Marriage is a wonderful invention. To be sure, marriage is much more than that—it is God’s original and perfect plan for the human race. The challenge is that humans were perfect when marriage was given to them—and would you know it—as soon as they sinned, the first thing to go was the proverbial bliss. Adam blamed Eve for eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:12), and Eve blamed the serpent for making her forget God’s instructions (Genesis 3:13).

Getting married, for me, is like learning to drive. And marriage, like driving, is complex. Complexity suggests the presence of many intricate, difficult, elaborate, and convoluted pieces requiring intentional effort to acquire an adequate level of skill in order to increase the probability of success. Driver’s education—then—is a requirement by the municipality issuing the license that conveys concern for and interest in the person getting ready to drive, as well as for the community experiencing a new driver on its roads. The Church, as an institution that sanctions marriage, should do no less to express its devotion, dedication, and commitment to people by requiring premarital education (premarital counseling) before declaring a couple husband and wife.

Good premarital counseling (the North American Division recommends the use of the Prepare/Enrich inventories) should be administered in a structured and deliberate way by a pastor or other family professional who is duly certified to administer the process. This procedure should help couples develop a much better understanding of meaning premarital education will give couples an opportunity to deal with real life scenarios in order to help them head into marriage with their eyes wide open.

Meaningful premarital education will give couples an opportunity to deal with real life scenarios in order to help them head into marriage with their eyes wide open.

Please understand, I am not suggesting marriage only works in a perfect environment. Rather, my intention is to underscore that since no human is perfect, no marriage is perfect. This means that to remain married, all who enter into marriage should know ahead of time there will be bumps along the way. It is all about keeping one’s expectations in perspective. We are more likely to handle adverse situations better when we are aware such circumstances will come up, than when we expect to be sleeping in a bed of roses only to find out later roses come with thorns. As the saying goes, in every life some rain must fall.

In this edition of my musings I am interested in identifying how family life professionals and the Church can provide for couples during their first decade of marriage. What systems should be in place to provide the necessary education, mentoring, intervention, and safe places for couples to grow, even thrive, in what is obviously a challenging process?

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Pitfalls And Perils

The focus of this edition is on the first decade of married life. We examine the roles of mothers and fathers. We consider some of the adjustments that are necessary during these years, and in this piece we examine some of the dangers that threaten young marriages.

“On average, first marriages that end in divorce last about eight years.” This was reported in a Census Bureau release on the 18th of September 2007. It makes one wonder about the old “seven-year itch” theory that was dramatized in the film starring Marilyn Monroe.

Not that I’ve seen the movie, but the idea still floats around in our collective consciousness that people tend to get bored after a few years of marriage. Then, intentionally or unwittingly, they open themselves to the idea that flirting a little, or a lot, isn’t really such a bad thing. What’s so wrong with a little excitement? I’m not out to hurt anyone, I’m just having fun!

It’s so easy to turn a blind eye to that immutable law of human nature: one thing leads to another. How powerful the proclivity to blind oneself to the perils involved; how easy to turn a deaf ear to the counsel: “Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.”

Consider with me ten pointers that can help one to recognize when an infatuation is imminent or has already begun.
1. You feel excited when you are with that fascinating person.
2. You think about the person more than you do about most other people.
3. You find yourself wanting to be really nice to the person or to do small favors for him/her.
4. You find yourself wanting to give gifts to the person: cards, candy, etc.
5. You want to spend more time alone with that person than with others, and want to communicate with her/him by phone and email, more than with others.
6. You study the person’s schedule and create elaborate plans to “accidently” run into him/her, or you devise fanciful excuses to spend time together.
7. You talk about personal things with that person that you do not normally discuss with others.
8. You find yourself wanting to touch or hug the person or to receive affection from her/him.
9. You become aware that these things are also happening with the other person, or you fantasize that the person feels the way you do.
10. You try to hide what is happening from others – especially your spouse.

