

Fathers and Daughters: Why a course for college students?

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More information on this topic can be found in Dr. Nielsen's book:

***Embracing Your Father: Strengthening Your Father-Daughter Relationship* (McGraw Hill, spring 2004)**

Why offer college students a course about Fathers and Daughters? What good can it possibly do since most daughters will never live with their parents again after college? And how could young adult daughters possibly use such information in any practical way in their own lives?

As an adolescent psychologist and college professor for 26 years, several years ago I decided to create a seminar course for undergraduates entitled "Fathers and Daughters." The course is not required for any major or minor. Enrollment is strictly voluntary - just an elective course in a demanding liberal arts curriculum that leaves students very little time for electives. Yet from the outset the Fathers and Daughters course filled up immediately - as it has every semester for the past 7 years. In fact for the past few years there have been so many students wanting to enroll that at least two sections of this course could be offered every semester. And most of the students are *not* psychology or sociology majors. So what's all the fuss about? Why are so many students attracted to a course devoted entirely to fathers and daughters?

Attention to father-daughter relationships: Why so little?

Books & Internet Perhaps many people are surprised when I tell them about the students' intense interest in this course because they assume that the most important relationship is between mothers and children - above all, mothers and daughters. Indeed college courses, workshops, therapy groups, television shows, and books that focus exclusively on mothers and daughters are common in our country. For instance, there are roughly 1300 books about mothers and daughters listed by Amazon.com, the largest website for books published in the past 30 years - and most are written for adult mothers and daughters. In contrast, there are only 900 books about fathers and daughters - most of which are children's story books. Interestingly too, there are only 500 books listed on mothers and sons; but nearly 1300 on fathers and sons.. This is also true on the internet where there are far more web site listings for mothers and daughters than for fathers and daughters. Clearly then many writers, publishers, readers, and internet fans believe the father-daughter relationship merits less attention than other family relationships.

Television and Movies Most of our movies and television programs also push the father-daughter relationship off to the side, or ignore it altogether. In contrast, much of our media focuses exclusively on mothers and daughters. If included at all, the father is often made to look like the bumbling idiot - or the indifferent, self-centered, distant, insensitive, foolish, uptight, uncommunicative, stressed out, withdrawn, immature, self absorbed parent - especially when it comes to interacting with his daughter and especially if he and the mother are divorced (Dow, B., 1996; Feldman, L., 1990; Gates, A., 2000; Heintz, K., 1998; Kluger, B., 2000; Lehman, P., 2000; Lupton, D. & Barclay, L., 1997; Mintz, S., 1997; Moore, M., 1992; Owen, R., 1997).

Adult and Children's Literature The father-daughter relationship doesn't come off looking much better in most novels either. Most novels present fathers as overbearing, judgmental, abusive, or tyrannical or as withdrawn, passive, weak, and ineffective (Sheldon, B., 1997; Sullivan, C., 1995; Zwinger, L., 1991). Even children's books and fairytales generally exclude the father or portray him in non-nurturing ways - interacting mainly with their sons, not their daughters. Not even animal fathers in children's books have the common sense or interest to nurture their offspring (Bottigheimer, R., 1987; Harshaw, T., 1997; Warner, M., 1996; Zipes, J., 1994). On another front, most fathers in the Bible are also rather unlikeable characters in terms of what they expect from their daughters and how they treat them. Often the daughter is rewarded for being submissive, meek, obedient and self sacrificing, banished for challenging her father, forced by her father into marrying against her will, or exploited by her father for his own gain (Abramovitch, H., 1997; Sheldon, B., 1997).

Research and Therapy More disturbing still, many researchers, psychologists, therapists and sociologists don't fare much better in terms of what they have been doing - or rather *not* doing - in regard to fathers and daughters. Much of the work that mental health and social workers do focuses on mothers' relationships with children - and, except in cases of incest, tends to downplay or ignore the father-daughter relationship (Beale, A., 1999; Barber, B., 1995; Butler, B., 1995; Caplan, P., 1990; Carr, A., 1998; Feldman, L., 1990; Frieman, B., 1994; Lazar, A., Sagi, A., & Fraser, M., 1991; Long, N., 1997; Mintz, S., 1997; Nielsen, L., 1999a). By and large, our

research in psychology and sociology pays the least attention to father-daughter relationships - especially teenage and young adult daughters (Abramovitch, H., 1997; Barras, J., 2000; Booth, A., 1998; Daniels, C., 1998; Griswold, R., 1998; Horn, W., 1999; Lamb, M., 1999; Lamb, M., 1997; Mackey, W., 1999; Mintz, S., 1997; Nielsen, L., 1996; Peters, E. & Day, R., 2000; Peterson, D. & Kilpatrick, S., 1999; Phares, V., 1999; Pruett, K., 1999).

Turning our attention to books, we can see that books devoted exclusively to research on fathers and daughters are few and far between. Several books are based almost entirely on interviews conducted back in the 1980s with small, nonrepresentative samples of fathers or daughters; others are essays by daughters about their relationships with their own fathers - and almost all are written by free lance writers, not by psychologists or researchers (Erickson, B., 1998; Murdock, M., 1996; Owen, U., 1985; Secunda, V., 1992; Sharpe, S., 1994). More recent books, even those written by counselors or therapists, mainly rely on only the author's own experiences with her clients rather than present the findings from our more broad based research in psychology and sociology (Goetz, M., 1999; Kast, V., 1997; Leonard, L., 1998; Maine, M., 1993; Scull, C., 1992). Even those authors who have tried to include research in their books usually only refer to several dozen studies about fathers and daughters (Erickson, B., 1998; Kast, V., 1997; Leonard, L., 1998; Loomis, M., 1995; Marone, N., 1998). Only a handful of books discuss the relationships between black fathers and daughters. Again, these are personal stories from a few fathers and daughters rather than research based on larger representative groups (Barras, J., 2000; Early, G., 1994; Gayles, G., 1997; Willis, A., 1997).

Books that discuss the father-daughter relationship from the father's perspective are mostly collections of essays, poetry, or photographs, or religious essays - not research (Berry, C. & Barrington, L., 1998; Berry, C. & Barrington, L., 1998; Clothier, P., 1997; Cook, M. & Styron, W., 1994; Dodson, J., 1999; Hazard, D. & Farris, M., 1996; Henry, D. & McPherson, J., 1998; Leman, K., 2000; Lyons, S., 1996; Meyer, C., 1999; Morgan, J., 1999; Ray, D., 1997; Schaff, R., 2000; Wolgemuth, R., 1999). There are a number of recent books by older daughters about their fathers' death and dying (Aijan, D., 1994; Cohler, B., 1997; Fishburn, K., 2000; Harris, M., 1996; Merkin, D., 2000; Olds, S., 1992; Owen, U., 1985; Simon, L., Johnson, J., & Drantell, J., 1998; Ware, S., 1996). And of course there are biographies and autobiographies where fathers and daughters talk about their relationship - many of whom are celebrities (Pollock, S., 1997; Greer, G., 1990; Hornfischer, D., 1997; Long, D., 2000; Ryan, J., 1999). This isn't to say that these books don't contribute to our understanding of the father-daughter relationship. They do. But the point remains: compared to mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters have not received their share of attention in research oriented books or in books written by psychologists.

Perhaps it's not surprising that, to my knowledge, there is no college or university course anywhere other than mine that focuses exclusively on fathers and daughters. And given how little there is on television, in movies, in books, on the internet or in the research about fathers and daughters, is it any wonder that almost all of the students in my Fathers and Daughters course for the past seven years have said that the course improved their relationships with their fathers and deepened their understanding of other father-daughter relationships. How does one course accomplish this? Why do so many daughters benefit or change as a result of a course? How does a course integrate academic assignments, research, and statistics to improve their relationships with their fathers - even in cases where the daughter and father have had nothing to do with one another for several years?

COURSE GOALS

I have four main goals for my Fathers and Daughters course: First, I want students to become familiar with the research and statistics relevant to father-daughter relationships in our country today. Second, I want them to be able to apply some of the research to their relationships with their fathers. Third, I want them to get to know their fathers better. And fourth, I want them to make some changes in their own behavior and attitudes in order to improve their relationships with their fathers.

Becoming familiar with the Research and Statistics

To help students examine their own relationships within the context of what we know from the statistical facts and research, I give them two very extensive written tests within the first month. I do not allow the students to rush headlong into talking about their own relationships until they are familiar with the statistics and research - especially since the research repeatedly reiterates several points they initially find upsetting and unbelievable. Although the subject is a very personal one, the class is an academic course, not group therapy or a talk show for airing one sensational story after another. The tests, written assignments and grading are just as rigorous as in all my other courses. In a sense, it's more important in this course that the students read extensively and be tested thoroughly on the research and statistics given the misconceptions many bring with them. Given the kinds of

relationships most of these students have with their fathers and their most frequent misconceptions, I focus their reading and testing on the following seven areas of research and statistics.

Lack of Support for Fathers It comes as a shock to most students that fathers generally are not as welcomed or as supported as mothers when it comes to establishing close relationships with their children - especially with the daughter and especially after she becomes a teenager. After reading the research cited in the introduction to this paper and after doing various written assignments, students are at least able to recognize the many ways in which our country's media, schools, therapists, doctors, religions, advertising industry, children's stories, novels, legal system and policies in the workforce generally make it more difficult for fathers to be as close as mothers to their children. At some point, most students see that the cultural deck is stacked against fathers in these respects (Abramovitch, H., 1997; Barnett, R. & Rivers, C., 1996; Blankenhorn, D., 1994; Booth, A., 1998; Daniels, C., 1998; Feldman, L., 1990; Horn, W., 1999; Jarema, W., 1999; Kluger, B., 2000).

