

Close ties with fathers help daughters overcome loneliness

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Fathers play a key role in helping their young daughters overcome loneliness, a new study has found.

Researchers found that girls tended to report less loneliness as they went from first grade to fifth grade. But loneliness declined more quickly among girls who had a closer relationship with their fathers.

"The bond between fathers and daughters is very important," said Xin Feng, co-author of the study and associate professor of human sciences at The Ohio State University.

"We found that closeness between fathers and daughters tends to protect daughters and help them transition out of loneliness faster."

The study appears online in the *Journal of Family Psychology* and will be published in a future print edition.

The researchers studied 695 families who participated in the Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, initiated and funded by the National Institute on Child Health and Development.

Mothers and fathers rated their relationships (both closeness and conflict) with their child when the child was in grades 1, 3, 4 and 5. In grades 1, 3 and 5 the children rated their levels of loneliness.

Results showed that levels of closeness tended to decline over this time period, while conflict increased. That's not surprising, said Julia Yan, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in human sciences at Ohio State.

"This is a time when children are becoming more independent, developing relationships with friends and spending more time outside the home," Yan said.

"So they become less close with their parents and have more conflict as their need for autonomy increases."

Loneliness also tended to decrease as the kids developed relationships with their peers and felt more comfortable with their social skills.

But the study showed that kids didn't shed their loneliness at the same rate. Daughters did better when they had closer relationships with their fathers.

Relationship closeness did not have an effect on loneliness in boys. The study can't show why, but Yan said it may be because parents don't socialize boys to have particularly close relationships and put less emphasis on them maintaining close ties.

Mothers' relationships didn't have an effect in this study, but that doesn't mean they aren't important, Yan said. One reason for the lack of impact among mothers in this research was that mothers nearly always had close relationships with their kids, so there was less difference to measure.

In addition, Feng noted that fathers have relationships with their children, particularly their daughters, that are different from relationships mothers have.

"In our society, mothers tend to be responsible for everyday care and stability for their children," Feng said. "Fathers have more freedom to interact with their children in different ways, to challenge them and have a wider range of emotional contact. That may be one reason why fathers had more impact on their daughters."

While relationship closeness was tied to changes in loneliness, the study did not find that levels of conflict between fathers and daughters had an effect.

One reason may be that most families didn't have high levels of conflict.

"Normal levels of conflict may not affect [loneliness](#)," Yan said. "If there is still communication going on and a good [relationship](#), it may not matter as much."

The results affirm that [fathers](#) should nurture their relationships with their children, particularly their daughters, the researchers said.

"Pay attention to their feelings, especially when they are sad or unhappy, and help them cope," Feng said. "Our results suggest it can really help [daughters](#) feel less lonely over time."

Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, professor of human sciences at Ohio State, was also a co-author of the study.

More information: Jia Yan et al, Longitudinal associations between parent-child relationships in middle childhood and child-perceived loneliness., *Journal of Family Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/fam0000446](#)

Provided by The Ohio State University

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