Whether you are experiencing a one-sided crush or the beginnings of mutual attraction that is leading toward a romance, this is very serious business. Unless you take immediate action to counteract the beguiling fascination with this new love interest, one thing will lead to the next until the infatuation becomes an affair, and your marriage falters.

What to do? Of course prevention is better than cure. So make a covenant with your eyes not to look at anyone with romantic or lustful intent. Steer your imagination away from mind-sex fantasies. Accept the reality that you can and will be tempted sooner or later. Have a carefully crafted plan of escape when circumstances conspire to set you up for infidelity. Communicate freely and often with your spouse about threats to the security of the marriage. Secrecy and intrigue often fuel affairs, so cultivate an open and transparent relationship with a same-gender person who will keep you honest.

The beginnings of unfaithfulness can often be traced to dissatisfaction and discord at home.

The Adventist Association of Family Life Professionals Newsletter
Positive Parenting

with Susan E. Murray

The Value of a Mother

Jesus understood the value of a mother and knows the burden of every mother’s heart. He made a long journey to relieve the anxious heart of a Canaanite woman. He gave back to the widow of Nain her only son. His own mother struggled with life’s difficulties, and from the cross He made provision for her welfare.

While countless poems, inspirational words, and testimonies attest to the value of a mother and while leaders (religious and otherwise) attest to the importance of mothers, the work they do and challenges they face are marginalized in many sectors of American society.

Mothers themselves tend to minimize their own value and the importance of what they do, and often don’t feel up to the task. While children don’t need a perfect mother nor one who feels compelled to be super-mom, one factor significantly affects the quality of life of the mother and her ability to provide the needed care for her children.

We are beginning to understand more about the support needed by mothers, which is particularly important during the first ten years of marriage when the children are small. While there are similarities in all mother’s experiences, each goes on an individual journey. But there are transition times when women are especially vulnerable during their mothering journey. One is right after a baby is born. The stress of caring for a new infant and the effects of hormonal changes are not always acknowledged.

It is estimated that one in every two women experience what is commonly referred to as “baby blues,” though some believe that as many as 80% of women experience varying levels of despondent feelings for 2-5 days after delivery.

Tearfulness, moodiness, feelings of isolation, headaches, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, or difficulties concentrating may continue for a few hours or for up to 10 days in some cases. This condition generally resolves itself without any need for medical intervention. These mood swings are usually due to changing hormone levels in the woman’s body and are considered normal following childbirth.

Sometimes the terms “baby blues” and “postpartum depression” are used interchangeably, but they are actually different. The symptoms of postpartum depression last longer and are more severe. Some mothers don’t begin to feel depressed until several weeks or months after childbirth. The identification of what we now call postpartum depression goes back to the 1850s when it was first recognized by psychiatric professionals. As early as 700 B.C. Hippocrates wrote of the emotional difficulties many women faced during the postpartum period. Symptoms include those of the baby blues, but also may include thoughts of hurting the baby, thoughts of hurting herself, and not having interest in the baby. Women with these experiences need treatment from a physician.

Studies of depressed parents have mainly focused on mothers, as they are the ones who most frequently interact with their babies. Depressed mothers look at their infants less often, touch them less often, have fewer positive facial expressions, and vocalize with infants less often than do non-depressed mothers. They also show less affection, play less with them, and see their little ones in a more negative light.

In the first months and years of a child’s life the mind is like a sponge, absorbing everything that his senses take in (sounds, tastes, images, smells, etc.) The pace at which children become masters of their world depends on the order and sequences of learning that are reflected in their environment, and a mother has much to do with that environment.

A mother’s ability to perceive her baby’s signals accurately and respond appropriately to those needs is a major contributor to her baby’s secure attachment. So when mothers (and fathers) are sensitive, responsive, warm, accepting, and attentive to the rhythms of their baby’s behavior and individuality, they foster a secure attachment. That secure attachment positively impacts a child’s emotional, social, and cognitive development.