It's also a rude awakening for students that most people in our country are still socialized to believe that fathers and children cannot be - and should not be - and need not be - as emotionally intimate, as communicative, or as involved in one another's lives as mothers and children. Sadly our society also tends to idealize, honor, and make more positive assumptions about mothers than fathers - not only in terms of how much more nurturing, unselfish, self sacrificing and sensitive mothers supposedly are, but also in terms of how loyal, honest, and trustworthy each parent supposedly is as a spouse. This in turn can make it more difficult for fathers to become as close as most mothers are to their children - especially to their daughters (Blankenhorn, D., 1994; Daniels, C., 1998; Dienhart, A., 1998; Feldman, L., 1990; Griswold, R., 1998; Hays, S., 1996; Horn, W., 1999; Levine, R. & Pitinsky, T., 1998; Levine, S., 2000; Mackey, W., 1999; Mintz, S., 1997; Osherson, S., 1995; Parke, R. & Brott, A., 1999; Phares, V., 1999; Pleck, E. & Pleck, J., 1997; Popenoe, D., 1996; Thurer, S., 1994).

Just like many of the rest of us, many students believe that fathers are inferior to mothers in terms of taking care of children. Sadly, most also believe that most fathers aren't as interested as mothers are in being with their children - a variation of the "maternal instinct" and "idealizing motherhood" themes. To pry them loose from these misbegotten notions, I focus their attention on three particular research conclusions. First, fathers are just as good as mothers at taking care of, nurturing, and bonding with children- even in early infancy (Dienhart, A., 1998; Dowd, N., 2000; Geiger, B., 1996; Horn, W., 1999; Jarema, W., 1999; Lamb, M., 1997; Levine, R. & Pitinsky, T., 1998; Levine, S., 2000; Mackey, W., 1999; Osherson, S., 1995; Phares, V., 1999; Pruett, K., 1999) Second, fathers and mothers nowadays are spending similar amounts of time with their children when the number of hours that each has to work outside the home, commute to and from work, and do work inside and outside for the home is taken into account (Aldous, J., Mulligan, G., & Bjarnason, T., 1998; Barnett, R. & Rivers, C., 1996; Bonney, J., Kelley, M., & Levant, R., 1999; Coltrane, S., 1996; Dienhart, A., 1998; Geiger, B., 1996; Lamb, M., 1997; Pleck, J., 1997; Pruett, K., 1999).

Likewise, even though the students have thought about the sacrifices and stress involved in being a mother, very few have considered the sacrifices and stress for fathers. Just like mothers, fathers say that being a parent creates more stress in their daily lives and puts a greater strain on their marriage. Not surprisingly, divorce rates are especially high in the first few years after children are born. Not only is there more financial stress - especially for the father- there is more arguing and less time together as a couple. It comes as a surprise to many students that so many parents say they are happier and have a better marriage after the children finally leave home. As one novelist puts it: "A child is a grenade. When you have a baby, you set off an explosion in your marriage and when the dust settles, your marriage is different from what it was before. Not better, necessarily; not worse, necessarily. But definitely different" (Ephron, N., 1996). But the point is that students often seem blind to the fact that men, like women, become more stressed and make more sacrifices when they have children (Ambert, A., 1996; Bernstein, A., 1991; Cowan, C. & Cowan, P., 1992; Gottman, J., 1999; Lerner, H., 1998; Levine, R. & Pitinsky, T., 1998; Steinberg, L. & Steinberg, W., 1994; White, L. & Edwards, J., 1990).

Male and Female Communication Styles Most students have a hard time abandoning their belief that women are naturally better and are more interested than men in communicating intimately and building close relationships with people - especially with children - and especially with female children. Most students have not given much thought to the fact that how open, comfortable, expressive, emotional or intimate a man or a woman is in communicating or in building relationships largely depends on what he or she has *learned and practiced since childhood*. For example, parents generally talk more with daughters than with sons about the past and give more elaborate and emotional details. In turn, girls give more emotional, detailed information in retelling these stories than boys do (Fivush, R., 1998; Goleman, D., 1995). Given how most boys and most girls are still being raised in our

country, most women generally do end up being better than men at intimate, self-disclosing, emotional communication *because they have been taught* and have been rehearsing these skills since early childhood. Even so, many of the students seem to resist the idea that when given a chance and a little practice, many men are just as expressive and communicative as women (Bader, J., 1999; Faludi, S., 1999; Kimbrell, A., 1995; Lakoff, R., 1990; Montemayor, R., McKenry, P., & Julian, T., 1993; Osherson, S., 1992; Tannen, D., 1991; Thorne, B., 1993).

In talking about why their fathers and mothers might communicate differently, I also introduce them to the research about emotional intelligence. First, emotional intelligence is a set of skills learned from early childhood on - mainly from our parents. Generally girls are taught and given more chance to practice these skills than boys. And these are the very skills that many of the daughters say their mothers are better at than their fathers: initiating conversations, carrying on length, detailed conversations rather than replying with short answers, maintaining good eye contact, participating in groups without dominating them, recognizing other people's nonverbal messages and interpreting them correctly, identifying what another person is feeling and what the feeling is underneath what is being said, knowing and sharing what you yourself are feeling, being attuned to subtle social signals that indicate what other people need and want, showing an interest in others, making others feel comfortable in conversations, verbalizing empathy for others, and asking good questions when talking to others. I repeatedly remind my students that their fathers were generally not given the same opportunities as their mothers to learn and to practice emotional intelligence as they were growing up - or in school or at work (Declaire, J., Gottman, J., & Goleman, D., 2000; Glennon, W. & Elium, J., 2000; Goleman, D., 1995; Gottman, J., 1998; Leaper, C., Anderson, K., & Sanders, P., 1998; Nowicki, S., 1996; Pollack, W., 1998; Thompson, M. & Kindlon, D., 1998)

When most students complain that their fathers aren't as good as their mothers at listening, being supportive, empathizing, and comforting, I again turn their attention back to the research on emotional intelligence and communication styles. Generally when a male is listening to someone's problems - especially someone he loves - his way of being loving, comforting, and supportive is to offer ideas on possible ways to fix the problem and to get beyond the sad or angry feelings long enough to come up with a plan for making things better. Unfortunately for many fathers, their daughters - and other females - too often see this loving response as unwanted advice, judgement, a lecture, or a lack of sympathy. In contrast, a mother generally responds as most other females have been taught to do - not offering specific ideas or possible solutions, but asking for more details about feelings, telling a story of her own similar to the speaker's tale, or offering up some version of "Oh, you poor thing". This reaction isn't particularly helpful when it gets right down to solving the problem or preventing the bad feelings from recurring. But it sure feels good and leaves the speaker feeling understood and listened to. What I try to help students take from the research is this: If there is a difference in how their parents respond, it's usually a difference in *how they have learned to communicate*, not a difference in how sensitive, or nurturing or loving or supportive each parent is - and not proof that men in general are less sensitive, less compassionate, less empathic, or less supportive than women.

Mothers' and Fathers' Parenting Styles Once students understand why their fathers and mothers might communicate differently, it's easier to explain why fathers and mothers generally have different styles of parenting. Most children find it's easier to coerce their mother into letting them have their way, to intimidate and manipulate her, and to talk their way out of being punished. By and large, mothers are not as intimidating, as assertive, or as blunt as fathers - especially with teenage children and sons. Fathers are less likely than mothers to continually tolerate, ignore, or make excuses for children's infantile, self-centered, self-pitying or aggressive behavior. Then too, the father typically tries to get children to change the way they're behaving by pointing out the negative consequences of what they're doing: "If you keep acting like that, you're not going to have many friends". "Stop griping about your teacher and do something or you're going to fail that course." "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." This, in turn, helps children develop the positive attitude referred to as internal locus of control. Rather than behaving like whiny, helpless, powerless, enraged children, people who learn internal locus of control attitudes are willing and able to see how their own decisions and behavior have led them to where they are in both the good and the bad parts of their lives. From a parent - usually their father - they have learned that "heaven is to steer, hell is to drift" (Pittman, F., 1999; Pruett, K., 1999; Seligman, M., 1998; Williams, E. & Radin, N., 1999). In contrast, the mother usually appeals to emotions such as guilt or shame: "How do you think it makes your friend feel when you act like that?" "I'm embarrassed when you act that way." Sadly though, kids sometimes see their father as judgmental, critical, insensitive, strict or unsympathetic when he expects more mature behavior from them than their mother does. Hopefully by time they become adults, children see that their father's less comforting, less soothing ways of parenting helped them develop self-discipline, self-motivation, self-reliance and self-responsibility

(Andrews, D. & Dishion, T., 1994; Blankenhorn, D., 1994; Bronstein, P., 1999; Hosley, C. & Montemayor, R., 1997; Koestner, R., Franz, C., & Weinberger, J., 1990; Lamb, M., 1997; Larson, W., 1993; Leaper, C., Anderson, K., & Sanders, P., 1998; Montemayor, R., McKenry, P., & Julian, T., 1993; Munsch, J., Woodward, J., & Darling, N., 1995; Parke, R. & Brott, A., 1999; Phares, V., 1999; Popenoe, D., 1996; Pruett, K., 1999; Putallaz, M. & Heflin, A., 1993).

