

Study of sisters helps explain dad's influence on risky sexual behavior

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Credit: University of Utah

What is it about a father that affects his teenage daughter's likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behavior?

Researchers have long shown links between father involvement and daughters' sexual behavior, with the standard explanation attributing that influence to shared genes that impact both a father's behavior and relationships and his child's problem behavior, including engaging in risky sex and affiliating with delinquent peers.

But a new study led by a University of Utah researcher and published online in *Developmental Psychology* suggests that even though genes likely play a part, they may not be the whole story.

By using pairs of sisters who spent differing amounts of time living with their [fathers](#), the study was able to control for inherited genes and environmental conditions, such as socioeconomic status or religious background, to isolate the effects of fathering quality on daughters.

The results suggest a causal relationship between a father's behavior and his daughters' experiences: Different amounts of exposure to fathers of high or low quality changes daughters' social environments—the monitoring they received and the peers with whom they affiliated—in ways that can impact their sexual behavior.

"It's not enough for a dad to just be in the home," said Danielle J. DelPriore, a post-doctoral fellow in the University of Utah's department of psychology and lead author of the study. "The quality of a father's relationship with his daughter has implications for both the overall monitoring she receives from her parents as well as her likelihood of affiliating with more promiscuous or more prosocial friends."

The study compared the outcomes of older and younger full biological sisters who experienced the divorce or separation of their parents while growing up, and thus spent differing amounts of time living with their fathers. In divorced/separated families (including those in which the parents never married), the parents stopped living together before the

younger sister turned age 14. Biologically intact families provided a control group in that the sisters in these families each lived with both parents into adulthood. The age difference between sisters in each group was at least four years.

The researchers theorized that in divorced/separated families, a father—and how he behaved—was likely to have exerted a stronger influence on an older daughter than a younger daughter since older daughters systematically received larger "doses" of dad's behavior.

That proved to be the case, for better or worse. The study found that older sisters with greater exposure to their fathers were strongly influenced by the quality of fathering they received. When fathering was high quality, [parental monitoring](#) was increased and older sisters were less likely to affiliate with sexually risky peers during adolescence compared to their younger sisters. The opposite effects were found for older sisters who spent many years living with a low-quality father.

Parental monitoring refers to parents' supervision over their children's lives, including their communication and knowledge about what a child is doing, who she is hanging out with, and how she spends her time and money. Research has shown that low parental monitoring is associated with increased drug and alcohol use, delinquency and other behavior problems.

The new study was co-authored by Bruce J. Ellis of the University of Utah and Gabriel L. Schlomer of the University of Albany, SUNY. Previous research by Ellis and Schlomer suggested a causal effect of fathering quality on daughters' risky sexual behavior, but did not examine how or why differences in quality translated into differences in a daughter's sexual behavior.

"We wanted to look into that 'black box' to see how a father's behavior

might change [daughters'](#) environments in ways that promote or protect against risky sexual [behavior](#)," DelPriore said.

The findings suggest that the most effective programs for reducing adolescent females' [risky sexual behavior](#) might include components that both promote engagement with prosocial peers and aim to improve parenting skills, including parents' ability to effectively communicate with their teens.

"There is a lot of emphasis on the effects of divorce and parental separation on children, but this research shows that what may be more important, at least in this case, is what dad is doing while he is in the home," DelPriore said.

More information: Danielle J. DelPriore et al. Impact of Fathers on Parental Monitoring of Daughters and Their Affiliation With Sexually Promiscuous Peers: A Genetically and Environmentally Controlled Sibling Study., *Developmental Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/dev0000327](#)

Provided by University of Utah

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