

Tips for Fathers Raising Daughters: Dads Make a Difference

Fathers play an essential role in their daughters' lives. They have reams of experience, expertise and encouragement to share. And, while it may not be overtly evident, girls value their father's views a great deal.

In order to have a healthier, more rounded relationship with their daughters, here are some tips for fathers.



PLANT THE SEED

Let your daughter know at a young age that you always want to be a part of her life. "A dream setting helps," says Peter Fisher, MOSAIC Director of Clinical Services. "When I was building sand castles with my daughter at the beach, I asked 'Are you going to do this with me when you're fourteen, fifteen or sixteen?' Her response at six was 'yes Daddy'. Well, she might not be building sand castles with me at sixteen, but I've put in her mind that, when you're sixteen I still want to be part of your life." The moment is not always now. We need to plant the seed for down the road.

Establish a strong relationship with your daughter in those early years. Mom does not always have to be the one who puts the children to bed. Develop a habit of always tucking your children in, along with Mom. Read to your daughter – it's a great opportunity for closeness. Find something you both enjoy playing together. You may not want to play Barbie's, but you might both enjoy playing a board game or going bowling.

PARTICIPATE IN HER ACTIVITIES

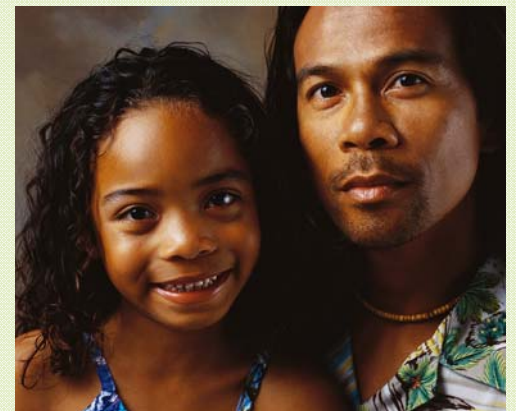
Fathers can develop that special bond with their daughters by doing activities together. Take an active role in her interests – volunteer to drive, coach, direct a play, attend her performances. Get involved in your daughter's school – volunteer, chaperone, read to her class or go on her class trip. "Whenever I'd go into my daughter's school, she would just beam," says Peter. "Girls think it's pretty special when dad joins them on the class field trip."

"I know it was important to the girls when Bob coached soccer or was the timer at their swim meets," says MOSAIC Counsellor Pat Ballantyne.

Doing activities together, when it is just you and your daughter, adds to the richness of the relationship.

INVOLVE HER IN YOUR LIFE AS WELL

While you're taking an active interest in her life, let her know what's happening in yours. Take her to work with you. Show her how you change the oil in the car. Take her to your basketball game.



Ensure that your daughter's social life doesn't completely usurp family life. Just because your daughter may be busy with her friends, does not mean that she cannot maintain a relationship with her parents. Make sure you continue to spend time together. Ask her, "When do we get to see each other this weekend? Okay, you're busy Saturday, how about Sunday afternoon?" Just because they are with their friends, does not mean parents should disappear.



TALK, TALK, TALK.....LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN

While you're doing activities together, you have the opportunity to communicate with each other.

Keeping the lines of communication open with your daughters is essential. Studies have shown that the proportion of girls who were able to communicate effectively with their fathers decreased sharply from Grade six to Grade ten. Girls become more private and reclusive as they enter their teens.

Create opportunities for conversation with your daughter. Turn off the television. Try to have as many mealtimes together as possible – include her friends. Watch her TV programs and movies and discuss the issues that arise. Turn off the radio in the car on the way to soccer and talk. Take just your daughter out to dinner. Listen to her music and, without being judgmental, ask "what do you think about that?"

You also have to be available when she wants to talk to you. "If you're busy or would rather she talk to her mother, you're telling her that I'm not interested in you, I don't have time for you, you're not important enough," says Pat. "You can say, *I'd like to talk to you, but can't right at this moment, let me finish and we'll talk*, or, depending on the subject, you can put down what you're doing, and talk."

Sometimes teenage daughters can be short with their responses, avoiding a conversation with dad. To help keep the conversation going, don't accept her short answer, ask more – *Well what do you think about that? I'm not sure I understand; please explain. No kidding, tell me more. What does 'fine' mean? What do I do that makes you not want to tell me?*



"It's also important to be in your daughter's face," says Pat. "Respect her privacy - knock on her door – but don't let her get away with pulling back, with retreating. Continue to be present."

Ask them about their friends. "Often they find it easier to talk about their friends than themselves," says Pat. "By showing an interest in their friends, activities and their lives, without always looking for an opportunity to instruct, your daughter will be more apt to have a conversation with you."

Teenage daughters can also be defensive, says Pat. "The minute you ask a question, they respond, *Well, why do you want to know?* What we found helpful was turning it around to be something that we need versus an interrogation or a lecture. *Look, I know you know this, but I need you to hear this-* or *You need to hear me out because this is important for me. It's not what you may need, but what I need.*"

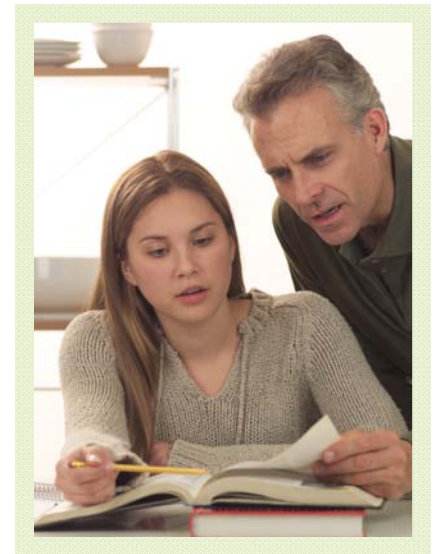
RESPECT HER DIFFERENCES AND DON'T BE TOO JUDGMENTAL

It is important for dads to listen to their daughters and appreciate their views, even if they don't agree. If a father is fair and listens to his daughter's thoughts, she will gain self-confidence and pride in her own opinion.