Work and Money Many students are reluctant to believe that the main reason why most fathers are not more involved and closer to their children has to do with money - the financial responsibility that our society still places on most men and the demands of most men's jobs. Only with much pushing and prodding are some students able to appreciate just how much power a man's work and his financial responsibilities wield over him as a father. Students often have a hard time letting go of the notion that it is mothers who are the self-sacrificing parents who give up so much for the sake of their children, and fathers who lead the interesting, exciting, fulfilling lives away from home. Harder still for many students is accepting that it is *still* mothers who are generally granted more power and more freedom to build close relationships with their children - even though most fathers find more joy parenting than working. Even today, compared to men, most women are not expected or pressured to work as much outside the home, to share equally in supporting the children, or to sacrifice as much of their lives to their jobs. To most people, providing love is enough to be considered a good mother. In contrast, a good father is supposed to be a "good provider" - and the phrase means providing money, not love. Until students truly grasp this reality, they can't fully appreciate why most fathers and children aren't as close to one another as they could be if both parents had equal job and financial responsibilities. This reality also means that many students have to re-evaluate their view that mothers are more unselfish and self-sacrificing than fathers (Aldous, J., Mulligan, G., & Bjarnason, T., 1998; Evans, J., 1999; Faludi, S., 1999; Flaherty, J., 2000; Larson, W., 1993; Levine, R. & Pitinsky, T., 1998; Levine, S., 2000; Lupton, D. & Barclay, L., 1997; Mackey, W., 1999; Mahony, R., 1995; Pleck, E. & Pleck, J., 1997; Popenoe, D., 1996; Wolfe, J., 2000).

It's hard for many of them to imagine that their father might sometimes feel burdened and stressed in their SITCOM family: single income, two children, oppressive mortgages (Belkin, L., 2000). Even though these students are on the verge of graduating from college, most haven't given much thought to how their fathers' work influences the ways he behaves and the ways his children perceive him. Well educated men who earn more than most other Americans are often the most stressed, exhausted, pre-occupied, and on edge when they get home given the responsibilities they have to shoulder at work. Not understanding the impact or the realities of his work, even many of these adult children say their father is distant, short tempered, disinterested or uptight - a workaholic who is more interested in his job and investments than in his daughter. It seems easier somehow for many students to imagine that their father just isn't very interested in them than to see how his job restricts his relationships. Especially if her father has to shoulder most - or all - of the family's financial burdens or if he is primarily responsible for teaching the children about making and managing money - he too often ends up looking like the "bad guy" compared to the mother. This isn't to say that mothers never have to teach the children the unpleasant realities about work and money - or that mothers never has as much financial responsibility or pressure to work as fathers. But for most of my students, this isn't the case. Given this, I ask them to discuss their feelings about the two million fathers who are home raising their children while their wives are at work and how they feel about the fact that fathers spend about \$290,000 for each child if the family's *pre-tax* income is more than \$62,000 a year - a price tag that does *not* include college (Schembari, J., 2000; Geiger, B., 1996; Marin, R., 2000).

Because so many students make negative comments about their fathers having to do with money, I keep reminding them of this (by giving them more statistics and research): Most of what annoys you about your father is related to his trying to teach you important financial lessons - for your benefit, not for his. Your dad isn't trying to make you feel guilty about how much he's spent on you when he points out how much things cost or reprimands you for spending too much. But sooner than you think, you will have to be financially self-reliant because your "daddy" isn't going to be giving you any more money after college. He's trying to prepare you, not torment you. So even though you might feel guilty or uncomfortable when you realize what he's give up or sacrificed for you, your dad is doing exactly what many experts recommend a "good" parent should do : give you the gory details about what things cost and make you painfully aware just how hard a person (usually he) has to work to pay for those things and just exactly what kinds of work and spending habits a person has to make in order to be financially secure (Humbolt, K., 1998; Kiyosaki, R. & Lechter, S., 1999; Stanley, T. & Danko, W., 1997; Stawski, W., 2000). Second, your father has to cope with tense financial realities that you rarely if ever have to think about. He knows what's probably ahead for you, given what he has had to live with for the past 20 years. So instead of being annoyed at him,

why not talk to your dad about the kinds of financial realities you don't seem to want to face. Realities like these: most banks aim their credit card campaigns at young adults, especially college students who have an average credit card debt of \$2000 while in school; only 40% of Americans are able to pay off their credit card debts each month; the younger generation is trying to live a lifestyle far higher than they can or will ever be able to afford; most jobs require more than 40 hours a week to make the kind of incomes young people have become accustomed to growing up; most Americans don't save enough money to carry them through retirement; we Americans run up far more personal debts than citizens in other industrialized countries; very few fathers have enough money left at the end of their lives to leave inheritances to their children or grandchildren; excessive spending is on the rise while retirement savings and health insurance benefits are on the decline; because we are living longer, we have to save more for retirement than ever before (Associated Press, 2000; Frank, R., 1998; Gold, D., 1998; Greenhouse, S., 1999; Kantrowitz, B., 2000; Kiyosaki, R. & Lechter, S., 1999; Rosenblatt, R., 1999; Schor, J., 1998; Staff, 1999).

Although very few of the daughters in my course have thought much about how their father's work and financial responsibilities affect his life, all 5 of the sons have. This isn't surprising, of course, since young boys are still being taught that a man's self worth and status largely depends on how much money he makes. So the white and the black male students feel much the same as young boys and teenage males do about the role of work in men's lives. When shown a series of pictures of men at work and asked to imagine what is going on, most boys responded like this: "This guy is sick of working and he doesn't want to deal with his job or family anymore." "He's thinking what life would be like if he hadn't married and how much it sucks to work all the time." "He wishes he could leave and be by himself and have some fun. But he'll work for 25 more years, hate it, then retire." "His kids will leave home and he'll realize his life was dull and boring?" "Soon he'll be old and what will he have to show for all this - not much." "This man's wife probably divorced him because he worked too late at night and was never home." "This is a construction worker, looking at blueprints, who was divorced by his wife and is staring at pictures thinking about his family and how can he get them back". In this research, only 15% of the boys described the men in the pictures as happy family men who liked their jobs (Pollack, W., 1998). The daughters in my class seem more uncomfortable than the sons with the fact that what these boys describe *is* what many men feel and experience (Birren, J. & Feldman, L., 1997; Easthope, A., 1995; Faludi, S., 1999; Kimbrell, A., 1995; Gilmore, D., 2000; Pollack, W., 1998; Willis, S. & Reid, J., 1999).

Mothers' Power and Influence Most students are also unsettled to discover that the relationships they have with their fathers have been powerfully influenced by their mothers. Indeed, one of the most important factors determining how close a father and his children become is how much the mother "allows" him to share in the parenting. The mother almost always has *power over* the father in this respect - an enviable, powerful situation referred to as "maternal gate-keeping". Put differently: "the hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world". Even the most well-intentioned, loving mother can feel insecure, jealous or competitive about the children's getting as close to their father as they are to her - especially during infancy and early childhood when it's the most important for her to open the gates between the father and children. Without meaning any harm, what the mother says and does too often makes it difficult for the father and children to develop as close a relationship as they might have otherwise (Blankenhorn, D., 1994; Booth, A., 1998; Ellestad, J. & Stets, J., 1998; Feldman, L., 1990; Horn, W., 1999; Kammer, J., 1998; Kimmel, M., 2000; Lamb, M., 1997; Levine, S., 2000; Lupton, D. & Barclay, L., 1997; Mahony, R., 1995; McBride, V. & Rane, T., 1998; Mintz, S., 1997; Osherson, S., 1995; Pleck, J., 1997; Pruett, K., 1999; Radin, N., 1994; Reszel, B., 1998).

At this point, I also want students to consider the kind of relationship their mother had or has with her own father. Why? Because generally mothers who were close to their own fathers growing up are the most supportive and enthusiastic about sharing children equally with their father- whether married or divorced. In other words, if mom and grandpa had a close, loving relationship, the odds are better that my dad and I will have a better relationship (Ainsworth, M. & Eichberg, C., 1991; Caplan, P., 1990; Karen, R., 1994; Main, M., 1993; Miller, A., 1994; Pleck, J., 1997; Pruett, K., 1999; Radin, N., 1994; Scarf, M., 1995; Silverstein, O. & Rashbaum, B., 1994; Stern, J., 1996; Stroufe, A., 1989; Todorski, J., 1995).

Interestingly, many students shrink from looking at the impact that their mother's decisions about earning an income have had on the children's relationships with their father. Generally children and fathers have closer relationships and spend more time together when the mother has always worked outside the home. Many of my students' mothers are housewives or have only recently gone to work. Because they define power as having a good income, professional status, and success outside the home, many think their father has far more power than their mother. More than half also admit that their mothers are hurt, jealous, insecure, or mad when they seem to be getting

as close to their father as to her. So seeing the kinds of power their mother has because she doesn't have the same financial responsibilities as their father gives students a lot to wrestle with (Barnett, R. & Rivers, C., 1996; Biller, H., 1993; Bonney, J., Kelley, M., & Levant, R., 1999; Chira, S., 1998; Dienhart, A., 1998; Farrell, W., 1994; Hoffman, L. & Youngblade, L., 1999; Larson, W., 1993; Mahony, R., 1995; Parke, R. & Brott, A., 1999; Paulson, S., Koman, J., & Hill, J., 1990; Peters, J., 1998).

