

Relationship, Marriage, and Family Education in the Bahá'í Faith Community *Potential Ideas to Consider from Marriage Transformation®*

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This document invites Bahá'ís and Bahá'í communities to engage as appropriate, needed, and timely in relationship, marriage, and family education for building happy, unified, and lasting character-based marriages and families.

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Any questions about the application of marriage laws in the community should be directed to the Bahá'í institutions:

“... [T]he provision of guidance on administrative matters such as the laws of engagement, marriage, and divorce falls under the purview of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies...” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, September 24, 2014)

Marriages and families are complex and socially vital entities that form the foundation of society. The Bahá'í community and its institutions have a strong interest in forming healthy and unified marriages and families. The Bahá'í Covenant from Bahá'u'lláh draws into unity all people and entities in the community. As individuals, married couples, and families stay connected to and faithful to this Covenant, they increase their opportunity to be unified.

The Universal House of Justice provides this guidance:

“...[Y]oung women and men become acutely conscious of the exhortations of the Supreme Pen to ‘enter into wedlock’ that they may ‘bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants’.... ...This generation of youth will form families that secure the foundations of flourishing communities. Through their growing love for Bahá'u'lláh and their personal commitment to the standard to which He summons them will their children imbibe the love of God, ‘commingled with their mother’s milk’, and always seek the shelter of His divine law.” (Universal House of Justice, Framework for Action, #35)

DEFINING RELATIONSHIP and MARRIAGE EDUCATION

Systematic Relationship and Marriage Education Based on the Bahá'í Writings

It's important to note that there is no one system for Bahá'í relationship, marriage, and family education that exists. The methods and focus for any of these types of educational efforts will vary significantly across the planet depending on the needs of the population, available resources, and venues. How scientific findings are included will vary as well. Below are quotations about the organic evolution underway.

“As you know, courtship practices differ greatly from one culture to another, and it is not yet known what pattern of courtship will emerge in the future when society has been more influenced by Bahá’í Teachings. However, there is no indication that it will resemble the practices extant in existing cultures.... In this interim period, the friends are encouraged to make great efforts to live in conformity with the Teachings and to gradually forge a new pattern of behavior, more in keeping with the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation.” (Universal House of Justice, August 28, 1994, to an individual, published in *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!*, 3rd ed., p. 141)

“Besides assisting couples through their professional expertise, counselors can draw upon their insights into the Bahá’í Teachings to provide further assistance, such as by encouraging them to develop the skill of consultation and by helping them to distinguish concepts and practices current in society from those found in the Teachings. The views of professionals and of the wider society that are contrary to the Teachings will naturally have an impact on the friends in this age of transition. As the community grows in strength and as the Teachings become more fully understood and practiced by Bahá’ís, the distinctive characteristics of Bahá’í family life will become increasingly apparent.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, September 24, 2014)

Communities will make decisions about whether to use materials already developed by a variety of people, organizations, and institutions or those that develop locally as needed. The people involved will utilize study of the guidance, consultation, learning-in-action, and reflection to discern what works. As materials evolve as part of the Ruhi Institute offerings, family life will also likely be part of the institute process of community building and service.

A Description of Relationship, Marriage, and Family Education

The field of relationship, marriage, and family education focuses on strengthening knowledge and skills in individuals, couples, and families as well as on preventing future problems. It’s aimed at empowering people to create marriages that provide healthy and happy stability and unity for families and communities. It includes results from scientific research as well as the experience of professionals working with clients, participants, and groups. This education can include such activities as reading books, studying in groups, taking courses in-person and online, participating in workshops, mentoring, and counseling. This education provides important knowledge, skills, and attitudes about relationships, marriage, re-marriage to someone new, parenting, and family functioning to foster a gradual and organic transformation process. When the fruits of this field are paired with and influenced by the Bahá’í teachings, there is a powerful harmony of resources.

This type of education builds capacity and understanding and increases competencies. Ideally, it equips people to be healthy individuals with many character strengths who can then be successful partners in a relationship and then marriage. It includes preparation for relationships and marriage for individuals and couples of all ages and experience levels. It provides marriage-strengthening tools for healthy married couples who want to continue learning, growing, and developing. It pairs well with spiritual and professional counseling for challenged marriages. It includes skill-building for those who are parenting, and it provides assistance for those forming and maintaining families. Ideally, this type of education continues across the life span of couples and families.

