

There was something about my dad's love for me that was more a choice than being automatic.

But I knew that because my dad loved me I was worth loving.

I have certainly come across people in my working life where they were not affirmed by their father and it has had a big negative influence on them.

Rosemary Kendell – occupational therapist, Floreat

Chapter 1

The importance of the father-daughter relationship

*"Dads have a profound effect on
their daughters - for good or bad"*

CHAPTER TOPICS

- Why fathers are important in a daughter's life
- What daughters really need from their dads
- Mothers and the role of fathering

Why the father-daughter relationship is important

There is an incredible power in the father-daughter relationship, a power which strongly influences a woman's future, for good or bad. Girls long for affection and affirmation from their fathers. The influence that fathers have on their daughters is profound and lasts for the whole of their lives and it creates a hole in their lives if it is absent.¹⁻⁶



Fathers and daughters need each other. A dad can give a daughter a special confidence and sense of her own value in a very special way. A strong father/daughter bond helps a daughter navigate through the many tough challenges of the teenage years and early adulthood.

Kevin Rudd – Prime Minister of Australia, Canberra

Many published studies have confirmed the powerful effect that fathers have on daughters, with few dissenting voices.⁷⁻¹⁷

The fact that women are profoundly influenced by a father and/or by father-figures worries me for two reasons.

Firstly, I have a daughter whom I love. When I look at my daughter and I think about how much she is being shaped by her relationship with me, I get a bit nervous – am I doing a good job of that? Am I doing the right things? How do I know what she really needs from me compared with her two brothers and how do I know how well I am doing?

As adults, women often think about their dads - how things were and how they wish they had been

Secondly, I have a wife whom I also love, and I have found out that the way a woman relates to men is profoundly influenced by the relationship she had with her own father. I confess that I was slow to realise that, like a lot of husbands. So when I look at my wife now I think about how much she was inevitably affected by her relationship with her

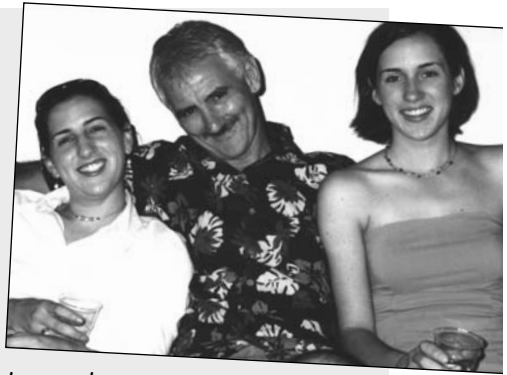
own father and I wonder whether I really understand that, whether I've shown enough interest in the issue and been willing to discuss it with her.

As adults, women often think about their dads - how things were and how they wish they had been. Most of the other women I spoke to have also sought to understand their relationship with their father. My wife has too and I have learnt from that.

Many dads tell me how slow they have been to appreciate the power of the father-daughter relationship in their family. That slowness is common and is described in the literature.^{18,19} Interestingly, by the time girls reach adolescence they are more aware of how important their dads are to them than the dads are themselves.²⁰

Hopefully as you read this book you will understand that relationship better yourself.

I talk to young women training to be teachers who say how much they were influenced - good and bad - by their dads. Unfortunately the negative side seems to be a constant longing by young women for their dad's approval; is that why they fall into relationships with men where they are looking for a father's approval, rather than a relationship of equals? I suspect so.



Peter Prout – farmer, soldier, lecturer in Education, teacher, pastor, Subiaco

The special needs of daughters versus sons

Hardly any of the men that I ask can tell me what it is that their daughters need from them, as distinct from their sons.

A respected family psychologist in Colorado Springs, Dr James Dobson, told me recently that a major factor

that determines whether or not a woman is likely to have a successful long term relationship with a man is the relationship that she had with her father.¹⁸ This is also true with regards to the confidence that a woman brings to her life. It is not the only factor and there are many other things that affect these outcomes of course. A number of studies support this notion.²¹⁻²³

There is something particular in the relationship between daughters and their fathers that represents a powerful bond, a powerful potential influence, for good or bad. Sometimes dads tell me that all kids need one thing - love. I used to think that too. Just love them all and have good times with them and teach them stuff and everything would be OK. This is not so.