“The children of our hearths are as much the purchase of His blood as were the children of long ago. . . .Let mothers come to Jesus with their perplexities. They will find grace sufficient to aid them in the care of their children. The gates are open for every mother who would lay her burdens at the Saviour’s feet. He who said, ‘Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not’ (Mark 10:14), still invites mothers to bring their little ones to be blessed by Him,” (Ministry of Healing, 42).
Parsonage Perspective

with Alanzo and June Smith

The Father’s Role in the Character Development of Young Children

Tucked away in the first book of Samuel¹ is an intriguing story about King Saul and his son, Jonathan. It appears that the relationship between father and son became strained, partly because the King was jealous over the strong bond of brotherly love that he saw developing between Jonathan and David.

Saul hated David because he saw him as a threat to his kingdom. The young man’s military successes and popularity among the soldiers and the common people led Saul to fear that David would assassinate him and destroy his dynasty.

Although still a young man, Jonathan had been Saul’s trusted advisor, but he began to recognize with alarm that the King was becoming increasingly unstable and fickle. On one occasion, Saul planned a formal banquet for the dignitaries of the kingdom, and expected that David would be among the honored guests.

Fearing for his life, David decided to stay away and asked Jonathan to make an excuse to the King for his absence. Saul’s suspicions were aroused after David failed to show up on the second day of the feast, and when Jonathan offered his friend’s excuse, the enraged King threw a javelin at his son.

One might suppose that Jonathan’s response to his father’s irrational actions would be to follow the depraved example set by the king, to become defiant and rebellious, and ultimately to sink into dissipation and profligacy.

On the contrary, “In Jonathan, the son of Saul, the Lord saw a man of pure integrity—one to whom He could draw nigh, and upon whose heart He could move.”²

While there is much truth wrapped up in the old saying that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, in the case of Saul and Jonathan it is clear that from a perverse father may come a righteous son – an important source of hope for single mothers and their sons.

Sadly, the negative influence of unrighteous fathers and the lack of positive paternal influence in the lives of fatherless children are all too evident in society.

For example:

• 85% of all youths sitting in prisons grew up in a fatherless home.³

According to a 1999 report of the Department of Health and Human Services, children from fatherless homes are:

• 32 times more likely to run away
• 20 times more likely to end up in prison
• 20 times more likely to have behavioral disorders
• 14 times more likely to commit rape
• 10 times more likely to abuse chemical substances
• 9 times more likely to drop out of school
• 9 times more likely to end up in a state operated institution
• 5 times more likely to commit suicide

On the other hand, children growing up with fathers in the home are more likely to develop positive character traits. Various studies indicate that fathers are important to the wellbeing of young children. Positive father involvement in the early life of children has been associated with:

• Higher academic scores.⁹
• Higher levels of socio-emotional development.¹⁰
• Lower levels of psychological distress.¹¹

Questions for Discussion

1. In an age where privacy is prized and individualism isolates, how can a church community draw people in young marriages into a network of mutuality where they can receive support and care when things go wrong?

2. Does the notion of the seven-year itch create a sense that marriages are destined to fail, so what’s the use trying to fight against the inevitable?
Perspective from page 4

• Better marital relations, and relationships in general; both in childhood and in later life.¹²
• Positive effects on self-confidence in children.¹³
• Lower levels of behavioral problems, conduct problems and delinquency;
• Less depression and more life satisfaction;
• Positive social behavior, social competence and popularity;
• Positive network support.¹⁴

The instruction to “train up a child in the way he should go” (Prov 22:6) includes the assumption that the father must be a part of that training.