Relationship, marriage, parenting, and family education serves:

- unmarried individuals interested in learning about relationships and how to prepare for them

- couples considering and involved in friendship, dating, courtship, and marriage
- unmarried individuals and couples considering marrying again after divorce or death of a partner
- parents of individuals considering dating, courtship, consent, engagement, and marriage
- newly married couples
- couples experiencing the usual ups and downs of married life
- couples experiencing external tests that are affecting their relationship
- couples in life-stage transitions; such as, becoming parents, guiding those in teen-age years, their children leaving home, or retirement
- parents who want to raise children according to Bahá'í principles
- couples with strong marriages who enjoy enriching their marriage further
- challenged married couples who need knowledge and skill-building

What Relationship, Marriage, and Family Education is Not

Relationship, marriage, and family education is not counseling or therapy; although counselors can use it along with their services. It's not generally for couples and families in active crisis who are dealing with major issues most suited to be addressed with a counselor. Although marriage education can provide skill building and assistance for challenged couples considering separation or divorce, these couples usually need additional help from a trained couples' counselor and consultation with a Spiritual Assembly.

The *timing* of education sometimes may not be appropriate when there is an active crisis or sudden decline. Symptoms of crisis may include:

- ongoing signs of estrangement or aversion
- daily conflict
- any type of coercive, abusive, violent, or addictive behavior
- infidelity (including pornography use)

Seriously challenged couples and families may find education in groups or workshops to be discouraging or difficult where others are having a much healthier experience in their relationships. Troubled individuals may also disrupt the experience for or discourage others who are not in crisis.

SOME FOUNDATION STATEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES

The following statements and quotations outline the role of Assemblies, describe marriage as the foundational element of society, underscore the significance of Bahá'í marriage and family unity as a model, and emphasize the essential art of consultation (and other knowledge and skills).

Assemblies may wish to reflect on these statements and share them periodically with those they serve. This may expand everyone's awareness of the importance of working conscientiously to build strong marriages and families, both for their own sakes and for the ultimate sake of the Bahá'í Faith and humanity.

Some purposes of marriage and family

“And when He [God] desired to manifest grace and beneficence to men, and to set the world in order, He revealed observances and created laws; among them He established the law of marriage, made it as a fortress for well-being and salvation, and enjoined it upon us in that which was sent down out of the heaven of sanctity in His Most Holy Book [*The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*]. He saith, great is His glory: ‘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.’” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Bahá’í Prayers* (US 2002), p. 118)

“The creation and rearing of children is a primary purpose of marriage. The Bahá’í Writings emphasize the mother’s role in the early education of a child, but both parents are held accountable for the health, education, and well-being of the child.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, #2324*)

“Marriage is a very sacred institution. Bahá’u’lláh said its purpose is to promote unity. [We] are trying to create a high moral standard, and reinstate the sanctity of marriage.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. I, #903*)

“The Bahá’í teachings on sexual morality center on marriage and the family as the bedrock of the whole structure of human society and are designed to protect and strengthen that divine institution. Bahá’í law thus restricts permissible sexual intercourse to that between a man and the woman to whom he is married.” (Note #134 appended to *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*)

Assemblies have a responsibility to educate the community about marriage and to respond to requests for help

“The Spiritual Assembly should always be concerned that the believers in its community are being deepened in their understanding of the Bahá’í concept of marriage, especially the young people, so that the very thought of divorce will be abhorrent to them.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance, #1304*)

“The House of Justice is distressed to learn that you and your husband are continuing to experience marital difficulties. It has frequently advised believers in such situations to turn to the Spiritual Assemblies for advice and counsel, and to follow this advice in their efforts to preserve the unity of their marital relationship. It has been found useful in many instances to also seek the assistance of competent professional marriage counselors, who can provide useful insights and guidance in the use of constructive measures to bring about a greater degree of unity.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, “Preserving Bahá’í Marriages”, p. 459*)

Fostering obedience to the Bahá’í marriage laws is an important duty of Spiritual Assemblies

“The carrying out of the Bahá’í marriage laws, as given to the friends throughout the world, is a vital obligation of every believer who wishes to marry, and it is an important duty of every Local Spiritual Assembly to ensure that these laws are known to, and obeyed by, the believers within their jurisdiction, whether or not the Bahá’í marriage ceremony is recognized by civil law. Each Assembly, therefore, must

conscientiously carry out its responsibilities in connection with the holding of Bahá'í marriage ceremonies, the recording of Bahá'í marriages in a register kept for this purpose, and the issuing of Bahá'í marriage certificates." (Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963 to 1986*, pp. 488-489)

