The Father’s Role in the Life of a Girl

When my mother was at work, my father did my hair. These are my fond memories even though at times it hurt. When he could not find a hair tie, he would cut a piece of an old rubber bicycle tube and tie my hair with it. I remember his rough hands and thick fingers. I later wondered how he was able to play the piano or the accordion with those sausage fingers. They seemed awkward on piano keys compared to my delicate fingers. We both loved music, we both played instruments, and we both sang. He loved working in the garden and bragged to every neighbor about his plants, the blooms, the fruit. Without even noticing it, I became the exact version of a plant hoarder and bragger. My father was a fabulous cook, and he taught me how to cook: he sat me down in the kitchen with my notebook and had me write step-by-step directions for preparing his key dishes. My father was man of many flaws, but I think I carry more similarities with him than differences. Till today, I am figuring out just *how much* of an impact he had on my development and building of my identity as a woman.

In psychology (and sociology) there is a notion that girls marry the versions of their fathers (whether consciously or subconsciously). I asked several women if this rang true in their lives, and most women past 30 agreed with this phenomenon (I guess they had lived together long enough to analyze their husbands more broadly). Some women rejected the notion, saying that they tried to marry the complete opposites of their dads, especially if their dads were absent in their lives. Whatever we *say* we *think* we *did* does not matter. When I look at my husband doing my daughter’s hair, I am looking at my dad. And when in the middle of the night my husband silently tip-toes to the fridge to have one more “last” slice of salami or some kind of other sausage (something that my dad did as a nightly ritual), I know that I definitely, subconsciously, married my father. This article is not about our husbands, though, but about their influence on our daughters.

My father was not a perfect man or even a husband, but he was probably a rather good father to his daughter. The evidence of that lies in the way I view myself, understand myself, push myself, or forgive myself today. It stems from the way my father treated me. Absolute support, unconditional love, admiration, and many many kind words to me: “You are most beautiful” “That’s my daughter singing on the stage. Let’s all applaud” “You played the best” “You are talented.” When I got older and argued with him, he said that the worst punishment to him would be if I ever refused to accept his *help* and *love*. When you are a child, you take a lot of things for granted: words, attention, care. But these things, these words form us, consciously or subconsciously. So is the role of the father different when it comes to raising a girl vs a boy? According to social research, yes. Very much so.

Fathers can certainly raise their daughters chaotically, without much thinking. Some, due to natural goodness of their heart, may even do and say all the right and necessary things, and their daughters grow up amazing confident women. But some fathers probably need a little help and direction in this area. If you are a woman reading this article, you now will know what the expectations are. And once you know, you can’t unknow.

The father’s role in the life of a daughter is unique. There is really no one else that can say something so life-changing (good or bad) than what a *father says* to his daughter.

Here are some important things a father *must teach* his daughter.

