

Why Daughters Need Their Dads

By: Dr. Meg Meeker

Men, we need you. We—mothers, daughters, and sisters—need your help to raise healthy young women. We need every ounce of masculine courage and wit you own because fathers, more than anyone else, set the course for a daughter's life.

After more than twenty years of listening to daughters—and doling out antibiotics, anti-depressants, and stimulants to girls who have gone without a father's love—I know just how important fathers are. I have listened hour after hour to young girls describe how they vomit in junior high bathrooms to keep their weight down. I have listened to fourteen-year-old girls tell me they have to provide sex acts that disgust them in order to keep their boyfriends. I've watched girls drop off varsity tennis teams, flunk out of school, and carve initials or tattoo cult figures onto their bodies—all to see if their dads will notice.

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And I have watched daughters talk to fathers. When you come in the room, they change. Everything about them changes: their eyes, their mouths, their gestures, their body language. Daughters are never lukewarm in the presence of their fathers. They might take their mothers for granted, but not you. They light up—or they cry. They watch you intensely. They hang on your words. They hope for your attention, and they wait for it in frustration—or in despair. They need a gesture of approval, a nod of encouragement, or even simple eye contact to let them know you care and are willing to help.

When she's in your company, your daughter tries harder to excel. When you teach her, she learns more rapidly. When you guide her, she gains confidence.

If you fully understood just how profoundly you can influence your daughter's life, you would be overwhelmed.

Boyfriends, brothers, even husbands can't shape her character the way you do. You will influence her entire life because she gives you an authority she gives no other man.

Many fathers (particularly of teen girls) assume they have little influence over their daughters—certainly less influence than their daughters' peers or pop culture—and think their daughters need to figure out life on their own. But your daughter faces a

world markedly different from the one you did growing up: it's less friendly, morally unmoored, and even outright dangerous. After age six, "little girl" clothes are hard to find. Many outfits are cut to make her look like a seductive thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl trying to attract older boys. She will enter puberty earlier than girls did a generation or two ago (and boys will be watching as she begins to physically mature even as young as age nine). She will see sexual innuendo or scenes of overt sexual behavior in magazines or on television before she is ten years old, whether you approve or not. She will learn about HIV and AIDS in elementary school and will also probably learn why and how it is transmitted.

Fathers are what stand between daughters and this toxic world.

If you're reading this, you are a motivated, sensitive, and caring father. You are a good man, but you're probably exhausted. For you, there is great news and bad news.

The great news is that in order to experience a richer life and raise a fabulous daughter, you don't need to change your character. You need only to indulge what's best in your character. You have everything you need for a better relationship with your daughter.

Here's the bad news. You need to stop in your tracks, open your eyes wider, and see what your daughter faces today, tomorrow, and in ten years. It's tough and it's frightening, but this is the way it is. While you want the world to be cautious and gentle with her, it is cruel beyond imagination—even before she is a teen. Even though she may not participate in ugly stuff, it's all around her: sexual promiscuity, alcohol abuse, foul language, illegal drugs, and predatory boys and men who want only to take something from her.

Don't think you can't fight her "peers" or the power of pop culture. Exactly the opposite is true. Yes, the four Ms—MTV, music, movies, and magazines—are enormous influences that shape what girls think about themselves, what clothes they wear, and even the grades they get. But their influence doesn't come close to the influence of a father. A lot of research has been done on this—and fathers always come out on top. The effects of loving, caring fathers on their daughters' lives can be measured in girls of all ages.

When you are with her, whether you eat dinner and do homework together or even when you are present but don't say much, the quality and stability of her life—and, you'll find, your own—improves immeasurably. Even if you think the two of you operate on different planes, even if you worry that time spent with her shows no measurable results, even if you doubt you are having a meaningful impact on her, the clinical fact is that you are giving your daughter the greatest of gifts.

Your daughter will view this time spent with you vastly differently than you do. Over the years, in erratic bursts and in simple ordinary life together, she will absorb your influence. She will watch every move you make. She might not understand why you are happy or angry, affectionate, but you will be the most important man in her life, forever.

When she is twenty-five, she will mentally size her boyfriend or husband up against you. When she is thirty-five, the number of children she has will be affected by her life with you. The clothes she wears will reflect something about you. Even when she is seventy-five, how she faces her future will depend on some distant memory of time you spent together. Be it good or painful, the hours and years you spend with her—or don't spend with her—change who she is.
Come on men, we daughters need you!