Given their own family situations, most students are stunned by how few mothers are full time housewives - and by what the traditional family in our country is and has always been (Coontz, S., 2000). Most of my students discover that their family is *not* "typical" or "average" or "traditional". Why? Because nearly 75% of all mothers have jobs outside the home. Of those who are full time housewives, about half are well educated women married to well-educated men whose incomes are high enough to allow the wife to stay home. The other half are mothers who are so poorly educated and who often have never been married - women who live in poverty. Since only about 20% of all adults in our country have a college education, most mothers only earn about \$16,000 a year and most married couples together only earn about \$45,000. Although many mothers with preschool age children only work part-time, the average married couple still has to put in about 72 hours a week at work (Bennett, W., 1999; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999; Census Bureau, 2000a; Census Bureau, 2000b; Hacker, A., 1997; Russell, C., 2000; Schor, J., 1998; Staff, 1999; Uchitelle, L. & Russell, K., 1999).

In any event, many students recoil or feel disloyal when asked to consider how their mothers' attitudes, job choices, or behavior has inadvertently hurt their relationships with their fathers. So I try to reassure them that feeling disloyal is common when we stop idealizing or continually defending our mothers. It seems to help them to know that both sons and daughters are often more willing to see their father's shortcomings, to criticize him, and to stop idealizing him than to see their mothers in these ways (Ackerman, R., 1996; Bassoff, E., 1994; Block, J., 1996; Caplan, P., 1990; Coontz, S., 2000; Gottlieb, D., 1991; Main, M., 1993; Miller, A., 1994; Parker, R., 1996; Scarf, M., 1995; Thurer, S., 1994).

Divorced Fathers Having examined how much power mothers have over most father-child relationships, I move the students along to the next topic: divorced fathers. Even those students with divorced parents are usually rattled and surprised by the depressing, disheartening research on what happens to most fathers after a divorce. Given that 50% of the couples in our country who say "I do", eventually say "I don't", this topic interests students not only because a third of their parents are divorced, but because they are aware of the high probability of their ending up divorced some day. At any rate, the research is a far cry from what most of them imagine. After divorce most fathers are more depressed and suicidal than mothers and grieve for years over losing their children. Most are not joyful, swinging bachelors who end up marrying young women. And most do not end up with a far higher standard of living than their ex-wives and children. To most students, this is more disturbing still: the single most important factor in determining how much of a role the father will play in his children's lives is usually how his ex-wife feels and what she will allow - not how much child support he pays, how educated he is, how involved he was with their kids before divorce, or whether he remarries (Amato, P. & Booth, A., 1997; Amato, P., 1997; Arditti, J. & Prouty, A., 1999; Arendell, T., 1995; Blau, R., 1994; Braver, S., 1999; Depner, C. & Bray, J., 1993; Farrell, W., 1994; Fouquest, C., 1996; Furstenberg, F. & Cherlin, A., 1991; Garfinkel, I., 1999; Greif, G., 1997; Guttman, J., 1993; Hetherington, M., 1999; Klatt, W., 1999; Nielsen, L., 1999a; Nielsen, L., 1999b; Pruett, K., 1999; Sheehy, G., 1998; Thompson, R. & Amato, P., 2000; Wild, J., 2000).

It's also important for students to recognize that an unhappy marriage usually affects men's relationships with their children differently than it does women's. When a woman is unhappy in her marriage, she tends to spend more time and get more involved with her children. Men generally do the opposite: withdrawing from their children and spending more time at work. Not understanding what's going on in the marriage, children are often left feeling that their father doesn't love them as much as their mother does - or that he cares more about his work than about them. In fact though, these children are feeling the fallout of their father's sadness and frustration over his marital problems. If the parents eventually divorce, children may have been feeling for many years that their father cared less about them than their mother did. And in cases where the unhappily married parents stay together, the children might grow up thinking that their father is emotionally distant or gone from home a lot because he doesn't care much about them. Either way, the point is that when the couple isn't happily married, the father's relationship with the children often seems to suffer more than the mother's (Booth, A., 1998; Ambert, A., 1996; Belsky, J., 1998; Biller, H., 1993; Cowan, C. & Cowan, P., 1992; Cummings, M. & O'Reilly, A., 1997; Goleman, D., 1995; Gottman, J., 1999; Pleck, J., 1997; Snarey, J., 1993).

Race & Sexual Orientation Although fewer than 5% of my students are African Americans, I want

students to understand that race does have an impact on the kind of relationships fathers and daughters have. Unfortunately there is even less research on black fathers and daughters than on whites. Nevertheless, I want my students to understand at least this: Even though 50% of black parents never marry one another, and so many of these fathers and daughters never live together, it doesn't mean that these fathers aren't involved in their daughters' lives. And even when the parents are married to each other, many black fathers tend to treat their daughters differently than do many white fathers. Even when their educations and incomes are equal, black fathers often seem to be more supportive of their daughters being assertive and outspoken, becoming self-reliant without expecting to rely on a boyfriend or husband to take care of her, and developing a strong personality which many white fathers might consider too "unfeminine" (Barras, J., 2000; Cochran, D., 2000; Coley, R. & Chase, L., 1999; Daniels, C., 1998; Early, G., 1994; Gayles, G., 1997; Hamer, J., 2000; Hutchinson, E., 1995; Loritts, C., 1998; Pitts, L., 1999; Toth, J. & Xu, X., 1999; Walker, A., 1985; Way, N. & Stauber, H., 1996; Willis, A., 1997).

As is true for black fathers and daughters, there isn't much research about the relationships between lesbian daughters and their fathers or between gay fathers and their daughters. I do bring these topics into my course. But since so few of my students are in these situations, I don't devote much time in class to these topics (Barret, R., 2000; Belastro, P., 1993; Benkov, L., 1994; Bona, C., 1998; Bridges, F., 1997; Due, L., 1995; Martin, A., 1993; Ramos, J., 1994).

The Importance of Father-Daughter Relationships Finally daughters have to come face to face with the fact that the kind of relationship a girl has with her father *does* matter as much - and in many ways matters *more* - than her relationship with her mother. Even if they want to believe - as some do - that their relationship with their father no longer matters, the research shows them how and why their fathers continue to affect them: in their academic lives, future careers, relationships with boyfriends, sexual and social self-confidence, their ability to express anger and stand up for themselves, mental health, and feelings about how they look and what they weigh (Appleton, W., 1981; Barras, J., 2000; Erickson, B., 1998; Gayles, G., 1997; Goetz, M., 1999; Gordon, B., 1996; Goulter, B. & Minninger, J., 1993; Henry, D. & McPherson, J., 1998; Kast, V., 1997; Lamb, M., 1997; Leonard, L., 1998; Loomis, M., 1995; Maine, M., 1993; Marone, N., 1998; Merkin, D., 2000; Morgan, J. & Wilcoxon, A., 1998; Murdock, M., 1996; Nielsen, L., 1996; Owen, U., 1985; Peterson, D. & Kilpatrick, S., 1999; Phares, V., 1999; Pipher, M., 1994; Scull, C., 1992; Secunda, V., 1992; Sharpe, S., 1994; Simon, L., Johnson, J., & Drantell, J., 1998; Wakerman, E., 1984).

Perception, Memory and Myth Finally I want students to understand that how they perceive their fathers - and even what they remember about their fathers - is not always accurate. Whether they think well or think poorly of their father, their memories and perceptions don't necessarily match reality. The research on perception, memory, and stereotyping. I continue to point out examples from their relationships with their fathers of findings such as these: If we assume that a person is going to think and behave in a certain way because of the group to which he or she belongs then we tend to ignore and literally forget the situations where the person does not behave the way we expected. To make matters worse, we feel uncomfortable and off-balance (a feeling referred to as cognitive dissonance) when people do or say things that contradict our expectations, *even when those things are positive or favorable*. Because we are driven to create logical, orderly, consistent stories about our lives and about the lives of others, we pick and choose what incidents and information we want to remember, to forget, to enlarge, and to overlook. And our minds play tricks on us so that we can literally "remember" things that in fact never happened - memories created by what other people have told us, not by what we ourselves actually saw, heard, or did. So, for instance, if you believe that the group "mothers" is more self-sacrificing, more sensitive, more easily hurt, and more interested in talking about personal things than the group "fathers", you will be more likely to notice and to remember the unselfish, sacrificing, sensitive things your mother has done. You'll also more likely to forget the times she's been selfish, aggressive, insensitive, manipulative, and emotionally abusive. Likewise, you will recoil or feel off-balance when your father tries to talk with you about personal things, cries in front of you, or talks about the sacrifices he has made for you. In short, I'm trying to get these daughters to understand that all of us usually only *see* something clearly *after we are willing to believe it* (Block, J., 1996; Fiese, B. & others, 1999; Fivush, R., 1998; Gergen, M., 1992; Gilovich, T., 1991; Howard, G., 1991; Loftus, E. & Ketcham, K., 1995; Miller, A., 1994; Minuchin, S. & Nichols, M., 1994; Nisbett, R. & Ross, L., 1991; Ofshe, R. & Watters, E., 1995; Pillemer, D., 1999; Scarf, M., 1995; Schacter, D., 1996; Thompson, M. & Herrmann, D., 1998).

