

Sports, shared activities are 'game changers' for dad/daughter relationships, study finds

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The most frequent turning point in father-daughter relationships is shared activity—especially sports—ahead of such pivotal events as when a daughter marries or leaves home, according to a study by Baylor University researchers.

"This is the masculine style of building closeness—called 'closeness in the doing' – whereas the feminine orientation is talking, 'closeness in the dialogue,'" said Mark T. Morman, Ph.D., a professor of communication in Baylor's College of Arts & Sciences. An article about the findings by Morman and former Baylor graduate student Elizabeth Barrett is published in the *Journal of Human Communication*.

When asked what key experiences changed closeness in their relationships, fathers and [daughters](#) who were study participants mentioned events typical of those that help cement masculine friendships. Morman noted that the study is qualitative – based on written responses by participants rather than by a statistical analysis. But it reveals meaningful markers of when relationships changed, regardless of whether they became closer or more distant, he said.

The 43 fathers and 43 daughters in the study were not related to one another but were asked to pinpoint in writing a crucial moment of change in their own father-daughter relationships. Daughters in the study were required to be at least age 22, while fathers ranged from 45 to 70. Adoptive and step-family relationships were among those included.

"These (turning points) . . . were independent of some type of family history," Morman said.

Most frequently mentioned of 14 relationship changes by daughters were engaging activities with their fathers, their marriages and physical distance from their fathers. Fathers most frequently mentioned joint activities, a daughter's marriage and the beginning of a daughter's dating.

Other pivotal times noted by both fathers and/or daughters in the study were adolescence, a family crisis, parents' divorce, a daughter's financial independence, giving birth, entering elementary school, high school graduation, a daughter's developing outside friendships, a daughter's maturation/beginning a friendship with her father and poor decisions on a daughter's part.

Daughters weigh in on turning points

● Shared Activities:

Sports, working together and vacationing together were the shared activities most frequently mentioned.

Many daughters said they became closer to their fathers when they began to play a sport, an intimacy in which the father is the "primary playmate" as daughters learn to compete, take risks and stand up for themselves.

Sports gave daughters a chance to be the center of their dad's attention. "It made me feel really important," one woman wrote. Another said that "I used to love it when my dad would take off work to come coach my softball team."

Working together was another life-changing shared activity.

"Growing up, I didn't see much of my dad because he was at the office," one daughter wrote. But through working together, "now I know him on so many different levels."

A third shared activity was vacationing, several daughters said. "The first time I really talked with my dad, I was 6 years old. We took a road trip together and talked about everything," one woman wrote.

● **Marriage:**

A daughter's marriage was the second most frequently reported turning point—sometimes bringing them closer together, usually due to gaining a father's approval of their husbands—but many reported the marriage distanced them somewhat because the father was no longer the protector and provider.

● **Leaving Home:**

The third most mentioned shift for daughters was when they left home for the first time, often to attend college. Some felt they lost touch; others felt a strain was lifted as they had their own space and developed a friendship with their dad rather than viewing him as a provider, adviser and disciplinarian.

From the fathers' perspectives

● **Shared Activities:**

Sports was the most frequently mentioned activity by fathers, with some saying it gave them a bond their daughter did not have with her mother or siblings. Others said it opened the lines of communication to talk about other subjects. Additional activities fathers mentioned were

church functions, household projects and teaching their daughters to drive.

One father even learned how to sing so he could be in a school talent show with his daughter.

● **Marriage:**

Marriage, the second most frequent turning point mentioned by fathers, was crucial, regardless of whether it strengthened or weakened the relationship. Said one father: "She became dependent on her husband instead of me, and I determined not to interfere to the point of driving a wedge between her husband and me."

On the flip side, one father said that being involved in her daughter's wedding plans gave him a reason to talk regularly to her.

● **Daughter Begins Dating:**

Fathers attempted to fiercely protect their daughters during this time, worrying constantly about them, and as a whole, their closeness lessened.

"She communicated more with her mother about personal matters and less with me," one man reported.

As their "little girls" grew into young women, [fathers](#) realized they could not shelter them forever and were forced to begin "letting go."

More information: www.uab.edu/communicationstudy/04_02_barrett.pdf

Provided by Baylor University

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