

An Open Letter to Fathers and Men about Daughters and Emerging Young Women

Dear Dads (and other Male Role Models),

Our impact on our daughters, nieces, stepdaughters, and granddaughters is immense. They love us, look up to us, and even revere us. Sometimes they dislike us, resent us, are disappointed in us and wish we didn't care so much.

When we listen to them, understand them, advise them, and forgive them they appreciate and feel it deeply, and they hear us. When we manifest our "papa bear" desire to protect them from all mistakes and perils with anger, manipulation, and fear we alienate them and even sometimes push them into risky activity. They need to make mistakes to grow, and their mistakes touch our heart in the deepest way. We work to separate sensible protection from possessive, domineering control.

We are mindful of the impact of our expectations. We encourage and expect them to succeed. When they do, we glow and congratulate them. When they fall short, or are less than perfect, we must love them, support them and congratulate them for their efforts. As a matter of fact, there is time in every day to tell our daughters how much we love, honor, and respect them, and how proud we are of them. Listen openly and attentively, turn off your phone and put your computer to sleep, look into their eyes, and remember to ask for permission to give advice. Sometimes, they just want to share and know that you are listening.

As they grow from the adorable, precious little toddlers saying "dada" for the first time, our young children who are precious apples of our eyes, we must respect the physical and emotional boundaries that go with the journey towards adulthood. We can honor the boundaries of their emerging beings and honor the cycles of their emerging womanhood. We can be instrumental in supporting their unconditional love and care their own bodies, hearts, and souls. Every word that we say to them carries meaning and impact. We must be mindful of our words and refrain from judgments and thoughtless comments that can have hurtful impact.

If we treat their mothers (and other women) adoringly, compassionately, respectfully and with genuine daily displays of love, our daughters will seek out partners who do the same. If we are no longer with their mothers, it is equally important to treat them with respect, dignity, and compassion. We should treat women as we would want a partner to treat our daughter. The key is to treat, but not to spoil; to indulge but not to entitle.

As Dads, we know that our daughters are sometimes naïve, innocent, vulnerable, overly trusting. It is our job to teach them how to stand up for themselves in all of the challenging situations that we know as men can confront them. We can support, respect and honor the crushes, and loves as well as their sexual orientations and preferences, never abdicating the reasonable and common sense we must exercise as parents. We can carefully choose our responses as we say "yes" and "no". We

can steadfastly stick to our non-negotiable safety expectations about risky behavior, while letting the more benign issues go. (No matter what they do to their hair, it grows back, so let it go!) We can consult our hearts, and not our sentiment, when we decide to step forward or stand back.

“Daddy-daughter days” are precious! Find out what your daughter loves to do and spend a day with her doing it. Do something with her that she loves doing, and it will mean even more to her than you are doing it.

In recognition of our many temperaments, we can model adult behavior by initiating acts of kindness, tenderness and understanding, by being responsive and accountable and showing restraint of our archetypal male outbursts, which we often regret even as we are uttering them.

Most important, we can participate in conversation rather than negotiation and discussion rather than argument. We can remember that rules beg to be broken, and agreements take us to a higher place, as they discourage secrecy. And by the way, respect the difference between privacy and secrecy.

On that special future day when you “give your daughter away,” she will take you, your love and everything you have given her as a guide, a light for her future. Your pride in her and joy for her will continue to grow!

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