Applying the research

As I'm helping students to examine the research, I am setting my second goal in motion: to get them to

apply the research to their relationships with their own fathers. It's one thing to make A's and B's on the written tests - which most of these very bright students do. It's another to get students to see how this research can be applied in practical ways to their own lives. To help them along, I require students to complete 30 written worksheets throughout the three month course. Each worksheet is related to their reading assignments and to their relationships with their own fathers. Among the workshop topics are: similarities and differences in the father's and daughter's personalities, the ways in which money affects their relationship, the issues that have caused the most pain, the parents' divorce or remarriage, how mothers and stepmothers affect the father-daughter relationship, what topics they wish they could discuss with their fathers and the reasons why they haven't discussed these things, how their father's past and his own father have influenced his behavior as a father; what events or aspects of the father's life have been most pleasurable and most painful for him; how the father has changed over the years as a parent; what they most and least respect about their father as a husband; how their father's sexual attitudes have influenced his daughter; the changes they would most like to see in their relationship with their father; the similarities and differences in communication styles; and changes the daughter could make to improve their communication.

I also use feature films to humanize the statistics and research in their reading assignments. I make general comments in class about why each film is relevant to what we're studying that week. Then I take students aside privately to tell them why I think they ought to watch a particular film given what they're dealing with in their family. Depending on her particular circumstances, I sometimes suggest that a daughter watch the film alone with her father the next time she's home. The films I've found most relevant are: "American Beauty", "On Golden Pond", "Kramer vs. Kramer", "Ordinary People", "Father of the Bride", "One True Thing", "Eat, drink, man, woman", "Stepmom", "Eve's Bayou", "Voyage around my father," "The Great Santini", "Guess who's coming to dinner", and "Smoke Signals". Even though some of these films don't deal directly with fathers and daughters, they still dispel many misconceptions about men as fathers and explore family dynamics.

I also invite several fathers to class to talk about their experiences as fathers. Beforehand, I tell the students a little about the man's particular circumstances - that he's divorced, or that he raised his two daughters by himself, or that his daughter died at a young age, or that his daughter just got married. Then the students submit a list of questions that I forward to him. Afterwards, the students have to do a written assignment, commonly making comments like these: "I never knew men could be so sensitive and so open." "I never knew men felt this deeply about their children." "I was astounded that he felt he has learned so much from his daughter. I wonder if my dad feels this way." "I've always heard how awful it is being a divorced mother. But I'd never once thought about how awful the divorced father feels." "I wish my dad had his attitudes about sex and marriage." "I wish I could have a conversation like this with my own dad." "I called me dad as soon as I got back to the dorm and we talked almost 2 hours about everything the speaker said today. Both of us cried and really opened up to each other." "I've never had any experience like this in my life. I just don't know how to sum up how it changed me to hear a father talking so honestly like this."

Getting to know their fathers better

For all of the reasons discussed so far, most children don't talk much to their fathers about personal things. And since father-son relationships are generally encouraged more than father-daughter relationships, it's not surprising that throughout childhood and in their adult years, most daughters don't know their father nearly as well as their mothers (Almeida, D. & Galambos, N., 1993; Booth, A., 1998; Daniels, C., 1998; Feldman, L., 1990; Lamb, M., 1997; Larson, W., 1993; Levine, R. & Pitinsky, T., 1998; Levine, S., 2000; Mackey, W., 1999; McBride, V. & Rane, T., 1998; Phares, V., 1999).

Given this, I require students to do a 3 hour interview with their father and to write a paper in which they answer these questions: How has your father's past affected his attitudes and behavior as a father and the kind of relationship he has with you? What were the most difficult parts of your discussion for you and for him? Why? What insights have you gained about your dad as a person outside his role as your father? What did you find most meaningful about the interview and why? Perhaps what's most important about the interview is this: Their mother or stepmother is not allowed to be anywhere around during the interview. The daughter must spend these three hours entirely alone with her father, asking him questions and listening. For 70% of the daughters, this is the first time in their lives they have spent more than an hour alone with their father *just talking*. Even though the interview doesn't take place until the last few weeks of the course, each student has to mail her father a copy of the interview questions during the first week and let him know that in a couple of months they'll talk about the questions. The directions tell

the father that he can skip any question he doesn't want to answer:

Part I: Your life apart from being a father: 1. Have your dad find 10 photographs of him at these times of his life: him & his father, his boyhood, his adolescence, his wedding to your mother, him with you when you were a baby, a young girl, a teenager, & most recently. Then ask your dad to tell you about his life around the time each picture was taken. 2. What are a few of the things you wish you had done differently during your life so far? 3. If you could change 3 things about your life, what would they be? Why? 4. What were some of the saddest and some of the happiest times of your life? 5. How have your ideas about life or your personality changed since you were 20 years old? 6. What kind of relationship did you have with your father? 7. What do you wish had been different between you and your father? 8. When you were a teenager & young man, what were your dreams for the future? Which came true and which didn't? Why? What are your dreams now for your future? 9. When you were a young man, what worried you most? 10. As a young unmarried man, what did you look forward to in your life? What do you look forward to now?

Part II: Fatherhood 1. What has been difficult about being a father? 2. How has being a father changed you? 3. When you first became a father, what scared you the most? 4. What do you wish you had known before you became a father? 5. How well do you think you fit our society's definition and your own definition of a "good" father? 6. What are your greatest strengths & weaknesses as a father? 7. How have the financial responsibilities of being a father affected you? 8. If you hadn't had kids, what different choices might you have made with your life? 9. How has being a father to a son been different from being a father to a daughter? 10. How have your behavior & your attitudes about being a father changed over the years?

Part III: Our relationship 1. What was the best gift & the nicest compliment I ever gave you? What's the best gift and the nicest compliment you think you've ever given me? 2. What was most difficult about being my father when I was an infant? a teenager? a college student? 3. How did your relationship with me change as I was growing up? 4. How did you feel when I first started dating & when I first fell in love? How do you think my relationships with boys have affected our relationship? What do you wish you had done differently when it comes to my dating and boyfriends? What do you wish I had done differently? 5. What do you wish had been different about our relationship as I was growing up? And now? 6. What do you wish I had understood better about you as I was growing up? And now? 7. What are some of the saddest & some of the happiest experiences you've had with me? 8. What questions do you wish had been on this list? 9. What are 2 of the things you have thought about because I'm taking this course? 10. What questions are you glad weren't on this list? (You don't have to answer them)

Changing Daughters Behaviors

From the outset most students are more than willing to let me know what they don't like about their dads and what they wish he would change about himself. The greater challenge is to get daughters to see how *their own* assumptions, biases, and behavior contribute to the kind of relationship they have with their father. The basic message I'm trying to get across is that they are no longer little girls who should sit back passively and expect their "daddies" to do all the giving, all the changing, all the initiating, or all the soul searching and apologizing. Instead of focusing on "how can we make your dad change?", I'm focusing on "what is it about *you* that needs to change in order to increase the odds of getting more of what you want with your father?" This isn't a path most of them want to go down. So I have to take the approach of the sun who made a bet with the wind over which of them could make the little girl take her coat off first. After huffing and puffing and blasting away to blow the coat off, the wind gave up because the girl just clutched her coat more tightly. Then the sun came out and....well, you know the ending.

Initially I try to shine some light on the way most students treat their fathers financially. I start gently by asking: When was the last time you talked to your dad about something that wasn't related to money in any way? What percent of your conversations with him in the past few years have had to do with something financial? Which parent do you contact first when you need money? Have you ever pouted, gotten mad, or given your dad the silent treatment when he refused to pay for something you wanted to do? Do you think your father should use his retirement money for your college education or should you have to take out a loan yourself? How would you feel if your father told your mother that she needed to get a full time job or take on a more demanding job so he could cut back on his work and stress? How would you feel if your dad didn't pay for your wedding or for graduate school because he had decided to take a big pay cut in order to do things he's never had time to do before? When parents are divorced, should mothers be legally required to pay part of children's college expenses if the father is required to? If you lived with your father after their divorce and your mother never sent any child support money, how would you feel about her? Then I reverse gears and ask them to reconsider their answers if we were talking about mothers

instead of fathers. Doing assignments like this is sobering because most have to face some unflattering realities: that they often treat their father like banking machines, require much more financially of him than of their mother, emotionally blackmail him when he doesn't yield to all of their financial demands, measure his love in part by what he gives financially. And those with divorced parents often have to grapple with an even sadder, more destructive reality: "When money stops coming through the door, love often flies out the window."

Many are also taken aback when I point out how little effort they have made to talk to their father about their own lives or about his: When's the last time you directly asked your father any question about himself that had nothing to do with his work? How much of what you know about what's going on in his life comes from what your mother tells you? What did you do the last time your dad suggested the two of you doing something together - or when did you last suggest this? How often have you gone off with friends rather than spend the time alone with your dad? When's the last time you asked to go along with your dad to do something you know he enjoys? How often have you asked him to show you pictures of his childhood or earlier life? When have you ever called him at work just to quickly say you loved him? Have you ever sent him a card or gift for no reason at all? How much time do you take to choose gifts for him compared to gifts for your mother or friends? Then I ask the same questions about their mothers to show how much more time, effort, and interest most of them bestow on her.