The father-daughter relationship is powerful in shaping a woman's future - but most fathers are not aware of this

Dads need to be aware that there are several ways a daughter's future is peculiarly influenced by the relationship with her father. It is incorrect to say that girls only need the same inputs as boys - this is true to a point, but there are some things that are particularly important for girls.

All of my interviews and reading have taught me that a daughter has special needs from her father, especially:

- approval of her *attractiveness* as a person, her beauty, including acceptance of her body shape²⁴
- encouragement to make her *confident* to function in this world, including the confidence to say 'no' to drugs and to think and learn for herself²⁵
- understanding what she should expect in her *relationships with men*, including a healthy view of sexuality²⁶

Also, I discovered in my interviews and in the published literature that there are special ways in which the fundamental needs of all children are slightly different when applied to a daughter, especially they way we show

- that we love her *unconditionally*²⁷
- that we are willing to *listen* to her²⁸
- that we understand and reinforce how *special* she is as a person, including doing one-on-one activities with her.²⁹

These inputs help to determine how kind a woman is to herself, how free she feels to be kind to others or whether she dislikes herself, even becoming self-destructive.

It was when I found this out that I first became really concerned about my own performance as a father. Once I realised that as Amy's father my role was important and not optional, that I have a profound effect on her life for good or bad, I asked myself how well I was doing. Was I behaving in a way that will help her in her important relationships, not hinder them? And was I giving her confidence in herself rather than eroding that confidence?

I had, up until then, thought I had been doing a pretty good job as a dad. But then I realised there were many things I just wasn't doing because I wasn't aware that my daughter needed anything different from what my sons needed.

The strategies listed in this book can strengthen the bond between a father and his daughter and help equip a daughter for life. What that means in reality won't be the same for every child, because every child is unique. And it won't be the same for every dad, because every dad is different. Also, not all dads reading this will be living in the same house as their children. Not every idea, tip and strategy will suit every reader so just take and use those that you find helpful. This is not an instruction manual but a collection of ideas that will suit different people at different times.

Why fathers of daughters should read this book

This book is partly written for fathers of daughters, because it will give them insight and strategies that will help them provide for the real needs of their daughters. Hopefully this information will help dads to make changes whilst their daughters are still young and able to benefit. I am grateful

myself that I learnt so much from these interviews and ideas whilst my daughter was young. But these are ideas that will help a father at any age or stage - it is never too late to work on the father-daughter relationship, and there are many examples of that in this book.

It is never too late to work on the father-daughter relationship

When dad is present in a girl's life she receives strong signals from him that affect her life, often profoundly, and he must understand how important those signals are.



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 terrified, overwhelmed, or both.

Many fathers (particularly of teen girls) 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.

Meg Meeker – adolescent health physician³⁰

Knowing what to do as a father of sons is hard enough, but doing a good job of being a father to daughters is not intuitive for men – we have never been girls. A book like this helps fill those gaps in our knowledge before it is too late to realise we don't know what we are doing.

Over recent years there has been an attempt by many fathers to spend more time with their kids.³¹ But as lives get busier this is harder to achieve. For example, although most fathers say that the evening family meal is important, less than half of them succeed in attending it most nights.³² Also, many dads tell me they just don't know *how* to talk with their kids when they do spend time with them.

The need to think about fathering and to change what we do was illustrated to me by what one man said to me after

reading *Fathering from the Fast Lane*. This man is a tough welder and when we talked about his own children, what he said surprised me.

I read a little bit of the book and I have to stop because I am crying so much. It reminds me of what I should have done with my kids. My kids were 'just there' and I thought that was enough for them. I never realised how much they really wanted me to do things with them until many years later. I will be a better grandfather for it all, but it is too late for my own kids as they have all left home now. I wish I'd known all of this stuff when I started my fathering.