Inherent in many Bible passages is the expectation of a son adhering to the instructions of his father.
• My son hear the instructions of thy father (Prov 1:8)
• My son if thou wilt receive my words (Prov 2:1)
• My son attend to my word (Prov 4:20)
• My son attend unto my wisdom (Prov 5:1)
• My son keep thy father’s commandments (Prov 6:20)
• A wise son maketh a glad father (Prov 10:1)
• I wise son heareth his father’s instructions (Prov 13:1)

What is implied in these texts is that the father is a good role model and that he is there to give good instructions to his children. The instruction to “train up a child in the way he should go” (Prov 22:6) includes the assumption that the father must be a part of that training. Certainly, the father’s role in the home in character training for young children should never be underestimated. It ensures security and provides the child with a clear model of the role of a man/father in the family.

Pastors and Family Life Professionals can have a profound influence on the families and children of the parish by providing support and encouragement to fathers to remain faithful to their familial responsibilities. Theirs is an awesome privilege to bless their children by their example and to shape their children’s characters through wise instruction.

Questions for Discussion

1. What can local church leaders do to undergird the efforts of young fathers as they shoulder their responsibilities toward their children?
2. How can the local church provide support for children and mothers in fatherless homes?

Alanzo Smith is the director of Family Ministries and Communications in the Greater New York Conference. June Smith is a professor at Long Island University.

¹¹Sam 20:1 ff.
¹²White, E.G. Sons and Daughters of God 208
¹³Fulton County Georgia jail populations & Texas Dept. of Corrections, 1992
¹⁴Center for Disease Control
¹⁵Criminal Justice & Behavior, Vol. 14, p. 403-26
¹⁶National Principals Association Report on the state of High Schools
¹⁷U.S. Dept. of Justice, Special Report Sept., 1988
¹⁸US Bureau of the Census
²²Amato, P. “Father-Child Relations, Mother-Child Relations, and Offspring Psychological Well-Being in Early Adulthood,” Journal of Marriage and the Family 56, 1994
Presidentially Speaking

with Jorge Mayer

Strengthening the Marriage Bond

In God’s original plan, marriage and family existed for the purpose of allowing His children to grow and mature individually and in relationship with each other. All living creatures grow and mature, and it should not be any different for those made in the Creator’s image.

Change is inevitable, but not always pleasant. Leaving the mother’s womb is the first step toward an independent existence. This is a painful process for the baby. But as each new growing stage is experienced and accepted, the child gains strength and confidence.

In marriage there are stages which help us grow and mature. These can also be painful and uncomfortable at first, but once accepted, one realizes a sense of completeness and fulfillment. We find it hard to imagine how it would have been if we had not moved on to the next stage.

After the wedding, couples begin to look at life from the perspective of a “duet” instead of the “solo” of one’s pre-marriage life. They start giving themselves more fully to each other and learn to incorporate their chosen partners into the daily routines of life. As the years go by, what initially seemed so difficult to adjust to (different bed times, food preferences, ways of shopping, etc.) becomes a natural part of life. This happens because each partner is determined to become one with the other.

Following the initial stages of marriage are more adjustments—a sure sign that the marriage is growing and maturing. Unless marriage partners continue to grow individually, the health and wellbeing of the marriage will likely be compromised.

Change and growth come about because individuals embrace a vision and combine their efforts to achieve a goal.

Couples who are able to look back and trace their progress toward maturity are to be congratulated for the effort invested and the adjustments made. But there is no stopping place, no vacation from the inevitability of change.

To make their happiness complete, many couples decide to bring children into their homes believing that this will greatly enrich their lives. There is no denying that joy and laughter come to couples when the little ones come along, but “Nothing brings so much happiness as well as stress to marriage, like the arrival and education of children. It is generally expected that they will unite the couple and add purpose and meaning to their relationship. Research has demonstrated the opposite though. Married couples with children register less satisfaction and intimacy than those who do not have children. The level of satisfaction is higher before the coming of children and after they leave.”

Without going into all the many challenges and changes that come about during the move from “solo” to “duet,” it can be confidently asserted that becoming a “trio” or “quartet” can be significantly more challenging. Even though each new addition is a very real part of the parents, she or he brings new realities, needs, preferences, priorities, and a unique individuality to the family.