* Teach her to respect and honor herself. Dads need to teach their daughters to withstand the attacks of unhealthy environments and influences (people, boys, social media, fashion trends, etc). Teach your daughter to demand her honor. She must know that anyone who dishonors her or disrespects her, should not be staying in her life. One way to teach this is to demonstrate how a father honors and respects the girl’s mother (regardless married or not).
* Tell her she is beautiful. Inside and out. Every day. Interestingly, when girls are younger, it’s perfectly fine to compliment on your daughter’s external beauty (“Your nails are beautiful” “What a magnificent tiara” “Your hair is beautiful”). When girls transition to puberty and become annoying vicious teenagers (some do, let’s be honest), the focus should shift from complimenting on the external beauty to internal. The trick is to lead your daughter to find that internal beauty (since this is the age when girls are most concerned with their looks, lashes, lips, and skin). Dads should have conversations with their daughters about what it means to be a *good person*, discuss the beauty that goes beyond external. Continue complimenting on external beautify; however, some teenagers experiment with their looks to such a stretch that the only reaction they get from their parents is the rolling of their eyes. So what can we do? Shift discussion of fake eyelashes and massive lips to internal beauty and self-respect, dreams, expectations, goals. We all experimented with fashion trends, so let’s be patient and forgiving. The girl who accepts her internal beauty grows up a confident amazing woman.
* Teach her to say “No.” Fathers should warn their older girls that they will face many pressures in this world. The minute they feel uncomfortable doing something, they need to learn to say “No” and say it confidently, regardless if they are hurting “some boy’s feeling.” Dads have feelings too and they matter more. She might be the only girl in school who is not participating in something, but let her know that she has *your* support, and she is not in her battles alone. She has you.
* Teach her to recognize and accept her value. Daughters need to hear that they are valued not only *now*, but who they *are becoming* in the future. When our girls are annoying, demanding, mean teenagers, it’s sometimes difficult to see that inner good person with a lot of potential and immense value. You don’t have to agree with her, but you *have to* value her as a person and love her. Think future. Wish her well. Dream her well. Pray her well. Project this goodness on her. Praise her for who she *is to become* in the future and believe it. She will believe it to. If you don’t value her as a person, the minute she finds a boy who gives her one meaningless compliment, she will replace you. Sadly, I heard some dads say things like “Well, she is not our sharpest” “She is going through stages” “I can’t wait for her to be out of the house” “I don’t think higher education is for her. She never had that drive.” If a girl hears any of these statements, her belief in her value will be damaged dramatically.
* Teach her to count on you. Tell her even when she is young that *life is messy and challenging*. Bad things and sad things *are* coming. Be truthful and realistic. But tell her that she has you to count on. Parents, let’s be honest, our daughters will screw up in the future in more ways than we can even imagine. But we need to make a decision *now* whether we will stand by our daughters or not. *Decide and assure* your daughter that you will be there for her in tough times. This does not mean you will need to agree with her, but you will be there to pick her up when she falls.

**And the most important, most deciding, most life-changing thing to teach your daughter is saying that**…

* You love her. Believe it or not, there are women (former little girls) that grew up never hearing these three words from their fathers. There are women who also don’t hear it from their husbands. These words are simply not pronounced in some homes. A card, text, or email with “I love you” is *not* enough. This sentence must come out of your mouth, it must be *pronounced*, and it must be *heard*. You are her *only* father, and she needs to *hear* from you.

One more thing I want to add from the *Birth Order* book by Leman (2014) that stood out to me was tips for raising a *first-born girl*. Leman insists that it’s essential for the father not to be critical of the first-born girl (she is not a first-born boy, she is a gentler creature, her role is different). If I have a first-born girl, older sister to many siblings, in my class and she is a type B introvert, very shy, very unsure, lacking confidence in most tasks, I ask her about her relationship with her father. In 99% of the cases I hear “Nothing I do is enough for him” “He always points out where I messed up” “His expectations for me are so high, I can’t please him” “When he is away, it’s my only time to relax my mind.” Fathers, common, you have a chance to turn it all around for her. Tell her that she is the gift long awaited, she is special, talented, she is perfect, she is interesting. Let giving her attention and praise become your priority. All girls are sensitive to praise. If you have a daughter who is a second, third child, praise her intentionally. She is fighting for father’s love that the first-born had. Post her art work on the fridge. Tape all her awards and her drawings somewhere where all can see. They need it. They don’t need a fashionable kitchen (yes, some parents told me that they don’t display their kids’ art work and awards because they entertain guests often and they want their kitchen to be “spotless”). Well, that’s just wrong (and research agrees with me). Your children want their successes and activities to be recognized, they don’t want them to be “spotless” but “spot *on*.” You brought kids into this world? Do me a favor, sacrifice your Ralph Lauren looking kitchen for their “I love my mommy” card.

To reiterate the main theme of this article, the father’s role *is* unique in the life of a daughter. Dad’s role is *to love her* and *raise her up*. A father plays a crucial role in the identity formation of the girl. According to research (contact me for a list of resources), when a girl suffers from a low self-esteem, the best way to boost her up is not signing her up for ballet or a new sport, or cut her hair differently, or hire her private tutors, but it is for her *father* *to spend time* with her and give her *love and affection*. Research also shows that if girls grow up in the home with a father (not a stellar one, even a bad one) they are more likely to graduate from high school, go to college, and even a graduate school. They are far less likely to use drugs, alcohol, and engage in sexual relationships at an early age. Dads are *phenomenal* for children. Children form their identity by reading their dad’s face. Children (boys and girls) can read the father who came from work within first five minutes and know exactly if he is going to be kind, play with them, eat with them, or if he had a rough day at work and they should hide in their rooms.