Marital and family unity among the Bahá'ís builds credibility for their message to the world about unity; seriously courting a partner and maintaining marriages are part of an individual's and couple's service to God

"...[I]f the friends are not able to maintain harmony within their families, on what other basis do they hope to demonstrate to a skeptical world the efficacy of the pre-eminent character of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh? What possible influence could they hope to exert on the development of nations and the establishment of world peace?" (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, #740)

"... [E]very aspect of a person's life is an element of his or her service to Bahá'u'lláh: the love and respect one has for one's parents; the pursuit of one's education; the nurturing of good health; the acquiring of a trade or profession; one's behavior towards others and the upholding of a high moral standard; one's marriage and the bringing up of one's children; one's activities in teaching the Faith and the building up the strength of the Bahá'í community, whether this be in such simple matters as attending the Nineteen Day Feast or the observance of Bahá'í Holy Days, or in more demanding tasks required by service in the administration of the Faith; and, not least, to take time each day to read the Writings and say the Obligatory Prayer, which are the source of growing spiritual strength, understanding, and attachment to God." (The Universal House of Justice, December 7, 1992, European Bahá'í Youth Council; www.bahairesearch.com)

Relationship and marriage preparation are key elements in establishing healthy marriages

"... [T]here is nothing in the Bahá'í Writings which relates specifically to the so-called dating practices prevalent in some parts of the world, where two unmarried people of the opposite sex participate together in a social activity. In general, Bahá'ís who are planning to involve themselves in this form of behavior should become well aware of the Bahá'í Teachings on chastity and, with these in mind, should scrupulously avoid any actions which would arouse passions which might well tempt them to violate these Teachings. In deciding which acts are permissible in the light of these considerations, the youth should use their own judgment, giving due consideration to the advice of their parents, taking account of the prevailing customs of the society in which they live, and prayerfully following the guidance of their conscience. It is the sacred duty of parents to instill in their children the exalted Bahá'í standard of moral conduct, and the importance of adherence to this standard cannot be over-emphasized as a basis for true happiness and for successful marriage." (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: February 5, 1992, to an individual)

"Careful preparation for marriage is an essential first step in the preservation of Bahá'í marriage." (World Centre Research Department in memorandum for Preserving Bahá'í Marriages compilation, item 3)

Building knowledge and skills with character/virtues supports relationships and marriages as well as all aspects of the Core Activities [devotional gatherings, study circles, children’s classes, and junior youth spiritual empowerment groups], each of which can include a focus on character; parents have a vital role in building strong characters in their children

“Bahá’í marriage is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must, however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, #86)

“No less pertinent [than rectitude of conduct] to the success of the Bahá’í enterprise today are the Guardian’s forthright comments on the importance of a chaste and holy life, ‘with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness’. He was unequivocal in his language, summoning the friends to a life unsullied ‘by the indecencies, the vices, the false standards, which an inherently deficient moral code tolerates, perpetuates, and fosters’. ... The forces at work on the hearts and minds of the young, to whom the Guardian directed his appeal most fervently, are pernicious indeed. Exhortations to remain pure and chaste will only succeed to a limited degree in helping them to resist these forces. What needs to be appreciated in this respect is the extent to which young minds are affected by the choices parents make for their own lives, when, no matter how unintentionally, no matter how innocently, such choices condone the passions of the world—its admiration for power, its adoration of status, its love of luxuries, its attachment to frivolous pursuits, its glorification of violence, and its obsession with self-gratification. ... May every one of them [the youth] come to know the bounties of a life adorned with purity and learn to draw on the powers that flow through pure channels.” (Universal House of Justice to the Continental Counsellors, December 28, 2010)

Consultation is a fundamental skill in marriages and families for maintaining harmony and unity and as a tool to seek help from others

[When asked about specific rules of conduct to govern the relationship between husbands and wives] “...for example, the principle that the rights of each and all in the family unit must be upheld, and the advice that loving consultation should be the keynote, that all matters must be settled in harmony and love, and that there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other. Exactly under what circumstances such deference should take place is a matter for each couple to determine. If, God forbid, they fail to agree, and their disagreement leads to estrangement, they should seek counsel from those they trust and in whose sincerity and sound judgment they have confidence, in order to preserve and strengthen their ties as a united family.” (Universal House of Justice: *Preserving Bahá’í Marriages*, pp. 5-6)

