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The Link Between Detached Dads and Risk-Taking Girls

New research on daughters and risk-taking sexual behavior

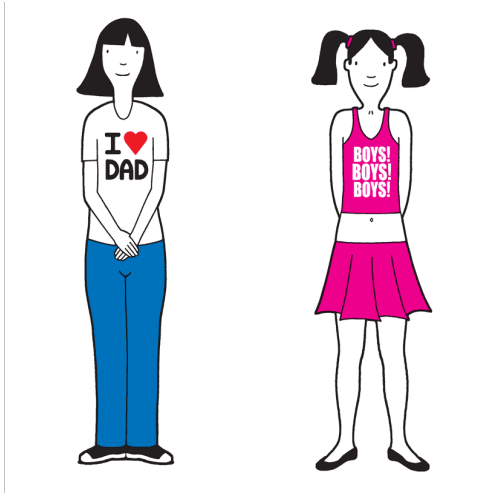


ILLUSTRATION: TOMASZ WALENTA

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How much do fathers matter to the personal development of their daughters? Scientists studying families have long suspected that domestic instability and insufficient fathering predispose girls to risky sexual behavior, but there was no hard evidence for this view.

A study published in the journal *Developmental Psychology* in May used an ingenious research design to get some answers. Danielle DelPriore and Bruce Ellis of the University of Utah, working with Gabriel Schlomer of the State University of New York at Albany, teased apart the effects of fathers within families.

They studied 101 pairs of adult sisters from families that had either remained intact or had broken up by the time the younger sister turned 14. In each family the sisters were distant enough from each other in age—at least four years—that they would have had different experiences of their father, especially if he had separated from the family before the younger one reached maturity.

This research design made it possible to control for variables that might interfere with clear conclusions about the effects of fathering. Both sisters randomly received half their genes from the mother, half from the father, so inherited genes couldn't explain systematic differences. Sibling order could matter: As teens, younger sisters

could for some reason be more risk-prone. But that was the point of including intact families. If the sisters differed in sexual risk-taking only in the disrupted families, it would be possible to zero in on how the difference arose.

The researchers used retrospective questionnaires to probe parenting and sexual experiences that the women—who were between 18 and 36 at the time of the study—recalled from high school. Sexual risk-taking included promiscuity, unprotected sex and sex while intoxicated. Older and younger sisters reported similar levels of mothering quality, whether their families were intact or disrupted.

But the most striking finding was in older sisters with a large age gap in the disrupted families. The father's behavior, for better or worse, usually affected the older sister much more than her younger sibling.

If these older sisters communicated well with their fathers and felt close to them, they experienced much more parental monitoring and hung out far less with sexually risk-prone peers. But this kind of fathering had much less effect on the younger sisters, many of whom didn't have enough contact with their father for him to make much of a difference.

These factors explained the older sisters' behavior. "The prolonged presence of a warm and engaged father can buffer girls against early, high-risk sex," Dr. DelPriore said. This doesn't mean that divorced fathers can't provide quality care. "A silver lining," she adds, "is that what dad does seems to matter more than parental separation." In other words, a divorce may be less harmful for a girl than more years with a bad dad.

The growing field of evolutionary child psychology adds interesting context to these findings. Biologists find that organisms in unstable environments grow up faster and start reproducing earlier than those in stable ones. Theoretically, in a stable environment you can take more time growing into your reproductive activities, focusing on long-term quality rather than on getting an early start. Conversely, in an unstable situation, it might "pay" (in Darwinian terms) to begin reproducing earlier, since in those girls' worlds, a good man is hard to find.

This doesn't rule out more familiar psychological explanations, but in a child's development, family instability—which, again, is something different from divorce—might provide a catalyst setting off a psychological change and risky behavior.

As Dr. DelPriore phrased the question, "What is it that dad does that shields a daughter from sexual risk?" Dr. Ellis phrased the answer: "It's all about dosage of exposure to dads; the bigger the dose, the more fathering matters—for better and for worse."