

How Dads Affect Their Daughters into Adulthood

by Linda Nielsen | June 3, 2014 8:00 am

Conversations about the importance of fathers usually revolve around sons: how boys benefit from having a positive male role model, a consistent disciplinarian, and a high-energy roughhousing partner on their way to pursuing career and family success in adulthood. But as recent research shows, fathers also affect the lives of their young adult daughters in intriguing and occasionally surprising ways.

In exploring this area, uppermost on the minds of many is a young woman's academic and vocational path—how her relationship with her father influences her academic performance and, as a consequence, her career success and financial well-being. As you might guess, daughters whose fathers have been actively engaged throughout childhood in promoting their academic or athletic achievements and encouraging their self-reliance and assertiveness are more likely to graduate from college and to enter the higher paying, more demanding jobs traditionally held by males. This helps explain why girls who have no brothers are overly represented among the world's political leaders: they tend to receive more encouragement from their fathers to be high achievers. Even college and professional female athletes often credit their fathers for helping them to become tenacious, self-disciplined, ambitious, and successful.

Interestingly, too, when female college students were asked what they would do if their fathers disapproved of their career plans, the overwhelming majority said they would not change their plans. But the daughters who communicated the most comfortably and had the closest relationships with their fathers were more willing to reconsider their plans if their fathers disapproved.

Today's fathers also seem to be having a greater impact on their daughters' academic and career choices than fathers in previous generations. For example, women who were born in the 1970s are three times more likely than those born at the beginning of the twentieth century to work in the same field as their fathers—a finding that researchers have attributed not just to society's changing gender roles but also to daughters receiving more mentoring from their fathers.

Another question on many people's minds is: how does a father influence his daughter's romantic life—who she dates, when she starts having sex, and the quality of her relationships with men? Not surprisingly, a girl who has a secure, supportive, communicative relationship with her father is less likely to get pregnant as a teenager and less likely to become sexually active in her early teens. This, in turn, leads to waiting longer to get married and to have children—largely because she is focused on achieving her educational goals first.

The well-fathered daughter is also the most likely to have relationships with men that are emotionally intimate and fulfilling. During the college years, these daughters are more likely than poorly-fathered women to turn to their boyfriends for emotional comfort and support and they are less likely to be “talked into” having sex. As a consequence of having made wiser decisions in regard to sex and dating, these daughters generally have more satisfying, more long-lasting marriages. What is surprising is not that fathers have such an impact on their daughters' relationships with men, but that they generally have *more* impact than mothers do.

Their better relationships with men may also be related to the fact that well-fathered daughters are less likely

to become clinically depressed or to develop eating disorders. They are also less dissatisfied with their appearance and their body weight. As a consequence of having better emotional and mental health, these young women are more apt to have the kinds of skills and attitudes that lead to more fulfilling relationships with men.

An emerging body of research suggests one more way that dads may shape their daughters' mental health and relationships in adulthood: scholars have found an intriguing link between the way daughters deal with stress as adults and the kind of relationships they had with their dads during childhood. For example, undergraduate women who did not have good relationships with their fathers had lower than normal cortisol levels. And people with low cortisol levels tend to be overly sensitive and overly reactive when confronted with stress. Indeed, the low cortisol daughters were more likely than the higher cortisol daughters (who had the better relationships with their dads) to describe their relationships with men in stressful terms of rejection, unpredictability or coercion.

Given the benefits a woman gains from communicating well with her father and feeling close to him, their relationship and communication matter a great deal. Yet both sons and daughters generally say they feel closer to their mothers and find it easier to talk to her, especially about anything personal. This is probably due to the widely held belief that children—but daughters especially—are “supposed” to talk more about personal issues with their mothers than with their fathers.

Furthermore, daughters tend to withhold more personal information than sons do from their fathers. Compared to sons, daughters are also more uncomfortable arguing with their dads, and take longer to get over these disagreements than when they argue with their moms. Most daughters also wish their fathers had talked with them more about sex and relationships, even though they admit that the conversations would probably have been uncomfortable at first. Considering the benefits of being able to talk comfortably with their fathers, these findings are discouraging.

So how can fathers and daughters forge a close, positive relationship? Some research suggests certain turning points or significant events can draw them closer. Both fathers and daughters said in one study that participating in activities together, especially athletic activities, while she was growing up made them closer. Some daughters also mentioned working with their dads or vacationing alone with him. Her leaving for college, getting married, and having children often deepened their relationship and made it less stressful—largely because the daughter gained a better understanding of her father's perspective and because he began treating her more like an adult.

In sum, fathers have a far-reaching influence on their daughters' lives—both negative and positive. Many still seem to believe that daughters should spend the most time and share the most personal information with their mothers, but women miss out if they neglect the bond they have with their fathers. And while fathers may find it easier to relate to and connect with their sons, they should make the effort to build a close relationship with their daughters, too.

Linda Nielsen is a professor of educational and adolescent psychology at Wake Forest University and the author of Father-Daughter Relationships: Contemporary Research & Issues[1] (2013) and Between Fathers & Daughters: Enriching and Rebuilding Your Adult Relationship[2] (2012).

Endnotes:

1. Father-Daughter Relationships: Contemporary Research & Issues: <http://www.amazon.com/Father->

Daughter-Relationships-Contemporary-Research-Textbooks/dp/1848729340

2. Between Fathers & Daughters: Enriching and Rebuilding Your Adult Relationship:

<http://www.amazon.com/Between-Fathers-Daughters-Rebuilding-Relationship/dp/1581826613>

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