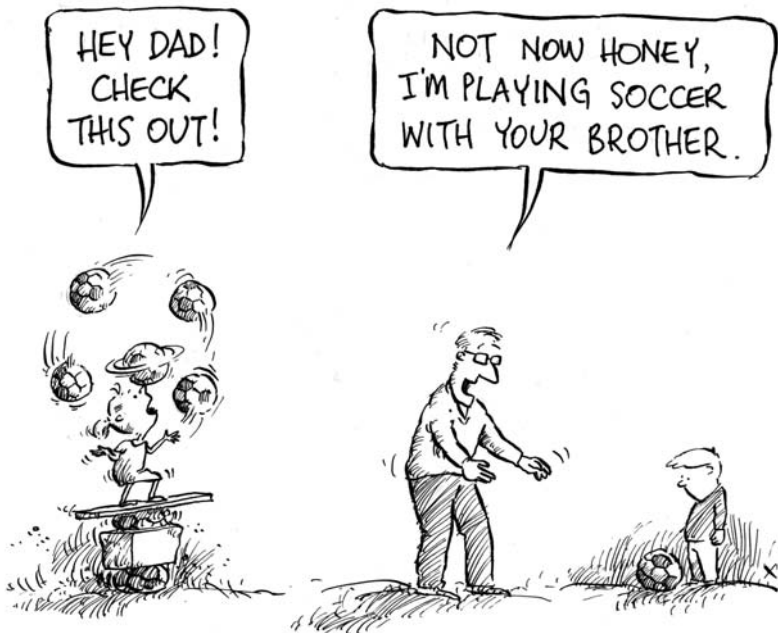
Peter Provan – welder, Quinn's Rocks

Most men are not aware of the power of a father-daughter relationship

Given that few men can identify what it is that their daughters need from them as distinct from their sons, we need to focus on that issue.

Dads lack basic knowledge about being a girl - they have never been girls themselves and their father never taught them how to be a good dad to a daughter. Often they have never read or heard anything on the subject. Indeed there is not much written on the subject of fathers and daughters, nor much spoken about in the media.

Another problem is that of male discomfort with girly things – men often feel more comfortable doing things with sons rather than with daughters. Certainly boys need a father-figure in their life but dads need to not let their desire to help their sons keep them from engaging with their daughters.



A hairdresser told me one day the following moving story about her father, a story which illustrates the block that some dads have thinking about what their daughters need from them:

My dad was a really good father - to my brother. They were very close and did lots of things together and are still very close even to this day.

For example every morning at 5 o'clock my dad would come in and knock on my brother's bedroom door and together the two of them would go off to train our family racehorse. But he never made any effort to do things with me.

Once a month now I get together with Dad for lunch. But after two minutes we run out of things to say to each other because he never really formed any

sort of close relationship with me. If he had bothered to do that, I would have really looked forward to those lunches. But he never did. But, you know, each morning at 5 o'clock as Dad came to get my brother to go and train our horse, I bet that he thought I was asleep in my bedroom. But I wasn't.

Each morning I would be lying there, waiting and listening and hoping that once, just once, he would knock on my door instead.

Shelley Grove – hairdresser, Sydney

What I find scary is that this is not a story of a girl growing up in a terrible family. There is no alcoholism or abuse to blame. It is about a good dad who just didn't realise how important he was to his daughter and a daughter who was too shy to demand his attention or didn't feel she could.

Separated dads

Virtually every suggestion in the book applies to dads who do not live in the same house as their children. There are some specific suggestions made for separated dads in Chapter 12. In general the needs of girls are much the same wherever the father lives, though the living circumstances and contact arrangements will necessitate additional attention.

Why adult daughters should read this book

Adult daughters could read this book for 3 reasons:

- as a *daughter* to try to better understand her reactions to events in her life, especially in her marriage
- as a *co-parent*, to encourage their husband to be a better father
- as a *mother* who is considering finding good father-figures for her daughter

Understanding issues relating to your own father

One reason why adult daughters might read a book like this is to help understand more about who she is and why she is the way she is. Given that most women are powerfully influenced by their father or other strong father-figures in their lives, it would be surprising if women could not learn a lot about themselves by reading about what a girl really needs from a father. It will probably become obvious to her, as she reads, whether she did or did not receive those things.