To succeed in this stage in the way you wish and deserve, the following three ingredients will be essential:

Steer your heart

Firstly, you have to commit to steering your heart and not be steered by it. Your heart is the most important part of you. It is the center of your being, where your “true identity resides.” It is the “headquarters” of your operations. “When you look into your heart, you see what you are really like.”

People say: “Follow your heart!” This is the guru’s philosophy of the New Age, the self-help seminars and the romantic pop songs. Since it sounds very romantic and noble, it sells millions of songs and books. The problem is that following your heart means doing whatever suits you at the moment, right or wrong. It means ignoring the protests of conscience and prudent caution, and instead, willfully following impulse and disregarding logic and good advice. God said: “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but whoever walks wisely will be delivered.”

People forget that feelings and emotions are superficial and fickle. They fluctuate according to the circumstances. Essentially, our hearts are selfish and sinful. Because of that, and in order for your family to continue growing, maturing and heading to where you want it to be, you need to steer your heart. This means to take responsibility for its condition and direction.

If you are now wondering: “How do I steer my heart?” allow me to suggest three simple but significant steps to take:

A. Understand where your heart is—that’s where your treasure will be.

B. Protect your heart. When it is tempted by something inappropriate, or even by something that is good in
itself, it is your responsibility to protect your heart against the temptation. No matter how noble, do not let work or money, or any other priority get between you, your spouse, and your family.

C. Make a sincere investment from the heart! Don’t postpone putting effort into improving your primary relationships until you feel like doing it. Don’t wait until you have special feelings of love for your spouse before you demonstrate your love. Dedicate yourself to your marriage and children. Spend time with them, buy presents, and write letters. Make a date with your spouse, just the two of you. Do the same with each of your children. The more your heart invests in your family, the more value the relationship will have.\(^3\)

**Children, the new priority**

Secondly, acknowledge that it is essential to be committed to raising your children well. It is very likely that bringing them up will require changes in your life; your finances will likely be affected, and you may need to make a significant redistribution of your means. The use of your time will probably require major adjustments since children need you to take them to music class, football matches, or drama rehearsals. But those changes are worthwhile. Your children deserve your time and your presence much more than the material things you could provide, like an iPod, laptop, iPhone, or car.

Society exerts a molding and shaping influence upon your children that, in many ways, is inconsistent with your values and the vision you have for them. Phil McGraw states that more than 50% of students cheat in their tests, plagiarize their assignments, buy drugs through the Internet, watch pornography, and have oral sex as early as 12-13 years of age.\(^4\) Since parents cannot completely eliminate the bad influences, they need to create significant and consistently positive experiences to counteract the negative and degrading influences of society. It may sometimes seem that our children do not value our instruction, or that they even resist it. But parents must remain undeterred, remembering that raising a family is not a rehearsal, but a critically important 24-7 job that continues for more than twenty years.

To neutralize the pernicious influence of society over your children, have frequent and open discussions about what they are exposed to in the media and from their environment. As they listen to your reasoning about why some things have value while other things are detrimental, their analytical abilities will develop, and they will be better prepared to make wise decisions based on an understanding of why you encourage certain practices and endorse certain beliefs.

Both parents should remember to be consistent when it comes to applying discipline. In a home where there is love (abundant love) and well-defined and age-appropriate limits, children will develop a healthy self-esteem, a higher respect for authority, and a more elevated level of religiosity. Those children will be stronger to resist counter-cultural influences like drug addiction, promiscuity, and vandalism.\(^7\)

**A special place for your spouse**

Thirdly, remember that even though children require special attention in your life, your spouse must receive even more from you than they do.

One of our functions as parents is to prepare our children in such a way that, at the appropriate time, they will be capable of flying, and will know how to do it well. Though our love for them is strong and enduring, our children will likely seek independence and distance from us. And when they leave, their parents will have to make the inevitable “empty nest” adjustments.