“Family consultation employing full and frank discussion, and animated by awareness of the need for moderation and balance, can be the panacea for domestic conflict. Wives should not attempt to dominate their husbands, nor husbands their wives....” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II, #2160)

POTENTIAL ACTIONS TO PROMOTE UNIFIED, HAPPY, AND HEALTHY MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES

Ideas to Consider from Marriage Transformation®

Below are potential actions that can contribute to creating strong marriages and families. They are categorized by how Bahá'ís can conduct themselves individually and in couple relationships and marriages. They include educating the community about having healthy relationships, marriages, and families. They also address how to become models and advocates who promote the importance of good relationships, marriages, and families in the Bahá'í community and beyond.

When individuals, couples, Spiritual Assemblies, and their communities begin the process of transforming the quality of their marriages and families, it will likely be important to examine when ongoing education efforts can be beneficial. Each Assembly and community will choose its own gradual and organic process and set its own goals. Ongoing education will accompany individuals in developing knowledge and skills. Further development of the art of reflection, consultation, and learning-in-action in a community will also be useful in this unfolding and organic process.

Involvement in the Core Activities of community life generally enhances people's ability to be in relationships of all types. Building character/virtues, making moral choices, and carrying out spiritual behavior are part of the materials and practices for children's classes, junior youth spiritual empowerment groups, and study circles. Devotional gatherings can have themes that include relationship, marriage, and family topics as well as provide opportunities for courting and married couples and families to worship together. As participants engage in service as part of these activities, friendships and relationships can strengthen. Service to each other and others becomes a way of life that benefits couples and families. Families whose members serve each other well and who also have an outward-looking service orientation can become strong examples and foundational elements for transforming neighborhoods and communities.

FOR INDIVIDUALS AND COUPLES

Enhancing Personal Conduct

- Engage in ongoing character development
- Be involved in service activities
- Regularly use prayer, reflection, and consultation for character discernment of potential partners; within couple relationships that are moving toward marriage; and within marriages to maintain awareness of strengths and growth areas, set goals, and take necessary actions to achieve improvement
- Seek help early from skilled and trustworthy sources for any needed courting-couple relationship strengthening and premarital education, or for addressing marital couple difficulties
- Maintain marital faithfulness and sustain family love and unity to the best of our ability
- Regard marriage as a sacred commitment
- Practice forgiveness, seeking healing, reconciliation, and unity-building to the best of our ability as promptly as possible in any upset or difficulty; and be willing to seek confidential consultative assistance with this process as needed from skilled and trustworthy sources
- Eliminate gossip and backbiting about relationships, marriages, and families of our own or others
- Pray on my/our own for relationships and marriages generally and my/our own in particular
- Be accepting of the choice some make not to be married

Participating in Study/Education

- Encourage children, youth, and adults to study, understand, and live their lives according to the Bahá'í teachings, guidance, and laws about character, relationships, marriage, parenting, and family
- Participate in relationship, marriage, and family education opportunities provided by Spiritual Assemblies or other institutions, agencies, Bahá'í schools (seasonal and permanent), companies, or organizations; seek further education and skill building opportunities as needed
- Engage in the process of character education and transformation to empower practicing rectitude of conduct in relationships, marriages, and families
- Periodically include prayers and readings focused on the strengthening of the well-being of marriages and families as part of community occasions such as the Nineteen-Day Feast or family and neighborhood activities such as devotional gatherings

Becoming Examples for Others

- Demonstrate through our words and actions respect and love for the sacred institution of marriage as the foundation for family, neighborhood, community, and global unity and prosperity and as a “fortress for well-being and salvation” (Bahá'u'lláh)
- Share encouragement and hope, as well as a vision and model of marital and family success with others
- Share laughter, humor, and hospitality together and with others
- Model purity and chastity for our families, neighbors, friends, and coworkers; these complex concepts include maintaining uplifting and chaste thoughts, positive words, honest motivations, a loving heart, and a spiritually focused soul and keeping sexual intimacy as a God-given gift to occur only within marriage for building unity between marriage partners and as a sacred act that brings children into the marriage to create a family
- Regard the health and happiness of marriages as a major contributor to the well-being of children
- Be sensitive, moderate, wise, and consultative related to requests for service or volunteering for service beyond the family to avoid being involved in activities that significantly interfere in marriage partner or family relationships

FOR A SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

This section contains some possible actions for an Assembly to consult about and consider implementing as appropriate for the conditions and demographics of their community.