And because there are many areas in which the father-daughter influence can be manifest in an adult woman's life, it is not surprising that women begin to think about such issues if they experience a lack of confidence in life, feelings of unattractiveness, low self-esteem, extreme mood swings, anxiety, difficulties in relationships with a partner, problems with sexual intimacy or controlling behaviour.³³⁻³⁵

Many women, as they get older, begin to develop insight into how their relationship with their father might have affected them. Indeed many women then seek to understand that relationship with their father, or lack of relationship, and try to understand themselves and their own reactions to their friends, partner, children and work colleagues. It is often in marriage that they begin to see these issues as being important.



When our marriage hit a difficult patch I realised that there were things that I hadn't resolved from my childhood that were interfering with our relationship.

Brenda Hodges – teacher, Sydney

Thus it is important for women to read this book to help them understand their own experience of their dads and other father-figures, their marriage and their own children. For some women, such memories and insights may be triggered by this book.

The importance of each of the issues raised in this book to individual women will vary – I have noticed that the significance of these things is often only apparent to women later in life. A whole chapter is devoted to resolution, forgiveness and reconciliation between daughters and fathers (Chapter 13). I hope that women will hand this book around to each other and discuss together how each issue might have affected them.

Why aren't mothers enough?

Sometimes I am asked by mothers, 'Why are fathers so important - aren't mothers enough?' This is a tough question to handle, especially when talking to sole-parent mums. There is often so much emotion in that question that I think of looking for a way out of answering it. But I can't and I don't, because the question is too important.

All the research and all my interviews point convincingly to the same conclusion - girls do much better in life with a father involved⁶⁻¹⁷ or, if he is not around, or not helpful, a strong father-figure.³⁶⁻³⁹

Many families with one parent do well. Single mothers do amazing work in difficult circumstances, succeeding at a job far harder than most of us can possibly imagine. They deserve our respect and they deserve our support. And millions of children have strong, loving relationships with their non-resident dads. But on the whole, we must never forget children need their dads, and when they're absent, something is lost.

*George Bush – US President,
Washington DC⁴⁰*



Mothers have a role in possibly helping their children's father be a better dad. Many dads that I have spoken to have told me that they really only learnt how to parent by asking or watching their wives.

Another reason why mothers might read this book in their role as co-parents with the father is that they are well placed to 'interpret' a father's words and behaviour for the children in a positive way, if appropriate.



It was my mother who translated Dad's love for us into words - she would explain to me how much my father loved me even though he had difficulty expressing it. That was important for me.

Christine Jenkins – physician, Sydney

Mothers are often the 'gatekeepers' of a child's access to good fathering, whether he lives in another location or in some families, even if he lives in the family home.^{41,42} This can be a positive or negative role.

Perhaps if you are a mother reading this book you might consider inviting your daughter's father to read it. This is important, even if your relationship with your daughter's father is poor. You might also encourage your child's school to have father-friendly strategies.

You need to target mothers, because if they don't understand how important fathers are to children it is very hard to achieve anything.

Jim Watterston – Director, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne

Mothers as co-parents with fathers

At the very beginning I am keen to emphasise that this book in no way devalues the role of mothers in the lives of their daughters. On the contrary, it is impossible to over-emphasise the importance of the relationship between mothers and daughters and the powerful role that women play in children's lives. There is also no doubt that some adult daughters have ongoing relationship difficulties with their mothers rather than their fathers.⁴³ But this book only focusses on fathers.

It is worth mentioning here that most of the tips in this book are just as relevant to mothers as to fathers. Girls need to hear most of these messages from their mothers too. But I have focussed on fathers because of their great need and because, as a man, I did not wish to tell mothers what to do.

Good fathering allows mothers to get on with doing a good job of mothering

Mothers tend to do a good job of mothering, and to think about that role, whether they are married or single, at home or working, healthy or prone to illness. Not always, but usually. But it is hard to be the mother you want to be when you are doing all the parenting – better fathering allows mothers to get on with doing a good job of mothering.

