

Families That Thrive

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

Being There

It was one of my proudest moments as a dean. I had just finished teaching my class, after which I made my way to the university dining room. After getting my food, I looked for a place to sit. One of the members of our fabulous soccer team motioned for me to join their table, where I enjoyed a wonderful conversation. Several members of our women's soccer team then told me how pleased they were with the results of the previous evening's soccer game. The women weren't bragging about winning. They were expressing their joy over such great school support from the rest of our university's athletes, especially our fabulous football players. The women were also telling me how supportive and enthusiastic the members of our football team are for other sports. They were thrilled!

This was a real victory for our university. It seems that in years past, the football players hunkered down into a world of their own. They were experienced by many students as smug, anti-social, and aloof. It now seems that this is all changing. Before the football season began, soccer and women's volleyball began. Our football players honored the dignity of the other athletes with their presence and their cheers. They raised our school's spirit.

When I was growing up, I wasn't the greatest baseball player in our little league, but I was okay. However, regardless of my talent or skill level, my parents were always there. I did not play one little league game without at least one of them being there. Most often, both were there. The only thing that kept Dad away was his job. Dad was a deputy sheriff, and he would occasionally have to work a shift that cut into our game. Even so, it wasn't unusual for Dad to drive his patrol car to the little league field, from which he could watch our game while he monitored the radio.

The truth is that Mom and Dad were always there. We kids were their top priority, and we knew it. Moreover, the parents were all there for the other kids as well. Our parents, of course, cheered for us, but they also cheered for the kids on the other team as well. And after the game, the parents all sought out the kids who had made great plays—especially those who rarely made any play at all—to congratulate them.

Looking back, it is evident that my parents, as well as the parents of my friends, shared an approach to parenting that can be summed up in two words—*being there*. Mom and Dad recognized that if families are to thrive, we have to be there. It is difficult at best to pull off healthy relationships from a distance. I don't mean that we can never be apart from each other, but chronic, habitual absence is a problem. If we are present only rarely, our relationships will suffer. Relationships are about togetherness. They are about being there with each other, pulling for each other, wishing each other nothing but the best.

Our relationships can thrive when we make the mutual commitment to be there for one another in ways that are joyful, supportive, and kind. Presence is everything.