

# **Fathers impact daughters more than most may realize**

By Jeffery M. Leving, SM

For decades, the relationships between mothers and their children have been examined by researchers and while there are a lot of important things about mother/child relationships, the relationships between fathers and children, especially daughters, has not been focused on enough.

We are all well aware of the special dynamic between fathers and sons, from stories about fathers coaching their son's sports when they were young to playing golf together when they enter adulthood. While these types of stories are great and are only an example (not all father and son stories revolve around sports), there is a lack of father/daughter stories in American culture.

The reason why we don't hear more about father/daughter relationships is a bit puzzling, as they do exist and are extremely important. Perhaps such stories do not sell tickets at the Hollywood box office, but in real life, they are prevalent and having a healthy relationship between a father and a daughter impacts the daughters more than most people can imagine.

Researchers have found that fathers impact their daughters in a variety of ways, from mental and physical health to academic achievement.

Among many ways the fatherly influence benefits their daughters is by giving them a higher sense of agency, which is defined as the thing that allows us to shape and control our lives into what we want them to be. It is not known exactly why men have a higher sense of agency than most women —many researchers attribute it to a combination of higher testosterone, and the tendency of cultures to make men more competitive and independent. What is known is that having a high sense of agency helps a person, in this example a daughter, stave off anxiety and depression, advance in their career and develop healthy relationships.

Fathers often determine whether their daughter plays sports in childhood, as it is often fathers who encourage their daughters to take up a sport. Additionally, a father's physical activity has the most influence on his daughter's physical activity as she enters adulthood.

Just as important as physical health is mental health, but that's also an area where fathers are often under appreciated. Yes, fathers can play a large role in mitigating mental health challenges in their daughters.

Healthy father-daughter relationships have been shown to lessen depression and anxiety in teenage girls, and it carries over into adulthood. The impact on a daughter's sense of agency likely helps with this. Body image issues have always been a big source of depression and anxiety

among young women and have only gotten worse with the rise of social media. Researchers have found that fathers lessen daughters' body image issues. Not surprisingly, on a similar note, researchers say teenage girls with a close relationship with their fathers are less likely to experience eating disorders.

Academic success and romantic relationships are two additional areas that fathers have a large impact on for daughters.

When it comes to academic success, researchers have found that girls with supportive fathers usually do better than girls who do not. This seems to carry over into secondary education as well, as girls who are close with their fathers have higher GPAs than those who do not.

A father's impact on a daughter's romantic relationships is perhaps the one area that isn't a surprise to most, as it may be the only aspect of a father-daughter relationship that has gotten adequate attention.

Girls who have healthy, secure and supportive relationships with their fathers are less likely to engage in early sexual activity and thus, have a lower risk of teenage pregnancy. Additionally, girls with healthy relationships with their fathers are more likely to have emotionally intimate and fulfilling relationships with their boyfriends and future husbands.

I've only highlighted a few of the ways fathers impact their daughters' lives, but it should be obvious that it is a critical role.

Fathers need to realize this and be sure not to discount their daughters. Be a strong, supportive and loving presence in your daughter's life as you have a vital role to play in creating a well-balanced adult.

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*Leving, who has dedicated his career to safeguarding children and reuniting them with their fathers, has written three acclaimed books: "Fathers' Rights," "Divorce Wars" and "How to be a Good Divorced Dad," the latter of which was praised by President Obama and by Cardinal Francis E. George, then the Archbishop of Chicago. Follow Jeffery M. Leving on Facebook and X @DadsRights.*