For example, one of the reasons that kids do better at school if a caring father is involved is because it allows mothers to now give children the personal and educational attention they need from them, rather than being busy and distracted doing all of the parenting. Indeed a 2006 study of 237 families showed that having a supportive mother and father was clearly associated with higher scores in mental functioning compared to having either parent alone.⁴⁴

And many fathers already do a great job too. But it is common that fathers are not pulling their weight when it comes to parenting, leaving a lot of it to mothers. When that happens the children and the fathers miss out. Because fathers often

worry less than mothers about their own performance as parents, they rarely read books or attend seminars on the subject.



Another good reason to have fathers more involved as co-parents is that mothers are human and thus are not always in good shape. When fathers are present in a child's life, whether in the same house or not, they provide support when mothers go through difficult periods (e.g. times of stress or depression) and vice versa, and this has been shown to be an important safeguard in a child's life.⁴⁵

Most husbands, and some wives, aren't aware of how much their marriage is influenced by the relationship she had with her father

It is important that all mothers, as co-parents with their child's father, read a book like this and be aware of the importance of the relationship between their daughter and her father so that she encourages that relationship out of love for her daughter. If a mother doesn't encourage that relationship, it may not happen.

Why husbands should read this book

Most husbands, and some wives, aren't aware of how much their marital relationship is influenced by the relationship the wife had with her father. If that relationship was strong and rich, this may not matter too much, but when it has negative components it becomes important to understand them so that it doesn't interfere with the marriage. It has taken me a while to begin to understand that in my own life.

Men, have you ever sat there listening to your wife reacting to something and thought 'I wonder why she is so sensitive to this?' I have often done that and been perplexed. Or have you wondered why despite being competent, she lacks confidence or why despite being attractive she often feels unattractive? I have done that too. Have you wondered why she is so sensitive to criticism given in a certain way or why she reacts to particular issues?

I have noticed that many men get surprised by their wife's strong reactions to seemingly innocuous events. I do too. It is a caring and worthwhile thing to consider where those feelings might be coming from, though this can be tricky.

I remember watching the Barbara Streisand film 'Yentl'. They had such a sweet relationship, that daughter with her father. I sat in the cinema and just started crying and couldn't stop.

It caught me by surprise and Bob was surprised too. I had missed out on that kind of relationship and it really struck me at that time. Fathers need to make their daughters feel precious to him.



Carol Hamrin – consultant on China, Virginia

Not all of a woman's surprising reactions will be able to be traced back to her relationship with her father. But you will realise, when you read this book, that it is a good place to start looking.

I didn't really understand how important that was in the first few years of our marriage (maybe the first 20 years of our marriage!) but I think I am seeing it more clearly now. I am a bit of a slow learner and should have seen it earlier. I used to fob it off and think my wife was overanalysing things. But as I have learnt more about my father-in-law and some of the hardships in his life and watched how he talks to my wife, I have realised how right she is. He is a wonderful man whom I love deeply, but he would never claim to have done his fathering perfectly. I wish I had had the insight to understand more of that when we were a young married couple.

By understanding what it is that a daughter needs from her father you will be better placed to talk to your partner about her relationship with her father. You might even go through this book with her, asking her to talk about each issue and her experience of that issue. And when you do that you will have a much clearer understanding of her. You might become less confused.

Try to understand your wife's issues with her father

Because the way a daughter is fathered has a profound effect on her subsequent relationships, particularly her marriage, husbands need to understand how their wife's relationship with her father is affecting her in adult life. We have discussed already how disabling those effects can be to communication, intimacy, confidence and sex in the relationship.

If we do not understand how our wife related to her father we risk getting confused and annoyed, for example when she reacts to what appears to be an innocent comment.

So husbands, try to understand so that you are not bewildered. When I talk to other husbands they have had the same experience in the early years of marriage they hardly

ever thought of how their wife's relationship with her father might be impacting on their marriage. It was only after many years of marriage, lots of discussion, some arguments and sometime illness or the death of the father-in-law that they became aware of the effect of her relationship with her father, or lack of relationship, on their marriage.

For the first 5 years of our marriage I didn't think about Cailey's relationship with her father. That began to change when we had our first daughter. I learnt more about it in the period when her father was dying, but it is still something we haven't talked about much.



