

Sports help dads, daughters bond, study says

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Many shared activities can help cement relationship, researchers find.

(HealthDay)—Fathers interested in creating a sense of closeness with their daughters should look for fun things to do together, a new study suggests.

When researchers asked [fathers](#) and daughters what experiences most affected their relationships in a notable way, they learned that girls seemed to appreciate engaging in the same kinds of things with their dads that sons typically do: playing sports, doing household projects, working together, or taking a road trip.

The male-female aspect of the father-daughter relationship can present a challenge for many fathers, said lead study author Mark Morman, a professor of communication at Baylor College of Arts and Sciences in Waco, Texas. Men usually get closer to other men by doing things

together, such as playing a game of pick-up basketball or [watching television](#), while women tend to bond through heart-to-heart talks and sharing details about the day. Men are drawn to activities, while women connect through dialogue, he explained.

Fathers and daughters who find a way to bridge that gap tend to be closer than those who don't, and it seems typically to involve having the father draw the daughter into the masculine way of connecting: doing things together, explained Morman.

"We found fathers tend to pull their daughters to the masculine, to the activity orientation they do with other men," said Morman. Some men have anxiety about doing feminine things in order to bond with their daughters, he added. However, "the activity doesn't really matter as long as both people are interested," he said.

For both fathers and daughters, sports were most frequently cited for creating closeness in their relationship.

The importance of the father-daughter relationship has been understudied, said Peggy Drexler, assistant professor of psychology in psychiatry at Weill Medical College of Cornell University in New York City. "Years ago, the dad's job used to be to prepare his daughter to hand her off to a man to marry. The relationships didn't seem to have enough depth to study," she noted.

But Drexler said that changed dramatically in the United States with the passage of Title IX in 1972, a law that banned sex discrimination in school programs—both academic and athletic—receiving federal aid. "In the 1970s and 1980s, girls were suddenly viewed less and less as delicate flowers," Drexler said. "Sports became a great bridge to draw girls into activities with their fathers."

Drexler said that as fathers and daughters began to spend more time together, the traditional father-daughter relationship dissipated. The notion of a "daddy's girl" morphed into the idea that a daughter would go out on the field and make her father proud, she explained.

But the relationship between father and daughter often goes beyond sports, noted Drexler, who was not involved with the study. "Dads are now shopping for prom dresses with their daughters. They're getting involved in ways that are enhancing the relationship between father and daughter," she said.

The research, published recently in the *Journal of Human Communication*, involved asking 43 fathers and 43 daughters who were unrelated to identify in writing a time that changed the closeness of their relationships.

The technique—called turning point analysis—is commonly used to study family communication styles and issues, said Morman. "The assumption is that if I only ask you for one thing, you're going to tell me a really important one. Whether it's a positive or a negative turning point that affects closeness, that's pretty informative," he said.

Daughters in the study were at least 22 years old, and fathers ranged from 45 to 70. People with step-family and adoptive relationships were included.

In addition to identifying the benefit of shared activities, the researchers also learned how the father-daughter relationships changed at critical milestones: adolescence, a family crisis, the parents' divorce, graduation from high school or college, a daughter's marriage and motherhood.

For both daughters and fathers, marriage was the second most frequently reported turning point, creating either greater father-daughter closeness

or generating a sense of distance. The third most commonly mentioned change for daughters was leaving home, while for dads, it was when their daughters started to date.

No matter what activities or milestones seem most important to fathers and [daughters](#) over time, Drexler said a strong relationship between father and daughter can set up a girl for success later in life.

"It's all about time, trust, engagement, nurturing, empathy, interest and shared experiences," she said.

More information: Learn more about parenting from the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

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