When that happens, your conversations may include the life and welfare of your children, but that subject may not create an intimate relationship. Refocus the energies and efforts that you expended looking after your children toward nourishing your relationship with your spouse. Thoughtfully and caringly develop a friendship that will make you want to spend the rest of your lives together.

Jorge Mayer continues to serve as president of AAFLP. His busy life includes his wife and family and his ministry as a vice-president for the Southern Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

1. How can one maintain a healthy balance between listening respectfully to what the heart says, while deferring in decision-making to what reason and conscience have to say?

2. What attitudinal changes are needed when the couple increases the complexity of their “music making” from “duet” to “trio” or “quartet?”

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1. Garland and Garland, Marriage for Better or For Worse, 121
2. Proverbs 27:19 NIRV
3. Proverbs 28:26 KJV
4. See Jeremiah 17:9; Matthew 15:19
5. Stephen & Alex Kendrick, The Love Dare, 210-214
7. Dr. Rubén Hill, Family Development in Three Generations: A Longitudinal Study of Changing Patterns of Planning and Achievement

**Questions for discussion**

1. How can one maintain a healthy balance between listening respectfully to what the heart says, while deferring in decision-making to what reason and conscience have to say?
2. What attitudinal changes are needed when the couple increases the complexity of their “music making” from “duet” to “trio” or “quartet?”
Musings from page 1

of the person they believe they are in love with and hope to spend the rest of their lives with. Meaningful premarital education will give couples an opportunity to deal with real life scenarios in order to help them head into marriage with their eyes wide open.

The local congregation should be a place where marriage is valued. To value marriage means to be intentional about planning for the continuing education of couples after marriage. Developing marriage clubs in which younger couples engage in regular conversation and study with more mature and stable couples provides an opportunity for mentoring and stability. Hosting marriage retreats on a regular basis, allows for couples to sharpen their communication and problem solving skills in order to effectively deal with issues that ordinarily remain unresolved.

Since the first decade of marriage involves many transitions—getting used to each other, bringing children into the home, experiencing the various changes of the parenting cycle [infants, toddlers, preschoolers, school-age children], purchasing a first home, and managing all those processes while attempting to keep marriage interesting and viable—family life professionals must help churches develop family ministries infrastructures to assist couples to succeed at marriage.

While marriage is complicated, demanding, and challenging, once the church and family life professionals help communicate this reality—the fact that marriage is difficult no longer matters since you expect it to be, have prepared for it, and are ready to meet its demands with the power and grace of God—through systems that are in place.

Willie Oliver is director of Family Ministries for the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Executive Director of the Adventist Association of Family Life Professionals.

Questions for Discussion

1. What practical resources does your church have available to assist couples to deal with the challenges of the first decade of marriage?

2. What kind of “make-over” does your church need in order for it to become a resource center that will attract members of the community who could benefit from focused ministry to young couples?

Parenting from page 3

There is good news and bad news. The good news is that babies of mothers who are successfully treated for depression have shown no long-term negative effects. However, preschool and older children of mothers with chronic depression show ongoing negative outcomes. Children sense unspoken messages like, “Don’t be happier that I am because I’ll feel worse.” They may decide they shouldn’t go to their mother (or father) for help because it will make their parent’s life harder. They may believe they need to make up for what the parent is unable to accomplish, or may feel they need to take care of their parent.

The role of family members, churches, and the broader community is crucial in the lives of mothers, especially those who experience depression. Family Life Professionals and Pastors who are alert to the needs of mothers can play a pivotal role in arranging for appropriate support, particularly during those transition times when it is so essential for the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental health of both mothers and their children.

Sue Murray teaches at Andrews University in the areas of Family Studies and Social Work. She is a spouse, passionate mother, grandmother and loyal friend.

Questions for Discussion

1. What resources are available in the local church to provide support for mothers in the early weeks and months following childbirth?

2. How can Family Life Professionals best address the special needs of women who are experiencing post-partum depression?

July 18, 2 - 5 pm
Research Forum & Reception
Andrews University