

## THE IMPORTANCE OF A FATHER'S LOVE IN THEIR DAUGHTER'S HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Next week is Fathers Day. Today we feature an article in the important role fathers play in the development of their daughters personality, values and behaviour.

At a time when the possibility of creating babies without men is no longer solely in the realm of science fiction, and when many children live without their fathers, due to divorce and relationship breakdown, the importance of fatherhood is in serious danger of becoming an antiquated notion. Of recent times, however, there has been some acknowledgement of the great need for boys to have a father, or at least, a father figure, in their lives. Yet little is said of the enormous importance of fatherhood in the lives of girls.

Never before has our culture been so dangerous for girls and young women, and, therefore, never before have girls so needed good, strong and protective fathers in their lives. Our society sends messages to even very young girls through the media, advertising and movies, that being sexy is extremely important. It tells teenage girls that it is normal and healthy to experiment with sex. Girls are in greater danger today of being sexually or physically assaulted, of having an eating disorder, an alcohol addiction, and of being depressed or suicidal than they were 20 years ago.

Dr Meg Meeker, a specialist in paediatric and adolescent medicine, has 20 years' experience counselling girls, young women and their families. She has found that the most important factor in a girl's life is her father. The quality of a girl's relationship with her father has a huge impact on the formation of her personality, her level of self-esteem, confidence and happiness, and therefore on the choices she makes in life. A father has the potential to give his daughter something that her mother cannot.

In her book *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters: 10 Secrets Every Father Should Know*, Dr Meeker pleads with fathers to recognise and to act on the necessity for them to defend and protect their daughters from "a very toxic, woman-unfriendly culture". She understands from her years of experience counselling teen girls that fathers can do this in a way that mothers cannot. Just in case we need convincing that our culture really is bad for girls, she lists some very disturbing facts:

- 11.9 per cent of females will experience forced intercourse.
- 40.9 per cent of girls 14 to 17 years old experience unwanted sex, primarily because they fear that their boyfriends will get angry.
- There are five to six million new cases of human papilloma virus (HPV) infections annually.
- HPV is spread through sexual contact. Some HPV strains cause cancer. HPV is responsible for approximately 99 per cent of all cervical cancer cases in women.
- If a girl takes oral contraceptives for more than five years, she is four times more likely to develop cervical cancer.
- 35.5 per cent of all high school girls have had sad, hopeless feelings for longer than two weeks.
- Engaging in sex puts girls at higher risk of depression.
- 11.5 per cent of females attempted suicide last year.
- Also presented are some facts about the influence of fathers on their daughters:
- Daughters who perceive that their fathers care a lot about them, who feel connected with their fathers, have significantly fewer suicide attempts and fewer instances of body dissatisfaction, depression, low self-esteem, substance use and unhealthy weight.
- A daughter's self-esteem is best predicted by her father's physical affection.
- Girls with good fathers are less likely to flaunt themselves to seek male attention.
- Girls with involved fathers wait longer to initiate sex and have lower rates of teen pregnancy.
- 76 per cent of teen girls said that their fathers influenced their decisions on whether they should become sexually active.

Girls today are pushed to be more independent and autonomous at earlier and earlier ages, and parents are afraid of being too protective. In our culture however, girls are vulnerable in many ways that boys are not, and are in need of more protection. Dr Meeker emphasises the need for fathers to monitor their daughters' exposure to potentially harmful media and also to be vigilant when they start dating boys.

She says: "One in 11 middle and high school students has been hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose while dating. Another one in 11 said they were forced to have sexual intercourse. An astonishing 96 per cent of students report that they have experienced emotional or psychological abuse while dating. Girls are markedly more at risk than boys in every one of these statistics."

It is also true that a girl whose father is protective (e.g., one who sets boundaries and curfews and makes a point of meeting the boys she dates), feels more loved and valued and therefore places more value on herself. A girl who places more value on herself is less likely to engage in risky behaviours, such as casual sex, binge-drinking or taking drugs. It is not enough for a father to be present in his daughter's life; he must also be actively involved in her life. This requires spending time alone with his daughter on a regular basis.

Dr Meeker asserts that it is important for a father to initiate this time spent alone with his daughter because she won't ask for it herself. A daughter wants to please her father and not be a nuisance to him when she can see that his life is busy.

The differences between sons and daughters mean that a father must engage differently with his daughter than he does with his son. "You might spend three hours watching a football game with your son and never say a word — and both of you would be happy. But your daughter isn't wired like that. You have to talk to her." One of the great myths that our society perpetuates is that teenagers need their space. During the teenage years, a daughter needs her father more than ever, and fathers often misinterpret their daughter's behaviour.

Dr Meeker writes: "Many fathers complain that their teenage daughters won't talk to them. They're usually wrong. It's just that these fathers have discouraged their daughters from talking to them. Daughters won't talk if they know the result will be only constant reprimand and correction." Often daughters are not looking for anything other than for their dads to listen to them, focus on them and show interest in them.

"If a daughter can trust her dad to listen, she will come to him again and again to talk," says Dr Meeker. It does not matter if a daughter has a higher IQ than her father. He does not need to entertain her. All he needs to do is be with her, listen to her and talk to her. Dr Meeker points out that "one of the primary treatments for girls with eating disorders" is for them to spend more time alone with their fathers. It is also extremely important for a father to frequently show physical affection for his daughter.

According to Dr Meeker, many girls begin having sex with their boyfriends purely because they do not receive any physical affection from their fathers. The simple act of a father giving his daughter a hug should not be under-estimated. A father who tells his daughter often that he loves her is building up her sense of self-worth, enabling her to resist the negative and demoralising messages she receives from our culture about what it means to be a female.

Many a father withdraws from his daughter during her teenage years or when she is moody and seems to want to be left alone. According to Dr Meeker, this is the worst thing a father can do. A father needs to fight for his daughter, to fight for his relationship with her, especially when things seem to be going wrong in her life. A father who fights for his daughter, to remain a part of her life, will ultimately be rewarded with her love and admiration. Daughters respect fathers who are strong, courageous and protective.

Furthermore, a woman is highly likely to choose a boyfriend or husband based on the qualities, whether good or bad, that she sees in her father. This alone demonstrates the awesome responsibility that comes with fatherhood. There is something very special and particular about the relationship between a father and daughter, which has the potential to protect a girl emotionally, physically and psychologically, as no other relationship in her life can.

Fathers need to trust their own instincts as men. For too long they have allowed themselves to be cowed by radical feminists in their ivory towers and the PC police who say that it is sexist for fathers to be too protective of their daughters. As the evidence in Dr Meeker's book shows overwhelmingly, a protective, loving and involved father can often, literally, save his daughter's life.

**Source:** News Weekly