Even at the beginning of the course, I challenge students to make a few simple changes in their own behavior and note the impact on their father. In a sense all I'm asking is that they treat their fathers the way they treat their mothers: Next time you phone home, don't ask to talk to your mom. Instead, ask to talk to your dad. Then talk about any topic except your car, your grades, or anything having to do with money. Write or talk to your dad about: a problem you're having with your roommate, a professor or someone at work; the best and worst part of your week and of his; something interesting you learned in your fathers and daughters class. More earth shattering still: ask your dad something about his life. Give your dad a compliment - maybe even send it to him in a funny card. And for your final challenge, how about saying or writing this: "Dad, I'd like to get to know you better" - eight words, that's all.

STUDENTS' INITIAL ATTITUDES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Intimacy and Familiarity In the past seven years 245 students have taken my Fathers and Daughters course - including 5 men who said they enrolled to become better fathers some day. Roughly 80% of the students are 21 and 22 year old seniors. The rest are in the last half of their junior year. When they come into the course, 70% say their relationship with their mother is better and closer than with their father. Fewer than 5% say they are closer to their father. Likewise, 85% say they and their mothers know each other much better than they and their fathers do. And even the 20% who say they communicate equally well with both parents, most say they don't know their fathers as well as their mothers. What's even more striking is that 80% of the students at the outset of the course say that the one thing they most want to change is to have more emotional intimacy with their father. Their other top two wishes are to get to know him better and to be able to communicate more comfortably with him. In short, most are not trying to resolve serious, ongoing conflicts with their father, they just want to be closer to and more at ease and involved with him.

Communication It sounds like such a simple request, and yet - Almost 90% of the students say they are too afraid, uneasy, or tense to talk with their fathers about topics other than school, money, and other "superficial stuff". Only about 20% of these young adults have ever talked with their fathers about the personal aspects of their own lives - their boyfriends, sexuality, fears about the future, longstanding problems within their family - or ever talked directly to their father about his own life. What little they know about his life has come mainly from what their mother has told them.

When asked why they seldom or never talk to their fathers about personal things, most say it's because he wouldn't be interested or wouldn't be comfortable. Rather than imagining that her father could be relaxed, open, and eager to talk if given the chance, the daughter typically has a rather hopeless, negative view "He just wouldn't be interested in my life." "He wouldn't care about that sort of thing." "Talking about emotional or personal stuff would make him too uneasy". "He'd just clam up and say nothing." In trying to get students to examine these negative assumptions more closely, I ask: "What would the worst possible outcomes be if you talked with your father about the things you'd really like to discuss with him?" Their most common answers have to do with their father's disapproval or disappointment: "I'd feel like I had failed him". "I can't stand the thought of his being disappointed or ashamed of me." "I don't want him to think less of me in any way." "He might get so sad that he'd cry." The next most common fear is being hurt by their father's reactions: "He'd get angry and yell at me." "I might

get kicked out of the house.” “I don’t want to bring up any of those things because it would hurt me to see him angry.” “I might find out things that would make me respect him less.” “It’s better not to talk intimately with him because it’s much easier to love a parent when you don’t know them very well.”

Mothers’ Influence But there’s more to the story than this. More than half admit that their mother would feel - or does feel - jealous, uneasy, or hurt if they try to discuss intimate things with their father as they do with her. Initially I ask: what would your mom do - or what does she do - if you called home and talked just to your dad about your boyfriend or some other personal issue? Fewer than 20% of the daughters have ever done this. Most typically answer like this: “Mom would die if I ever talked to dad about my boyfriend instead of talking to her.” “Mom’s self worth would be diminished even if I talked alone to dad unless we were talking about grades or money.” “Mother has to be the all knowing person in the family - the one who is in charge of conveying everyone’s personal concerns to everyone else.” “Mom takes over all my conversations with dad . She even gives me information about him when he’s on the phone with us. She acts like he’s not even there.” “She wouldn’t say anything directly to me, but she’d let me know she was hurt.” “My mom is trying to make me feel bad about taking this class because I never took a Mothers and Daughters course.” “It’s like a slap in the face to her when I try to do things alone with my dad.” According to most students, their mothers derive power and pleasure from being the family’s radar system or satellite dish - tracking and transmitting the emotional and personal data from the bodies orbiting around one another in the universe of home. It’s worth noting that what the students say about their mother’s reactions is not closely related to whether their parents are married or divorced. On the other hand, as most other researcher has shown, daughters whose mothers are mainly housewives tend to see her as being the most jealous and most uncomfortable with the idea of a close father-daughter relationship.

Most students are uncomfortable or downright unwilling to admit that mothers - including theirs - do sometimes have a negative impact on father-daughter relationships. Though well-established in the research and in their own comments, the idea is particularly threatening and unsettling. In fact, some have accused me of “mother bashing” or “attacking motherhood”. In response, I remind them that they don’t consider themselves to be “father bashing” or “attacking fatherhood” when they make sweeping, negative statements such as these: men aren’t as sensitive as women, most fathers care more about their work than their children, men enjoy being workaholics, mothers sacrifice more than fathers, fathers are more insensitive and judgmental than mothers. And I remind them again of the research showing that many children feel they’re being disloyal or unloving to admit or discuss a parent’s shortcomings - especially if that parent happens to be your mother.

Daughters’ Biases Leaving aside the mother’s influence, roughly half of the daughters who *have never tried* to talk with their fathers about personal things make negative assumptions about him because he is a male. Unable to recognize how sexist they’re being, many daughters make statements such as these: “He’s always so preoccupied with work that I just figure he doesn’t have much to say about the other things”. “Men just aren’t that interested in personal stuff.” “Fathers just aren’t going to be as sensitive and open as mothers”. “My dad is too macho to be introspective.” More sadly still, more than half of the daughters admit that their fathers *have tried* to discuss personal things with them, but that *they* rejected or withdrew from him: “It just seemed awkward so I changed the topic.” “I felt uncomfortable and was afraid he’d get sad or cry.” “I just wasn’t used to him doing that so I made an excuse to leave.” “I don’t think fathers and daughters should talk about those things”. “I was too embarrassed to discuss it with him.” “I just don’t think he has anything to teach me about something like that.” On the one hand, most daughters say their father shies away from talking about personal things while, on the other hand, they tell me about the times he has tried but they have withdrawn or rejected him. My challenge is to help them examine these discrepancies - to see how the very things they say they want from their father is what many of them flee from when he tries to be self disclosing and emotionally intimate.

Another approach is getting students to envision or to fantasize about more positive reactions from their fathers. So I ask them to discuss and write about this: What do you think the best outcomes might be if you ever decided to have more intimate, candid conversations with you father? Their responses are both insightful and heart-breaking: “He would help me with some of the awful things I’m struggling with now.” “I might really learn something about his past and tell him personal things I’ve wanted to tell him for years about me.” “I might learn how to get along better with his new wife.” “We might start spending time alone with each other.” “He might tell me that he regrets missing out on so much of my life and that he’d like to spend time with me now.” “We might talk about the things that have been lying dormant beneath the surface of our relationship for years.” “We might not feel uncomfortable around each other any more.” “He might actually come out and say that he loves me.” “He might help me learn how to break free from my mom’s depression.” “We might someday get to the point where we would feel

at peace with each other.” I’m trying to get students at least to *imagine* what might happen if they took the chance to get to know their fathers better. As the poet John Greenleaf Whittier once wrote: “For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest of these: *It might have been.*”

Fearful Topics So what exactly is it that these young women want to discuss with their fathers but haven’t had the nerve or made the effort to talk to him about? I ask them this: What would you like to discuss with your father if you had an absolute guarantee that nothing bad or sad or negative would happen afterwards? Their answers range from the somewhat mundane to the very serious and profound. Among the simpler topics are: how their father feels about his work, what he’s looking forward in the future, how he spent his childhood, what kind of relationships he had with his parents and siblings. Among the more serious topics are: the daughter’s having been (or still being) anorexic, clinically depressed, raped, alcoholic, or physically abused by a boyfriend; her father’s alcoholism, clinical depression, being fired and going bankrupt, his having children from a previous marriage, his being found guilty of embezzlement, how he feels about having a mentally retarded or drug addicted child, what it was like for him to be abandoned by his own father as a child. Daughters would also like to talk to their fathers about their mothers - her alcoholism, clinical depression, her death when the daughter was young. As you’d expect, daughters with divorced parents have the most they’d like to talk with their dads about. Astounding as it might seem, only 5 of these 90 daughters had discussed anything about the divorce with their fathers, while *all 90* had discussed the divorce with their mother - often in great detail. Even more sadly, all 90 daughters said they wanted to talk to their fathers about the divorce and about his new wife or girlfriend - even those who had not talked to their fathers for several years.

But regardless of whether their parents are divorced, 85% of the daughters say they wish they could talk to their fathers about the same thing. And what do you think that thing is - their future careers? financial issues? religion? job interviews? No - it’s love and romantic relationships - their present or past boyfriends, how to create a happy marriage, how to resolve problems, how to get over a broken heart, how to leave a bad relationship. They not only want their father’s input, they want to know about his experiences with women - his mistakes, the lessons he’s learned, the things he wishes he’d done differently, his most romantic moments, his heartbreaks. In their words: “It would be awesome to be able to tell him about my boyfriend and for him to tell me what he’s learned about love and relationships.” “I’d love to know how he knew that mom was the right woman for him.” “I think he wants me to wait to have sex until I get married; but I’d really like to know how he feels and why.” “I wish I could sit down and ask him what he thinks I should look for in a future husband.” “My dad tries to be romantic at all the wrong times and ends up frustrating my mom. She degrades him and he just takes it. I wish I could talk to him about all this.” “I wish we could talk about why he never likes any of my boyfriends.” “I want to be able to talk to him about how to get over the depression I’ve been in since my boyfriend dumped me.”