Kanishka Raffel – lawyer, pastor, Shenton Park

Given that most divorces happen in those early years it seems wise to think about these things early. It wasn't for lack of input from my wife that I failed in those early years. It was because I didn't really listen. I discounted a lot of what she said because I didn't have the insight and willingness to really consider what she was saying.

Others have noted a similar slowness to understand these issues.

I have known for a long time that the father-daughter relationship is important, but interestingly I have only ever thought about that issue as a parent, not as a husband.

This might be an important factor in helping to understand my wife's strong reactions to things.

Michael Tarca – engineer, Claremont

I hope you will not be as slow as I was to see how father-daughter issues affect a marriage.

I don't mean to imply that understanding how your wife was influenced by her father makes a husband a passive observer of things. Although the marriage will be affected, the male partner is in a position to at least partially fill empty emotional spaces. Men, we could think about understanding those emotional spaces in the woman we love, e.g. by reading through this sort of book and thinking about the issues as they might affect her, and by talking with her about the issues.

Help and encourage her to think through them and don't get in the way of her doing so. She may need professional help to sort things out and it is vital that you are supportive during that time. Remember, if she is reacting to you because of how she related to her father, it is not you, not your marriage and not her love for you that is in question, even though it seems that way.

By understanding where a wife's reactions come from, husbands are in a position to deliberately not react the same way her father did, i.e. he can break the cycle. Also, understanding can change annoyance into empathy.

We could help by filling in some of those empty emotional spaces with words and deeds where possible. So, for example, if she was forgotten on her birthday, make a fuss of her every birthday; if she was never made to feel special, think of all the things that

make her special and tell her; if she was never made to feel beautiful, tell her how beautiful she is, even if she doesn't seem to believe you at first; if she was not listened to start asking her opinion on things and doing some 'harpoon' listening (see chapter 9).

By understanding what it is that a daughter needs from her father you will be better placed to talk to your partner about her relationship with her father

However husbands are not there to fix things, nor to be a wife's therapist, nor to try to be the father that she never had. We can't. It is enough just to understand, listen and empathise. That is a great gift we can give our wives.

The ideas presented in the book are not 'heavy' and not difficult. In fact they are easy, a bit like remembering our wedding anniversary or putting out the garbage – they are not hard to do but just have to be remembered. How much time does it take for a father or grandfather to tell a girl she is beautiful or gifted? About 20 seconds. They just need to think of doing it. That is why I want this book to be given to any father or father-figure because most won't think about saying these things, or know what to say, without those extra bits of help and encouragement to do so.

I also don't wish to induce 'over-parenting'. That sometimes occurs when people begin to understand what kids really need from them. But over-parenting, i.e. a life in which it is 'work + kids and nothing else' is a mistake because it puts too much pressure on kids (because they become a measure of a parent's success in life) and it doesn't role model for kids a life of rich friendships, community living and interesting child-free activities.

My aim in this book is not to make fathers feel even more guilty than they already do about their performance as fathers, but to give them greater understanding of the issues.

I also don't wish to disturb women as they consider their relationship with their fathers, if that consideration proves detrimental rather than helpful.

The book simply offers simple information plus a range of suggested strategies to improve the relationship that fathers have with daughters and that daughters have with their fathers and their husbands. It is also aimed at helping father-figures be strong, positive influences in a girl's life.

I encourage you to try them and discuss them.



Quiz Question

Who said: "I am a great writer because when I was a little girl and walked into a room where my father was sitting, his eyes would light up. There isn't any other reason."?

Answer: Toni Morrison – Nobel prize-winning novelist, b. 1931

The father-daughter relationship - some things to think about

Men

Understanding father-daughter relationships is important for all men.

We could read this book

- as *fathers*, to understand what we need to do as fathers of daughters
 - as *husbands*, to understand our partners better
 - as *father-figures*, asking ourselves how we can positively influence young girls
 - as *community members*, to encourage other men such as brothers and friends to be good dads
-

Women

Understanding father-daughter relationships is also important for all women

- as *daughters*, to try to better understand their reactions to events in their lives, especially in marriage
- as *co-parents*, to help them encourage their partners to be better fathers
- as *community members*, to encourage other men such as brothers and friends to be good dads
- as *mothers* who need to find good father-figures for their daughters