

“To speak or not to speak...that is the question”

© The Abba Project™, Michelle J. Watson, PhD, LPC, 2010 www.theabbaproject.com

In my years of working in the mental health field I have continually been an advocate for assisting greater health and communication in dad-daughter relationships. I have had dad after dad join counseling sessions with their daughters and sometimes the dads have been motivated afterwards to kick it up a notch by being more intentional with their girls whereas other times I've seen things get worse because the daughter then had hope that things would change only to realize that nothing was going to be different. Like the proverb says, *“Hope deferred makes the heart sick”* (Proverbs 13:12).

I do believe that dads want to be their daughters' hero and often when they realize they fall short of their own or another's expectations they give up trying.

Here is something that I have observed in my years of working with dads:

Men would rather do nothing than do it wrong.

I have seen that men tend to hold back in pursuing relationships consistently with their daughters if there is a negative interaction between them where they get rejected, shot down, yelled at, dismissed, ignored, belittled, etc. Rather than pushing forward after these kinds of interactions dads often (and understandably so) pull back and retreat.

The assumption that dads tend to make after situations like this is:

**Clearly I am making my daughters life worse.
Her reaction confirms this.
When she is ready she can come to me.
In the meantime, I'll let her mom handle her.**

Here is the problem that I see with this line of thinking: Dads are the adults and their daughters, whose hormones lead their lives from early puberty throughout their 20's if not later, are their children. In other words, the ball is in each dad's court to pursue the relationship with his daughter, not the other way around. Even with all her emotional ups and downs, every girl needs her dad to see and know that ***she is more than her reaction***. The emotional reactivity is simply part of being a girl.

No, it's not always fun to be the dad when your daughter is intense and emotional, particularly when it's directed at you, but the truth is that the bulk of this comes down to the fact that this is how her brain is wired. But she will level out...it just takes time. You as her dad can play a significant role in how she navigates her emotions and I want to give you some tips on how to best do that.

It's important to know that your daughter will level out emotionally in healthier ways and with greater maturity if you can be patient and non-reactive to her. The more you can validate her feelings (even if you have no idea why things are such a big deal to her), the faster she will move through her emotions. Oftentimes the greatest thing she needs is to know that she isn't alone in her feelings and to know that she is heard. ***Even if you can't understand her emotions, it will go a long way to build a bridge with her if you can use your words to tell her you care and are sorry she is hurting.***

Another thing I have seen is that dads hold on to the words of their daughters, whether they are positive or negative. As imagined, when the positive compliments and humor are flying, all is well. But when words from daughter to dad are negative, caustic, reactive, intense, critical, etc., the words (understandably so) penetrate a dad's heart, and he pulls back.

This is where I come to my next assumption:

Men are much more sensitive on their underbelly than they would ever like to admit or would want anyone to know.

Once a dad is hurt by his daughter it is extremely hard for him to move back towards her. In fact, often at this point it becomes mom who is the go-between and it is she who then pursues communication and resolution with their daughter. Mom knows (because she is a girl) that even if there is a reaction, it's better to move towards rather than retreat. It is here that many marital relationships are strained because dad thinks mom is catering too much and is simply enabling their daughter while moms tend to communicate that dad needs to stay out of it because he's being too harsh and/or impatient.

As a result of dad taking a few steps back from his daughter, it is here that the relationship stalls. Distance ensues. Communication is halted or at least decreased. Pride holds both at bay and neither is willing to concede. Here is where you, as her dad, have to take the high road and soften if you want to build, rebuild, and strengthen the relationship with your daughter. ***The movement has to start with you.***

Yes, girls have to take accountability and responsibility for their words and actions, but the truth is that big emotional up's and down's are a normal part of the experience that girls go through on their path to developmental maturity. Most of the time the outbursts are later forgotten....by the girl anyway. Getting feelings out into the open and being validated for how she feels goes a long way toward girls being able to actually move on and ***through*** their reactions more quickly.

I long to see dads proactively step relationally towards their daughters, even through the haze of reactivity from them. Girls ***NEED*** their dads to let them know they are beautiful, enough, and okay, even with their flaws. They need to know that their dads are proud of them without strings attached. Unconditional love and acceptance from dads despite their moods and reactions is something girls both need and long for. Your pursuit of her even when she is least deserving of it (after she's been less than pleasant to be around) is something she will never ever forget. Teach her about grace by modeling it to her.

The question after all of this then is: ***How does a dad proactively pursue consistent relationship with his daughter without being harsh, condescending or impatient while validating her worth and value?*** Though there clearly isn't a formula, I will go on record as stating some things that I believe are ***good to say*** and other things that are ***not good to say*** if a dad wants to speak in a language that his daughter will understand and thrive on.

What a dad says or doesn't say bears more impact on his daughter's well-being, self-confidence, self-esteem, and her future than words can fully capture. I realize that in the heat of the moment we all say things we regret, but it's vital for dads put a guard over their mouths and watch what they say because girls do remember. There is actually no truth at all to the old adage that reads, "Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me." As we all know, words do stay with us long after they are spoken.

This isn't about having to be perfect but is more of a call to be the dad you want to be, the dad you imagined yourself being when you first looked at her on the day she was born.

Here are some ideas that will help foster better communication and strengthen the relationship between you and your daughter:

What not to say:

- You got yourself into this mess so don't come running to me...
you have no one to blame but yourself
 - Stop crying....You're just being a baby.
On top of it all, you're too old for this behavior anyway....
It's about time that you grew up
- Do you know how utterly ridiculous and nonsensical you sound right now?
 - Why do you always make mountains out of molehills?
- I can't understand you when you're like this. Go talk to your mother...
She'll understand you
 - I gave up trying with you a long time ago
- How on earth do you ever expect a man to want you when you act like this?
 - You are one high maintenance girl
- You are wearing me out...I don't know how much more of you I can take
 - You have always been the most needy of all our kids
 - You drive me crazy
 - When are you ever going to start acting your age?
- I'm going to call your friends and tell them that you act this way
 - How on earth do you have any friends?
 - Shape up or ship out
 - In my house you will act the way I tell you to act
 - Do you want a taste of your own medicine?
 - Can't you ever think of anyone but yourself?
 - God must regret having made you
- You are a big disappointment to me and a disgrace to this family
- What did I ever do to deserve having to deal with a daughter like you?
 - Why can't you be more like your brother/sister?

What to say:

- What did I ever do to deserve to have such an *incredible* daughter like you?!
 - Do you know how grateful I am to be your dad?!
 - You look so beautiful today
 - You get prettier with each passing year
 - You're right, I don't understand you right now but I **want** to understand. Can you help me understand?
- I'll be here for you no matter what. Any time, day or night, I will do my best to be available. You can text or call me when I'm at work or out of town and I'll figure out a way to respond as soon as I can
 - I want you to know that I enjoy you
 - You are going to make a great wife and mother some day
 - I've seen so much growth in you (list specifics)
 - Tell me what you're learning in school (or work)...I'd love to hear
 - What was good about your day today?
 - What was hard about your day today?
 - God broke the mold when He made you! You are one of a kind!
 - You are completely unique and gifted (list specifics)
 - I love you just the way you are
 - You could never be a disappointment to me no matter what you do or don't do because I love you unconditionally
 - What a treasure you are. Any guy who gets to date you (or eventually marry you) is a very lucky man
 - In my eyes, you are the best of the best
 - I am so proud of you
 - I love you
 - You are amazing!
 - I look forward to our dates
- I want you to know that no matter what, I will always be your main man!