Because so many daughters want to be able to talk with their fathers about love, I encourage those who do have intimate, honest conversations with their fathers to share some of their experiences aloud with the class. Sharing their stories helps these fortunate daughters realize just how unique and how rare a relationship they have with their fathers. But their stories also give hope to the other daughters who need proof that, when it comes to this kind of emotional intimacy, *fathers can be just as good or better than mothers*. And so the students speak: “I’ve always gone to my dad, never to mom, when I need to talk about sex or relationships”. “A few weeks ago my dad sent me an e-mail about how I need to change the way I communicate with my fiancée. He’s always been helpful that way.” “My dad has always been relaxed and open with me about sex. And because he’s so comfortable with my being a sexually active adult, I enjoy my sexuality.” “My dad is the one who helped me realize I was in a dead end, abusive relationship. I always go to him for advice.” “My dad talked with all us girls about sex, birth control, tampons, having our periods - all of that. At first I might have been a little embarrassed; but I’m glad he did and I expect my future husband to do that too.” “When I was getting out of a long term relationship, my dad wrote me this letter that put everything in perspective and he called several times a week just to let me talk.” “When I finally did have sex at 22, I phoned dad the next day to tell him about it. He was tickled and just said, “that’s nice, honey.” “Dad always gives me good advice about my boyfriends from the guy perspective - after all, he is one so he can fill me in on all the secret stuff about men!”

Descriptions of parents Given how most students relate to their fathers and the kinds of families they come from, it’s not especially surprising to see how they describe their parents. From a list of 50 adjectives, I ask them to mark the ones that describe each parent. More than 70% describe both their mother and their father as: loving, forgiving, reliable, fair, attractive, trustworthy, helpful, and sociable. That’s good news. Nearly 60% describe their fathers, but not their mothers, as: industrious, intelligent, successful, confident, logical, assertive, and

independent - which is good news for fathers, and maybe not so good news for mothers. But the bad news for fathers is that a third of the students see him, but not their mother, as: domineering, tense, selfish, boastful, intimidating, aloof, arrogant, defensive, and distant. Likewise, 80% describe their mothers but only 30% describe their fathers as: nurturing, comforting, unselfish, sensitive, affectionate, and sentimental. It's worth noting too that students are about five times more likely to describe their fathers as sexy, romantic and charming and three times more likely to describe their mothers as depressed, dependent and weak.

Knowing Their Fathers As for the interview questions I give them, almost all students say they know the answers to every question about their mothers. But only 20% of the students know the answers for even a third of the questions about their fathers. Every single student has spent time alone with her mother talking about her life; but only 20% have done this with their father. You would think then that most students would look forward to interviewing their father, since they say they want to get to know him better. But you'd be wrong. In fact nearly 70% of the students tell me they are feeling nervous, uncomfortable, tense or are "dreading" or "hating" the idea of having to spend a few hours alone with their father *just talking*. Before the interviews take place, at least a third of the students come to me for private conferences to discuss their fears, to rehearse what they'd like to say, or to beg for a substitute assignment. But even in the eight cases where the daughter and father had not spoken for several years, I insist that they do the interview - if not in person, then by phone or by letter. We work together privately until the student is willing to contact her father and ask if he's willing to do the interview.

IMPACT OF THE COURSE

Despite the kinds of feelings and relationships most have with their fathers when they start the course, at the end 95% of them rate it as "top 5%" in terms of what they have learned and how interesting the course was. Roughly 60% say it is "the best course I've had in college". Only 5% say the course had no impact at all on their relationship with their father. Nearly 90% say they took the course because a friend recommended it so highly or because they saw the impact the course had on one of their friends. Since I read roughly 50 pages of written assignments for each student throughout the semester, I get continual feedback on how the course is affecting their relationships with their fathers and their general understanding of the research. So as a way of conveying the overall impact of the course, I have selected the most representative and most frequently repeated comments from the students' written assignments.

Familiarity with the research and statistics

It's clear from the students high test scores, that they become very familiar with the research and statistics in their reading assignments. Roughly 80% earn at least a B on these lengthy essay and multiple choice two hour exams. The most frequent complaints about the course are that I require so much reading and that the tests are too hard - music to my ears! In their own words: "The tests were really hard but I know more statistics and research about fathers than you can imagine". "We explored our lives in the context of all that research and statistics she forced us to memorize." "She made us tie our opinions and what we said in class to the empirical data." "She supports her comments and advice with statistics and research - and she made us do that too." "She really knows that research and she opened so many doors for us with it." "I found myself talking in my other courses about the data and statistics from this course. I even corrected a few things another professor said!" "I've never been so excited to do my homework. This professor encourages real thinking and introspection - not just the plug and chug formulas and stuff."

Applying the research to their relationships

Taking off rose colored glasses For most students, the course helps them confront certain unpleasant realities - not just about their families but about themselves. As they put it in their papers: "It wasn't easy at first, but now I'm glad this professor asked us the hard personal questions that other people hesitate to ask". "I left these classes thinking about our discussions for the rest of the week". "I can't say I liked it in the beginning - actually I thought about dropping the course. But she helped us dig deep into ourselves to understand and accept the reasons why we and our fathers act the way we do." "I had to look at a lot of painful things that I'd been avoiding." "I've let go of a lot of childish ideas I've had about families and learned that I'm not alone in my struggle to connect with my father." "She tells us things we haven't heard before because no one else has been willing to take off our rose colored glasses about topics like she makes us do."

Understanding Fathers' Motives Many students also gain a better understanding of how their fathers have been trying to help them - help that often made them angry at their fathers. Just a few weeks into the course, students are beginning to write comments like these: "I can see now that much of the time I was mad at him he was

trying to teach me to be assertive and allowing me to be assertive with him.” “I remember him trying to teach me how to re-start the lawn mower. I was furious because he wouldn’t do it for me. Now I see he was trying to teach me that I wouldn’t always have someone there to rescue me.” “I refused to go to a women’s sports event with my dad and he lectured me on the importance of women’s sports. I was so annoyed with him. Now I see this as one of many times he worked to instill a non-sexist attitude in me. I thought I just grew up knowing that women should do what men do. But it was him who taught me that.” “I’m thinking now about my dad always taking me to the courthouse with him to see the election returns come in. Now I see that he helped cultivate my love of politics by sharing his passion with me. I’m a politics major; but I never thought about it being connected to him before taking this class.” “I was so angry at my dad because he refused to let me come home from summer camp when I was 12. But I recognize now that he was teaching me to grow up. During our interview, he told me how hard it was for him to do that.” In short, many students come to see that their fathers were helping them develop a backbone instead of a wishbone.

Getting to know their fathers better

Fathers’ Self-disclosures and Love Given the negative beliefs so many students initially have about their fathers’ inability to discuss intimate things, their reactions to the interviews with their fathers are overwhelming. At least 75% say that they discussed topics with their father that had never even been mentioned before. More than 90% of those who initially say they know their fathers very well, say they learned new things about him during the interview. And at least half say that their fathers actually told them how happy and relieved they were to have at long last talked about those topics: “I have begun to see my father as a person who struggles through life as a man, and a husband - not just as my father.” “When I started this course, I didn’t think my dad and I had much to improve on. I was wrong. Now I’ve started getting to know him as person and we talk like two grown-ups.” “I’d always thought of him as a prude. But after listening to his stories about the wild things he did when he was younger, I actually see the carefree man in there.” “When we talked I saw him as a young man remembering what it was like to fall in love with my mom. There was tenderness in his voice.” “He was so sweet when he was telling me how scared he was to hold me when I was born. I cried because I finally had this sense of how important I am to him.” “He said he wished he had been more personal and communicative with me. I couldn’t believe it because that’s exactly what I had always hoped he might say to me one day.” “When he told me he wished we would talk more, I felt incredible. For the longest time I’ve wondered if he wanted more in our relationship like I do.” “He said the best present I have given him is becoming who I am. I was speechless.” “When I was eight, someone started sending me a special valentine’s gift. I still get them. During our interview, dad finally told me they were from him but that he hadn’t told me because he was afraid I wouldn’t feel they were special if I knew they came from him.”

Fathers pain and vulnerability For many, the interview is the first time they have seen their fathers as vulnerable, sensitive, romantic, sad, or lonely: “I had never seen pictures of him as a child - so small and vulnerable.” “When we were discussing his dreams, the expressive look on his face and his tone of voice made me see him as a man with a lonely heart. It was so meaningful to have my dad open his heart to me just for that few seconds”. “I had never known about the emotional milestones that marked his childhood until I asked him about his parents.” “It was hard seeing that my dad had this whole life before I came along - and a sad one.” “He was so uncomfortable talking about his father. He even asked me for advice on the issue! It’s hard to be angry with him anymore knowing about his childhood.” “It made me so sad to hear him say that even when he was my age, he had no dreams. I got a glimpse into the darkness and emptiness inside him.” “I had no idea how much I had hurt him when I was a teenager.” “When given the assignment to sit down and talk with my father about his life, I was shocked and terrified. I mean sure, I talk to him about sports, my car, school, money. But to actually talk about feelings? I couldn’t imagine it. When we got to talking about his dad, I saw him fight not to show me his pain. I actually reached over to him and said it was ok to talk to me about it. It was such a weird moment- me reaching out to my dad for the first time.”

