the keynote of the Cause of God” which, the beloved Guardian has stated, “is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation.”

A family, however, is a very special kind of “community.” The Research Department has not come across any statements which specifically name the father as responsible for the “security, progress and unity of the family” ... but it can be inferred from a number of the responsibilities placed upon him, that the father can be regarded as the “head” of the family [see page 245]. The members of a family all have duties and responsibilities towards one another and to the family as a whole, and these duties and responsibilities vary from member to member because of their natural relationships. The parents have the inescapable duty to educate their children — but not vice versa; the children have the duty to obey their parents — the parents do not obey the children; the mother — not the father — bears the children, nurses them in babyhood, and is thus their first educator; hence daughters have a prior right to education over sons and, as the Guardian's secretary has written on his behalf, “The task of bringing up a Bahá'í child, as emphasized time and again in Bahá'í Writings, is the chief responsibility of the mother, whose unique privilege is indeed to create in her home such

conditions as would be most conducive to both his material and spiritual welfare and advancement. The training which a child first receives through his mother constitutes the strongest foundation for his future development..." A corollary of this responsibility of the mother is her right to be supported by her husband — a husband has no explicit right to be supported by his wife. This principle of the husband's responsibility to provide for and protect the family can be seen applied also in the law of intestacy which provides that the family's dwelling place passes, on the father's death, not to his widow, but to his eldest son; the son at the same time has the responsibility to care for his mother.

It is in this context of mutual and complementary duties, and responsibilities that one should read the Tablet in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives the following exhortation:

"O Handmaids of the All-Sufficing God!

"Exert yourselves, that haply ye may be enabled to acquire such virtues as shall honour and distinguish you amongst all women. Of a surety, there is no greater pride and glory for a woman than to be a handmaid in God's Court of Grandeur; and the qualities that shall merit her this station are an alert and wakeful heart; a firm conviction of the unity of God, the Peerless; a heartfelt love for all His maidservants; spotless purity and chastity; obedience to and consideration for her husband; attention to the education and nurturing of her children; composure, calmness, dignity and self-possession; diligence in praising God, and worshipping Him both night and day; constancy and firmness in His holy Covenant; and the utmost ardour, enthusiasm, and attachment to His Cause. ..."

This exhortation to the utmost degree of spirituality and self-abnegation should not be read as a legal definition giving the husband absolute authority over his wife, for, in a letter written to an individual believer on 22 July 1943, the beloved Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf:

"The Guardian, in his remarks ... about parents' and children's, wives' and husbands' relations in America, meant that there is a tendency in that country for children to be too independent of the wishes of their parents and lacking in the respect due to them. Also wives, in some cases, have a tendency to exert an unjust degree of domination over their husbands, which, of course, is not right, any more than that the husband should unjustly dominate his wife."

In any group, however loving the consultation, there are nevertheless points on which, from time to time, agreement cannot be reached. In a Spiritual Assembly this dilemma is resolved by a majority vote. There can, however, be no majority where only two parties are involved, as in the case of a husband and wife. There are, therefore, times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife, but neither should ever unjustly dominate the other. In short, the relationship between husband and wife should be as held forth in the prayer revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá which is often read at Bahá'í weddings: "Verily, they are married in obedience to Thy command. Cause them to become the signs of harmony and unity until the end of time."

These are all relationships within the family, but there is a much wider sphere of relationships between men and women than in the home, and this too we should consider in the context of Bahá'í society, not in that of past or present social norms. For example, although the mother is the first educator of the child, and the most important formative influence in his development, the father also has the responsibility of educating his children, and this responsibility is so weighty that Bahá'u'lláh has stated that a father who fails to exercise it forfeits his rights of fatherhood. Similarly, although the primary responsibility for supporting the family financially is placed upon the husband, this does not by any means imply that the place of woman is confined to the home. On the contrary, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated:

"In the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, women are advancing side by side with men. There is no area or instance where they will lag behind: they have equal rights with men, and will enter, in the future, into all branches of the administration of society. Such will be their elevation that, in every area of endeavour, they will occupy the highest levels in the human world." ... and again:

"So it will come to pass that when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, when they enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics, war will cease; ..."

In the Tablet of the World, Bahá'u'lláh Himself has envisaged that women as well as men would be breadwinners in stating:

“Everyone, whether man or woman, should hand over to a trusted person a portion of what he or she earneth through trade, agriculture or other occupation, for the training and education of children, to be spent for this purpose with the knowledge of the Trustees of the House of Justice.”

A very important element in the attainment of such equality is Bahá'u'lláh's provision that boys and girls must follow essentially the same curriculum in schools.

It is hoped that the above explanations and comments will help the Local Spiritual Assembly of ... to resolve the questions set forth in its letter.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

(The Universal House of Justice, Messages 1963 to 1986, pp. 470-73)

[Head of the family]

When the House of Justice stated that the “father can be regarded as the ‘head’ of the family,” ... This reference ... is based on the clear and primary responsibility of the husband to provide for the financial support of the wife and family, and on the provisions of the law of intestacy [when the individual dies without leaving a will] which assigns special functions and rights to the eldest son.

(The Universal House of Justice, Messages 1963 to 1986, p. 632)

ANSWERS: *Affirming treasures...*

1. the mother is the first teacher of the child
2. unity
3. equality between the sexes
4. c
5. false
6. to educate the children and train them in all the perfections of humankind
7. God
8. unity
9. a, c, d, e, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, o, and p
10. all answers are valuable

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