“Parents not necessary” was the message on the cover of a popular news magazine a few months ago. The story was based on an academic book detailing scores of scientific studies justifying the conclusion that parents didn’t make much of a difference in the lives of their children. Immediately this notion was attacked by other social scientists who proved just the opposite.

On Feb. 25, 1999 a Knight Ridder column appeared in newspapers across the country telling of a new book that said fathers are not important. The moment the book hit the market it was criticized by an excellent researcher who has authored numerous books and articles explaining why fathers are so important.

An equally difficult controversy about whether gay couples make good parents is presently being debated and researchers for each side present scientific studies to support opposite conclusions.

With so much controversy and conflicting information on these hotly debated issues, many parents are confused. How is a parent to discern the truth? And, if the truth is hiding in these visible issues, what about questions on more general issues like spanking, adoptive parents, the development of I.Q., maternal employment, day care and home schooling?

Now the questions we are talking about deal with people and you may have noticed that the track record of behavioral scientists in explaining human behavior is not too impressive. It seems that every time an important question is asked some behavioral scientists answer with a yes and others answer with a no. Why is this?

Janet found an answer to this question when we were reviewing research articles on the effects of maternal employment in preparation for a paper we were presenting at a national conference on parenting. After reading conclusions of good, bad, good, bad, and etc, Janet exclaimed in exasperation, “You can prove anything you want with research like this, can’t you?” I smiled in agreement and continued writing the report as I was trained to do.

You can expect science to provide you with ample amounts of information, but do not expect some kind of final truth or resolution to our many human problems. Science is a powerful method for obtaining a certain type of information but the findings must be judged and interpreted by you to determine truthfulness, veracity and application to your own situation.

For example, five studies could say you don’t matter in your child’s life - but only you and your
child know if this is true. A hug and “I love you,” can provide more truth on this subject than all the surveys in the world.

Hopefully, this way of looking at behavioral science research will enable you to understand the conflicting cries of two behavioral scientists each making the opposite truth claim.

Now, some will be sure to say that when you have these opposite truth claims you are merely witnessing bad science. Furthermore you might be advised to be patient and wait until a better scientist delivers the final solution you need for your problem. Our answer for this proposal is, “Don’t hold your breath!”

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