

## Note to dads: Good parenting makes a difference

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Father's Day this Sunday is a chance to recognize dads for putting up with all manner of nonsense that kids manage to cook up on the way to adulthood.

But a new study by researchers at the University of Arizona shows just how important dad's job as a [role model](#) actually is.

The study, "Impact of Fathers on Risky [Sexual Behavior](#) in Daughters: A Genetically and Environmentally Controlled [Sibling](#) Study," is due to be published in the journal *Development and Psychopathology*.

When it comes to girls and their decisions about sex, it turns out a father's influence really does matter," says Bruce J. Ellis, the study's lead author and the John and Doris Norton Endowed Chair in Fathers, Parenting, and Families at the UA Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences.

"Girls who receive lower quality fathering tend to engage in more risky sexual behavior in adolescence. We know that poor fathering and daughters' risky sexual behavior go together, but we haven't known why and haven't known how. Our study was meant to figure out that issue," he said.

Ellis and his colleagues developed a special methodology to test for the impact of fathers on their daughters' sexual risk-taking. "By controlling for both genetic effects and family-level confounds, our results

demonstrated a cause-and-effect relationship: different amounts of exposure to different kinds of fathers altered daughters' sexual behavior," he said.

Ellis's colleagues on the study included Gabriel L. Schlomer, a research scientist, Elizabeth H. Tilley, a graduate student, and Emily A. Butler an assistant professor. All are from the Norton School.

They looked at 59 pairs of [sisters](#) from families in which the [parents](#) had divorced and the father moved out and compared them with 42 pairs of sisters from intact families. Sisters were full biological siblings whose age difference spanned an average of about 7 years.

In divorced families, older sisters spent an average of 7 more years living with their fathers, compared with their younger sisters. The study examined the effects of this different exposure to the dad.

"It turned out that it didn't matter that much how long each daughter lived with her father, but rather what he did when he was there," said Ellis. Comparing sisters in the same family, the study showed that living for longer periods of time with a dad who provided high-quality fathering reduced risky sexual behavior.

More time with a dad who provided low-quality fathering actually increased risky sexual behavior. Quality of fathering was rated by the sisters, who largely agreed on how the dad acted towards them, whether warm and supportive or harsh and abusive.

The study also supported the hypothesis that higher quality father-daughter relationships are uniquely protective against [risky sexual behavior](#). Variation around the lower end of father-daughter relationship quality appeared to have the greatest influence. Risky sex included such behaviors as sex without a condom, having sex while intoxicated,

multiple sexual partners and becoming pregnant before age 19.

Ellis said that results from the relatively small study provide important directions for future research. "It will be especially important in future research to study larger numbers of divorced families in which older and younger sisters are differentially exposed to important dimensions of paternal behavior.

"This could include such factors as differential exposure to stepfathers and sexual abuse, differential exposure to socioeconomic conditions, different experiences of parental monitoring, and so forth. Future research is needed to identify these intervening pathways."

Provided by University of Arizona

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