Gaining Skills and Knowledge

- Use prayer, consultation, and reflection to gain understanding about the general health of the relationships, marriages, parents, and families in the community
- Track statistical data and trends for marriages and divorces in their jurisdiction to be able to set clear goals for improving trends, such as reducing the divorce rate or increasing pre-marriage preparation
- Strengthen the knowledge and ability of the Spiritual Assembly and its representatives to skillfully meet with individuals and couples before marriage, those who are troubled about their relationships or marriages, and those who are applying for divorce or attempting to reconcile; building knowledge

includes being aware of the signs of abusive or violent relationships and guidance for how to respond to ensure the safety of all involved

- Strengthen the ability of the Spiritual Assembly and its representatives to skillfully guide couples who are in challenged marriages or who apply for divorce to achieve reconciliation before or after the granting of a year of waiting (alt: year of patience); provided the Assembly has first ensured the safety of all involved
- Be aware that some individuals may feel that they must accept and carry out service requests others make of them, even though saying “yes” may cause negative repercussions within their marriage or family. They may need consultative assistance with evaluating their choices.

Providing Education

- Provide regular, proactive opportunities for spiritually based relationship education, both knowledge and skill building, to unmarried individuals such that they have excellent characters and character discernment and are well prepared for being in a friendship, relationship, courtship, and marriage and positioned to prevent divorce; provide referrals for stepfamily education prior to marriage where applicable
- Provide parenting education to those raising children of all ages
- Provide spiritual guidance to parents on how to assist their children to practice chastity, when they should not interfere in an unmarried relationship, how they can help a couple make the free choice to marry, and about their role in considering parental consent for marriage
- Discourage cohabitation and adultery with a balance of love, forbearance, and understanding along with firmness on laws and principles
- Provide regular, proactive opportunities for spiritually based marriage education, both knowledge and skill building, to married members such that they are maintaining strong, happy, and faithful marriages that are of service to their families and community as well as examples to their children and others
- Provide education about Bahá'í marriage laws and the teachings about divorce and its harm
- Provide information about Bahá'í-based relationships and marriage as needed to seekers and those collaborating with their community

CONSIDERING POSSIBLE LINES OF ACTION

Potential Ideas to Consider from Marriage Transformation®

Through the processes of consultation, learning-in-action, and reflection over time, Spiritual Assemblies, other institutions, and community members may begin to develop their own purposes and lines of action that are unique to the experience and developing knowledge of the community. These will reflect the creative and diverse ideas of individuals, institutions, communities, and others as the transformation process takes shape and evolves.

Some possible actions to consider are to:

- Track and celebrate wedding anniversaries as part of honoring the institution of marriage and the perseverance of couples in their marriages
- Consider and provide opportunities for single Bahá'ís, both youth and adults, to meet and spend time with each other in a safe, supportive atmosphere, including service opportunities whenever possible;

Behavior to avoid could be embarrassing comments, teasing, and gossip that could prompt a couple to hide a developing relationship

- Provide opportunities for pre-youth and youth and those working with them to learn about character choices and relationship skills
- Provide thorough marriage preparation for each seriously courting or engaged couple over a period of months, preferably along with some time with a skilled or trained married mentor couple
- Set-up follow-up meetings (at least two) between a mentor couple and a married couple during the first year of marriage for support and to answer questions
- Provide ongoing facilitated relationship and marriage strengthening groups with trained individuals or couples leading them at the community level or as part of sessions at seasonal or permanent schools*
- Offer relationship and marriage education and skill building study sessions or workshops periodically

* The concept of ongoing groups guided by non-professional individuals and couples who have gone through facilitator training and are also participants willing to gain ongoing growth in their own relationship or marriage (similar principle to the Ruhi study circle tutoring process) is a possibility to help the relationships and marriages of Bahá'ís. Challenges to address include the identification within a community of those appropriate and willing to be trained and carry out this service, as well as a practical method and funds to accomplish the facilitator training. This model of marriage enrichment has been successful for over 40 years through Better Marriages (formerly Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment; www.bettermarriages.org). Collaborating with experienced organizations such as this could benefit the Bahá'í community as appropriate over time.