As Dr. Meg Meeker (2015), pediatrician of 25 years, highlights in her book *Strong fathers: Strong daughters*, every child is looking at their father to have these important questions answered:

* Dad, what do you *believe* about me? What do you think about me? Am I good? Am I smart? Am I capable? Am I dumb? Kids answer these questions by *reading your face* and your body language (without you knowing).
* Dad, how do you *feel* about me? Am I loveable? Am I good? Am I likeable? Are you ashamed of me? Are you embarrassed by me?
* Dad, what are your *hopes* for me? *Do you* have hopes for me? Do I have a future?

Kids who don’t have these questions answered by their fathers, live in chaos. I am writing this, and I am a mother, and I want to scream out loud: “Yes, my daughter, I believe that you are good, you are smart, you are capable. Yes, my daughter, you are loveable and I am proud of you. Yes, my daughter, I have high hopes for you, you will go far, you will have an amazing future!” I pronounce it, I pray it. But ***it’s not enough***. ***Our dads must answer these questions***.

This summer, around Father’s Day weekend, I posted a question in one all-female forum. My question was simple “What was the most memorable impact of your relationship with your father on your life? and What was missing when it came to relationship with your father?” I was overwhelmed with hundreds of responses. Here are some of them:

* My dad helped me during dating period and gave me serious advice.
* All his free time he dedicated to us.
* He treasured me. If I asked for a star from the sky, he would have given it to me
* He read to me and helped me with math homework.
* I grew up with my stepfather who showed me what a real father was. He treated me as a princess and he openly hugged my mom. I knew he loved her.
* He created stories for me.
* My father went fishing with me and we went mushroom picking.
* My father is present in my life even after his death. He expressed his feelings for me, confessed of his unconditional love for me, daily. His love for me is my strong psychological foundation even today.
* He taught me to think with my head and told me not to expect help from anyone but to take initiative. He taught me to be critical of myself and not blame others. He taught me to continue hoping and living till my last breath.
* My dad had us when he was 47. He really wanted us. He taught us to value family and stand by it.
* My dad worked a lot. He talked to me a lot before sleep. He told me how factories and plants work, how sailing works (it was his hobby). I loved these stories; he taught me curiosity. I now commit to give my children full answers to their questions, and I encourage their inquisitiveness. My dad was very reserved and very goal-oriented. He achieved so much in his life and set an example for me. He supports me in my studies, in my profession, and encourages me to be financially independent. My dad is always ready to support and encourage people around him, and he does it humbly, not trumpeting about it. He is a true example to me what it means to be a real human being.

These responses made me literally emotional. I wept over my laptop. We can learn so much from these memories and testimonies. Sadly, not every little girl (who is now a grown woman, a mother) shares the same fond memories. I received some sad comments of the following nature:

The only thing he did for me is bringing me into the world.

He drank all his life and didn’t notice anyone.

He ruined my mom’s life and ours. He was a liar. He was a cheater.

I never saw him.

Some women (former little girls) wrote to me in private messages. They didn’t want to ruin the party of the rest of the group who were praising their fathers and confessed that they wished they had something positive to say, but they could not, sadly. Some admitted that because they didn’t know their father’s love and respect, they could not figure out what to expect of men in their lives and made poor choices when it came to choosing men.

Maybe someone believes that it’s a lot to ask of a guy who simply has a daughter. Maybe so. The role of a father who has a daughter or daughters is indeed unique. But this is also such a *privilege* to have this role. You get to be her knight, her champion, her standard of respect, her rock, her advisor, her confidant, her example of unconditional love. You get to set the bar. Through you she views and analyzes all other male figures: teachers, boyfriends, her husband, uncles, and even … God (if you teach her to follow God and love God). If you mess it up, you don’t just mess up the childhood of a little girl, you are damaging the future of an amazing woman.