Fathers’ jobs and money By and large, students develop a deeper appreciation for what their fathers have sacrificed by being the primary or the sole provider for the family: “He actually told me that if he could do it all again, he wouldn’t work for the big corporation. It’s funny because all these years I’ve thought he loved his work and that it was just normal for dads never to be at home.” “Until this course, I never thought about how awful it was for him to do that 3 hours of commuting every day to a job he hated.” “I have always thought he just didn’t care about being away from us so much. I was shocked when he said he cherished this certain picture of me as a baby and he had always looked at it to make himself feel peaceful when he was out at sea. Suddenly I could imagine him on a ship feeling lonely. I felt so sad.” “I learned how trapped my dad has always felt as the provider. Everybody has this

idealized image of him, but he actually said to me that he wasn't as great as the public thinks he is." "I was stunned to find out that he had given up a higher paying job to spend more time with us kids." "My dad is a tall, successful man with a commanding presence that intimidates lots of people. After our interview, I didn't see him like this anymore."

Many students also become more mature and more sympathetic with their fathers' attitudes about financial matters. "He keeps bringing up the fact that I'm graduating soon and will be on my own financially. But I'm finally seeing that he isn't being mean. He just wants me to be prepared for what's ahead." "I don't like it when he says anything about how much money he's had to spend for our college educations. But I think I see why now." "I was mad at him when he yelled at mom for spending so much on credit for Christmas. I understand his position better now though. It's not that he's selfish; he'd just like to be able to retire at 65." "I see now that he thinks I'm comparing him to other dads because he can't afford to drown me with gifts like other dads do. I need to let him know I'm not judging him." "I see now why he's so upset about being out of work. Instead of retiring, he's going to have to keep paying off my college loans." "He often says his work isn't fulfilling anymore; and now I realize that he thinks I take his money for granted. I need to work on that." "I feel that when he looks at me, he only sees a huge \$ sign. But I guess he'd like me to be financially independent and understand some of the stress he feels." "Because I'm always calling him for more money, I have made my dad feel that he's just a big wallet. I'm going to stop doing that."

Fathers' wisdom More than 80% of the students say that after interviewing their father, they see him as more wise and more insightful than ever before: "Now I see my dad isn't just a bald guy with his head always stuck in a book. I have a lot to learn from him." "His stories about his feelings in college were so meaningful because I am struggling with the same questions as he did back then." "For the first time ever, we talked about religion. I saw what a deep person he is. I was thoroughly intrigued by what he was telling him. The other day I wrote him a letter and told him how much he meant to me." "I was surprised to learn that he still sees his life as a developing process - even at his age. I'd thought he wasn't introspective about things like that."

Divorced Fathers Since the ninety daughters whose parents were divorced had rarely or never talked to their dads about the divorce, and since eight had not talked to their fathers at all for several years, these father-daughter relationships usually change the most throughout the course. These are also the students who most dread having to do the interview with their father - even when I allow them to do the interview by phone or by letters if they can't tolerate the idea of a face to face talk. So, the best news is this: *not one* of the 90 fathers has refused to do the interview with his daughter - and to do it *in person* even when they have not spoken to each other for years. For the eight students who met with their fathers for the first time in several years, all but one said the experience renewed their relationship: "Because of this course, I was able to jump start the relationship with my father after not talking to him for 4 years." "That interview was so awkward and difficult at times, but it really created some much needed bonding." "After we finished the interview, he sighed and said he'd been nervous. Then he said he'd been carrying those questions around in his briefcase for two months, reading and re-reading them, thinking about what he was going to say. I just cried." "I was stunned when he said the saddest thing was his having to live away from me after they divorced. It was great to hear because my mom has always given me the impression that he didn't care." "He showed me a picture of us that I had no idea meant anything to him. He wouldn't let me take it with me because he's kept it hanging in his bedroom all these years since their divorce." "I felt that I had gotten someone back in my life who loved me, after 8 years of losing him. Headed back to school after talking to him, I felt something for the first time since their divorce - that I was *leaving* home rather than *coming* home."

But even those daughters who have maintained a relationship with their father come away from the interviews surprised and pleased: "My dad and I finally talked about things that have caused tension between us for years." "Looking at those pictures together, I understood how much he loved being my father even though they got divorced." "I understand now why he's been so angry at my mom since their divorce - because she refuses to pay anything for any of us for college. I'm starting to agree with my dad's position - she has a duty as a parent to pay something." "He just got remarried and so we talked about how I was having to learn to see the romantic side of him now since he'd never had that with my mother. I learned a lot about dating and romance from talking to him." "It's hard to think of my parents as two people once in love and without kids, and then to realize that dad was not immune to the hole in your chest, sinking sensation of a doomed marriage." "I would also like to add that more than twenty of these divorced fathers have either written, phoned, or contacted me personally to thank me for the course. And several have volunteered to come to future classes to talk about being divorced fathers."

Changing their own behavior as daughters

As the course progresses, almost every student begins to examine the impact that her own behavior has on the kind of relationship she and her father have. Some advance to the point where they actually apologize to their fathers for mistakes they feel they've made as daughters. And others feel ashamed of the negative assumptions they once had of their fathers: "In the interview I had a chance to apologize to my dad for some of the things I've said and done to him." "Now when I call home, I ask to speak to dad alone - and he loves it." "Until I took this course, I only thought about my father in terms of me and how his actions affected my life. Now I think about how I affect him." "He said he wished I would talk to him more. That really bothers me because it forces me to acknowledge my faults in our relationship." "I had never thought of my dad as a caring human being before this course. I'm ashamed of that now." "In talking to him I realized that it's me who hasn't been receptive to talking to him." "As I began filling out the worksheets and thinking about my father, I started becoming aware of the many things he had said and done for me. It made me feel bad about myself that I came into this class with such a negative image of him." "This time when we talked to him I treated him just like I treat other people. I consciously tried to focus on how he said things, where he was looking, his mannerisms. I could see what made him tense and could tell when he was desperately searching for the right thing to say." "I've gotten a more realistic grasp on financial matters and an understanding of how little I've appreciated what my dad has sacrificed for me." "I felt embarrassed realizing I was so hasty in judging my father and his motives. I finally see that he's not trying to control my life."

Many daughters also awaken to the influence their mothers have on the father-daughter relationship: "My mom always tells me about their fights. I'm going to tell her to stop doing this to me." "Mom has always told me that women have special intuition that men don't have. But I think what's really going on is that she'd be hurt if I was really close to dad." "I see now how jealous my mom is. She didn't even like my being alone with dad to do our interview." "I've stopped treating my father like he's just an extension of my mother." "Since this class, I've started calling my dad at work so my mom won't get hurt or jealous." "I've decided I am going to tell my mom to quit badmouthing my dad." "I realize now that I'll only get closer to dad if I start talking to him myself instead of always relaying things to him through my mom." All of these comments, by the way, come from students whose parents are still married to each other.

Many also recognize that they - not their fathers - are the ones who have made it difficult to be closer emotionally: "I need to spend time just with him." "I'm going to stop assuming I know how he feels without asking him first." "I need to let him know that I do value his opinions and that I do want him to be more involved with me." "I should take the initiative to ask him to do things with me." "I should write a letter just to him to tell him what's going on in my life." "If I want him to open up, I have to be willing to do it too." "Instead of getting frustrated with him, I need to understand that he's asking questions about my life because he loves me, not because he's trying to pry into my life." "I should ask him what he wishes he'd done differently in his life so that I don't feel afraid to tell him things I've done wrong." "I need to be more sensitive to how tired he is as soon as he gets home from work. I act like a demanding child." "I've got to stop pouting and walking away every time we disagree about something." "I was wrong to hide my depression from him for so long, especially since I told mom. I understand now why this hurt him so much." "When he asks how I am, I have to quit saying "fine" when I'm not." "I have to stop assuming that he just magically ought to know what's going on in my life without my telling him." "I should stop running to mommy like a little kid every time I'm upset with dad. I owe it to him to talk directly to him." "I've had to learn to forgive him for certain things and move on. Like we learned in class, guilt and grudges would just lead to regret when he dies."

CONCLUSION

Teaching my Fathers and Daughters course, I'm often reminded of the story about the confused, unhappy person who went to a very expensive psychiatrist for advice. Several months and several thousand dollars later, the therapy came to an end. Much happier, yet much poorer, the client says: "You know, I've paid you all this money just to get the same simple advice that my friends and family have been giving me for years." "Yep", the psychiatrist replies, "but because you paid so much, this time you'll remember it." In a sense, maybe this is what happens for many of my students. They're finally able to "hear", to accept, and to apply a lot of what they already knew - or at least suspected - all along. Maybe when the advice, the information, and the most wrenching and unsettling questions occur in an academic setting with a person who has "professor" and "psychologist" attached to her name, they take root fastest.

On the other hand, roughly 5% of the students leave the course pretty much as they came into it - convinced

that there's no hope of improving their relationships with their fathers. From their perspective, there are no options other than to observe the relationship and passively wait for it to change into something else. In the minds of these daughters, "A leopard is never going to change its spots" or "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear unless you start with a silk sow." Yet from their course evaluations, I know that even these students have been altered in certain ways - by witnessing the close relationships some fathers and daughters have, by hearing other daughters talk about the positive changes that are coming about in their relationships with their fathers. And if in no other way, everyone leaves the course having had to embrace at least one shared reality: none of us can ever dig deep enough to bury our fathers.

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