

Marriage and Family Corner: The difference between being and doing

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As Father's Day approaches, we thank fathers for powerful and positive examples and lessons. Gratitude is often expressed for dad's example of work ethic.

With Father's Day following Mother's Day, a comparison might arise between father's hard work and mother's nurturing. This difference mirrors masculine and feminine stereotypes.

These gender generalizations are connected to real patterns and are contradicted by many other patterns.

Mothers often work hard and fathers frequently nurture — and sometimes parents exhibit neither of these traits. Still, this distinction reveals a dichotomy between “doing” and “being.”

A person is lucky to see both examples of this and wise to embody them, as together, they provide direction for many important elements of life. For example, parenting experts describe useful strategies (“doing”) for raising responsible and happy children.

I frequently use the Love and Logic program to help parents and guardians navigate difficult childhood problems.

In “Love and Logic Magic for Early Childhood,” authors Jim Fay and Charles Fay explain that “Happiness comes from doing great things — rather than getting great things.”

The emotional bond and trust between parent and child (“being”) is also central to this approach, although much of the content deals with guidance for what to do.

Others, such as Brené Brown, focus on the strength of “being” as a parent. Brown examines wholehearted parenting and sets forth guideposts for the parenting relationship.

In “Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead,” Brown points out, “The gap starts here: We can't give people what we don't have. Who we are matters immeasurably more than what we know or who we want to be.”

Most experts provide guidance for what to do and also identify the value of relationship and being.

Brown also includes descriptions of important things to do, while maintaining a focus on “being.”



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The idea of “human beings,” versus “human doings,” has been examined by many authors.

Determinations of salaries, status, social acceptance and self-esteem are often made according to accomplishments.

“Being” is also highlighted in some societies and religions.

What is known about joy and healthy relationships has to do with ways to be. A sense of connection and belonging is critical to wellbeing.

As a Marriage and Family Therapist, one of the theoretical constructs I find to be widely true is “both/and.”

This idea indicates that what might be true in a given situation both includes one idea and a different idea.

So, truth isn’t confined to an “either/or” understanding. This wide range of options allows for balance and more satisfactory outcomes.

This idea applies to guidance about parenting and even to management of depression and anxiety.

Doing at the expense of being, or being at the expense of doing, are recipes for unhappiness and less healthy relationships, although it is easy and common to be caught in those patterns.

When providing therapy, I talk about the normal “pendulum swings” that humans make after identifying a state of being — or a pattern of doing — that is undesirable.

This state of being, or pattern of doing, often resides near the pinnacle of a swing (at or toward the extreme) in one direction.

As an attempt is made to adjust what is identified, a swing is often made to the opposite pinnacle. That end of the swing is ultimately as undesirable as the first apex.

Another swing is made to the other side. This pattern is repeated until the adjustments are made to narrow the swing. That is, the swing becomes more balanced and flexible between more than one healthy and useful option.

So, as what dad offers or offered — or what one has to offer, as a dad — is viewed through a wider lens, it includes who he is or was (being) and what he has or is doing.

This broader view might increase the reasons for being thankful for him.

It might also boost the ability to be persistent in doing and in being, thereby improving overall wellbeing and health. Both, to be and to do, is the question — and the answer.

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