Recognize that your teenage daughter will rebel against your ideas. "She needs to take what she's learned from you," says Peter, "chew it around and spit it out before she decides whether to buy into the value system you've presented her."

Daughters will also make mistakes and fathers have to be there in those moments. At those times, it's important to separate the behaviour from the person. We don't like your behaviour, but we still love you.

Your daughter may also dress in a fashion that you find inappropriate. "Fathers need to look beyond how they're dressing and find out the message they are trying to convey," says Peter. "There is a belief and value behind the way she's dressing. Try to help your daughter express what is going on inside. If your daughter is wearing all black – *Is life that sad that you're dressing that way?* - what's the philosophy of thought that is behind that?



"I can also provide the male perspective around how she is dressing," adds Peter. "I can tell her that males are turned on by visual, and that when you wear certain things, boys will look at you as an object, rather than as a person. Do you want to dress in a way where you are seen as an object or a person to be respected?"

APPLAUD HER STRENGTHS

Encourage her strengths. Celebrate her style. Help her develop her strengths and achieve her goals even though they may be different from the desires you may have for her.

"It is still a man's world in many respects," adds Peter, "which makes it harder for girls to excel. We want to encourage our girls to work hard so they can succeed in their lives. But it is important to balance our expectations and accept our daughters' choices and limitations."

At the same time, fathers seem to have the role as the more critical parent. "Everything is acceptable to mom," says Pat. "Moms have this huge, unconditional acceptance all the time. But, girls still want that extra approval from Dad along with the practical, instructional, push/pull piece of advice."

However, fathers do need to be aware and temper the critical comments. Sarcastic remarks, even when said in jest, only serve to reinforce a young girl's negative self-talk – *I'm stupid, I'm a cry-baby, I can't do anything right*. Rather than being critical, be supportive of her abilities and how you can help her in areas where she struggles. *You're really good at this, but are having difficulty with this. It's really hard isn't it? How can I help you?* Let her know her weaknesses are acceptable and that together you can work through them.

ENCOURAGE A HEALTHY BODY-TYPE AND HELP HER FEEL GOOD ABOUT HERSELF

Body image is a considerable issue with young girls. It's important for fathers to help their daughters feel good about their appearance and to encourage a healthy body type. Fathers have a profound influence on how their daughters view themselves.

Discourage dieting and promote a healthy, active family lifestyle of eating well, exercising and getting fresh air. Fathers can encourage this by being physically active with their daughter – play catch, jump rope, throw a Frisbee, bike, go for walks. Studies show that the most physically active girls have fathers who are active with them.

Dissuade your daughter from buying into the magazines and advertising that tries to tell her how she should look. Help her focus on who she is, not what she is physically. When you value her true self and focus on what is really important – what she thinks, feels and dreams – she will recognize her talents and her own true beauty.

MODEL HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Daughters learn about male/female relationships by watching Mom and Dad. Fathers teach their daughters what kinds of relationships are healthy, what traits to look for in a partner and what to expect in their future relationships. Daughters need to witness their mothers being treated with respect. They need to see their parents, while not necessarily agreeing, respecting each other's differences and finding solutions to problems. They need to see affection between their parents. They need to see their parents working as a team, not undermining one another or putting each other down. Even joking unconscious phrases like *Why don't you ask your Mom, she knows everything?* sends a powerful message.

ASK TOUGH QUESTIONS

Ask questions and talk about issues around sex, drugs and alcohol at an early age. It's important to have fathers be a part of these discussions. Don't close the door on these issues once you've discussed them once. Do you know where to get drugs? Do you know kids who are using drugs? What do you think about that? Permission to talk about issues is different than giving them permission to drink alcohol, use drugs or have sex. Talking about using a condom is not giving them permission to have sex. You can still talk about the responsibility, safety issues and your values around premarital sex, drugs and alcohol.

ESTABLISH GROUND RULES

Mothers and fathers need to establish their household ground rules. Daughters want rules to guide them in making their decisions, and often appreciate having the rule to fall back on when they are pressured into something they do not want to do. "I often say, make me the fall guy," says Pat. "Your mean old parents won't let you do this."

Negotiate with them around the rules. Ask what they think is reasonable? Give them some choice, some control. You can be home at 10:15 or 10:25 p.m., but not after 10:30 p.m.

No matter what happens, it's important that your daughters know that they can come home and be safe. There will be discipline, but you can always come home. "During our girls' teen years," says Pat, "we told the girls they could always call us day or night to come and get them. We also had \$10 in the cookie jar at all times, so they knew they could come home in a taxi and there would be money to pay the taxi driver."

SHOW AFFECTION

Daughters need lots of reassurance and words of encouragements from their fathers. They need Dad to hold their hands, give them hugs and tell them they are loved.

Fathers, like mothers, will make lots of mistakes. But, if fathers take the time to be with their daughters, to listen to them and value who they are, those mistakes won't be earth shattering.

When dads are supportive and involved in their daughters' lives, they foster their daughters' self-worth and a relationship that will last a lifetime.

