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## The Lost Relationship: Fathers and Daughters

*Linda Nielsen, interviewed recently by Vision's Gina Stepp, is a psychologist and professor of adolescent psychology and women's studies at Wake Forest University in North Carolina. Author of Embracing Your Father: How to Build the Relationship You Always Wanted with Your Dad (2004), Nielsen also teaches a "Fathers and Daughters" course, the only one of its kind in the United States for nearly 20 years.*

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**GS** In researching the importance of fathers to daughters, I was able to find long lists of articles on father-daughter incest, but very little on any impact that positive father-daughter relationships may have on the lives of women. Why do you suppose that is?

**LN** Your experience gets exactly to the root of the problem. This is what I've been harping at for 20 years, to the point that I feel I'm just a voice in the wilderness. First of all, do you realize how rare incest is between a biological father and daughter? It is extremely rare. To psychologists and sociologists, the term incest covers sexual abuse by cousins, uncles, stepfathers, stepbrothers, brothers, half-brothers, men who live with your mother who are not related—that all goes into the category of incest. But when you look into the statistics about girls who were sexually abused by their biological fathers, it is a very small percentage. What it tells me, just as it told you, is that researchers have the wrong focus when it comes to studying father-daughter relationships.

What you've discovered, and what my research is trying to get across to people, is that we perpetuate such unfounded stereotypes of fathers when it comes to their importance to their daughters, and this influences the relationship. If you're brainwashed to think that every black person on the corner is about to steal your pocketbook, then you're going to be on the lookout for that all the time. We're brainwashed to think that fathers are not as good a parent to daughters as mothers are, or that fathers can't nurture the way mothers can, or that daughters raised by fathers only are going to

be worse off than daughters raised by mothers only, or that boys need their fathers more than girls do. That is exactly the point of my books, my class, my research.

**GS** Why are these unfounded stereotypes proliferated so widely? Is it just that people tend toward the negative?

**LN** I think people tend to be negative, and—I'm a feminist, but I'll just say this flat out—I think we feminists are some of the worst when it comes to negativity. We start out with negative preconceptions about men as parents. We want to believe in the superiority of women as parents. Think about how you would feel, as a mother of daughters, if they turned to their father more than they turned to you for personal issues, or when they have problems with their girlfriends or their boyfriends. If they always went to him first and sometimes shut you out, that would hurt your feelings. And a large part of the reason it would hurt your feelings is that we have been told those are supposed to be mother-daughter things.

**GS** How does one convince fathers and daughters that this relationship is so important?

**LN** In the back of my book, I have these boxes called "eye-openers." I didn't want to make this a heavy academic book, so I've listed the studies at the end of the book linked to these eye-openers. These are actual research studies that give the facts about how important fathers are in their daughters' lives. Are you worried about teenage pregnancy? Are you worried

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about whether your daughter will get a good job someday and be able to support herself? Are you worried about your daughter picking boyfriends and husbands who are going to be emotionally or physically abusive to her? Are you worried about boys taking sexual advantage of your daughter? All of these things, research shows, are connected more strongly to her relationship with her father than to her relationship with her mother.

**GS** Most people would buy the fact that boys need their fathers to develop the rough-and-tumble, adventurous aspect of masculinity, so they might also buy the fact that girls need their fathers to develop the adventurous side that might lead to business success. But some studies seem to indicate that fathers treat their daughters much more gently than they do their sons. What does that say to you?

**LN** That may be, physically, because we tell fathers that girls are more fragile than boys. But think about your own life. Which parent is more likely to have taught you and your friends that, when you fail at something, you don't sit in the corner and cry about it and feel sorry for yourself; you get up and try again.

**GS** What other advantages do girls with involved dads have that other girls don't?

**LN** They're going to get a certain confidence that others find it harder to get. You've got to remember that in this culture, most of the people girls see who have power and authority are men. So if they can get praise and recognition from the man in their family, it does, for them, carry a certain weight. If they don't have that father in their family, they're going to go looking for that praise and recognition elsewhere. Those girls, as they enter their teenage years, are more likely to be desperate for male approval, constantly thinking about the next boyfriend, or what do the boys think about me, or how do I get the boys' attention. But once they get one—boyfriend, fiancé, husband—

they're constantly worried about him leaving. And so they become suspicious, overly dependent; they make their boyfriend or husband nuts by clinging to him. Nobody wants someone hanging on them all the time, like a child. There is some fascinating research out there about the advantages fathers give their daughters. Part of the problem is just getting the public to pay attention to it.

Think of the fact that, in the United States, about 70 percent of black children are born out of wedlock. All you hear about absent black fathers is the impact on young black men. What about the impact on black daughters? The emphasis is on the boys, and how much they need their fathers. But the highest rate of AIDS infections right now in our country is among teenage girls. That's the fastest-growing group to contract AIDS. Why? Because they're dating guys and having sex too early—and, of course, it's the poorest girls, because the poorer the family they come from, the less likely they have a father growing up with them, the more likely they'll have sex by the time they are 12 or 13 years old with multiple partners, and the more likely their partners use drugs. The guys are not 12 or 13; they're older, 19 or 20, because the girls are looking to fill that father void. So the fastest-growing group contracting AIDS is low-income teenage girls. They contract it as teens; it shows up when they're 19 or 20. And that is directly connected to father absence.

**GS** If fathers are this important in the lives of their daughters, how should society encourage their presence?

**LN** Well, it's interesting that when the mother and the father both work an equal number of hours outside the home, the amount of time they spend with their children is almost equal, which tells me that when both have the time to spend with their children, they both do it. But that wording is important: when they work *an equal number of hours*, they spend an equal amount of time. However, when women work "full time" and men work "full time," men are still working 15 hours more a week than women, and commuting more hours than women. The negative assumption is that men are more interested in their work than in their children, or that they aren't as interested in children as women are. But you know, if I've worked longer hours than you have during the day, I probably am less interested in spending a lot of time with my noisy kids when I come home. That's not a gender thing; that's an exhausted worker thing!

I give my students a quiz titled "Are you an equal-opportunity daughter?" It has 10 questions—simple ones, like "Do you spend as much time alone with your father as you do with your mother?" You're not going to get more of what you want from your father if you don't give him the same opportunity to develop this kind of relationship as you've given your mother.

**GS** How much of this falls on the daughter? Does the dad have a responsibility to make time as well?

**LN** Well, certainly. But you're told, as a dad, that once puberty hits you aren't supposed to spend as much time with your daughter. Once she's a teenager, you're supposed to back off and let Mom have the main

relationship. If that's the message you're sent, and you're told that's what a "good father" does, then that's what you're going to do. So yes, the father plays out that script too. My students tell me that their fathers stopped doing things with them when they became teenagers—like going camping with them alone on the weekends—because it would look weird, because it would be suspicious, and of course that gets back to that misconception people have about the prevalence of father-daughter incest.

But during her teenage years, a daughter needs her father as much as ever. Unfortunately, the sad fact is that most fathers and daughters do not know each other nearly as well or spend nearly as much time together as mothers and daughters do.

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