



Fostering Father/Daughter Relationships

Father's Day provided the perfect opportunity to reflect on the relationship between fathers and their teenage daughters. Fathers have a unique, significant and important impact on the emotional and physical developmental outcomes for both boys and girls, especially for self esteem, emotional well-being, capacity to love and be loved and the ability to participate in society. For girls, the father is the first man in the life of a little girl and, as such, provides an important role model for future relationships.

WHAT DOES RESEARCH AND THEORY TELL US ABOUT FATHER/DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS?

1. Early Interaction

Contrary to the popular belief that fathers have less involvement with their daughters, one study found that, regardless of background or prior experience, fathers actually involved themselves at least as fully as the mothers in all forms of care for their newborns, with the possible exception of feeding. That is, the fathers in the study conducted by Parkes (1977) found that fathers and mothers both looked at, spoke to, smiled at and kissed the babies equally often. Even more importantly, fathers held and rocked their new babies *more* than mothers did. The average father was as competent as the average mother at reading the baby's signals and adjusting his style of care to suit the needs of the baby.

2. Developmental Tasks

As a result of the work of Sigmund Freud, it is commonly accepted that one of the key developmental tasks for a young girl to achieve during puberty along the road to womanhood is to loosen the close bond to her mother in order that she can develop her own identity, strengthen her ego and unfold her own personality. Because of this inevitable separation from the mother, it is important for girls to also have their father, or a father-figure, present in their lives from the very beginning. Where there is the opportunity for a 'positive father complex' to develop, girls are likely to find it easier to detach themselves from the mother-child symbiosis. Girls also learn from this 'other' bond that each relationship has different characteristics, leaving them better prepared to deal with a range of relationships in adulthood and, eventually for the developmental task of leaving the family home.

3. Fathers and Self Esteem

When a daughter feels loved, respected and highly regarded by her father, they are doing a great deal to enhance their daughter's self esteem. A girl's self-esteem is likely to be higher when she has a good relationship with her father or a father figure. Your words need to be supported by deeds: telling your daughter she is fantastic one minute but asking her why she only got a pass in English the next is likely to lead to mistrust and disbelief. Cultivate her strengths rather than focusing on trying to eliminate her weaknesses. It is this pride in her own skills that is the basis of self esteem. Avoid criticism, negative judgements, derogatory and ironic comments. Daughters long for their dads to treat them with love, respect, kindness and even admiration and praise so every harsh word from a father cuts very deep. Spend time with your daughter,



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encourage her to try new things, help her to identify solutions to problems and give her recognition for what she has achieved. Thank her for being just the way she is. Focus on little things you can do: drive her to her sport/music/dance lessons, watch her participate and show an interest, know her friend's names and make an effort to meet their parents. Don't underestimate your capacity to teach your daughter the things only you, as her father can teach her as a result of your own strengths and interests:- invite her to take part in your professional work sometimes, teach her how to handle money by involving her in budgeting and include your daughter in home renovation tasks you are carrying out. Remember that each task you engage in together is laying the foundations for how she will go about the same activities with her partner when the time comes.

Source, References and Further Reading

Parke, R.D. (1977) The father of the child. *The Sciences*, 14(4), 12-15

Gisela Preuschoff (2004) *Raising Girls: Why Girls are different and how to help them grow up happy and strong*

Dr Bruce Robinson *Fathering from the Fast Lane: Practical Ideas for Busy Dads*

Steve Biddulph *Raising Boys; Why boys are different and how to help them become happy and well-balanced men*

WHICH TYPE OF FATHER ARE YOU?

Steve Biddulph, well-known author of parenting books such as *Raising Boys*, describes three types of fathers:

1. The Autocratic or Authoritarian Father

This type of father believes his wife and children must subordinate themselves to him and are prepared to use force to achieve their status as patriarch of the family.

Implication for your daughter

With this type of father, there is a risk that the daughter will see herself as submissive and as a 'victim'.

Recipe for change

Ask yourself whether it is really such a good idea for the women in your family to just do as you tell them? Provide opportunities for your daughter (and wife) to make decisions for herself in order that she can gradually learn to assert herself on her own, with commitment, intelligence and skill.

2. The Soft, Permissive or Laissez-faire Father

This type of father is adored by his daughter. On the positive side, a father who displays his emotional side to his daughter is more likely to develop trust in him and is therefore more likely to ask him for advice. At the same time, she can manipulate him because she has him 'wrapped around his little finger'; "If Mum says no, maybe I can still get a yes out of Dad...". He is a resource. No limits are set.

Implications for your daughter

There is a danger that the daughter raised by a soft father will learn to manipulate male behavior using 'female cunning'. In later life, how will she cope with the disappointment of learning that not all men will cave to her and that lowered eyes and tears do not always help her to get her own way?



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Recipe for change

Show your daughter that there are rules and limits and make all decisions as a parenting 'team' rather than letting your daughter play one parent off against the other. Show your daughter it is worth approaching some matters with factual, rational points of view rather than emotions.

3. The 'True', Democratic or Authoritative Father

A true father is much more than a friend. His love and his involvement with his daughter is unshakeable – whatever happens, he will be there for her. In this sense, this type of father demonstrates unconditional love for his daughter. A true father has to be kinder and more forgiving than any friend would possibly be. Balanced with this, in order to do his job, he also has to sometimes be tougher than any friend would risk being. The true dad is clear and firm but does not resort to aggression or humiliation: 'tough' is different to 'mean' just as 'respectful' is different to 'equal'. His underlying tone is warm, even when he is setting firm boundaries. A true father expects and teaches his daughter to be a cooperative member of the family, to keep her agreements, treat others with respect, be thoughtful and to help out with household tasks. He takes his time and listens to his daughter's side of the story.

Implications for your daughter

There will be times when a daughter will not really like what her father says, or what he insists on. However, there is a security that comes from knowing that the boundaries are firm and can't be manipulated. When you display strong reasoning and ethics, your daughter also learns to be strong and true to herself. When you say 'no' to your daughter, kindly, and with good reasons, she will learn how to say 'no' when she needs to in her own relationships with peers and others. When eventually she presents a solid, passionate argument against you and wins, you can then either feel completely miffed or very proud that you have taught her so well!

Recipe for encouragement

Fathers who want to foster a friendship with their daughters can focus on one positive thing -treat your daughter as you would your best friend: with respect and dignity.