

Dad: A Girl's First Hero (Part One)

by Linda D. Bartlett



All eyes turn toward the bride and her father who make their way down the aisle. His hand is wrapped protectively around his daughter's hand as he leads her forward. With love in her eyes, the bride turns her gaze from her dad to a beaming young man. The father lifts his daughter's veil, kisses her cheek, then takes her hand and places it in the hand of her soon-to-be-husband.

Do we really know the significance of what's taking place? Do we know that the father is his daughter's protector and "hero"? Do we know that, in this wedding ceremony, the father is literally placing his daughter into the loving protection of her husband? Do we know that the bridal veil symbolizes modesty and that, by lifting the veil of his daughter, the father is revealing his daughter's virtue and entrusting it to the man who has promised to be her faithful husband?

But, what if there is no father? What if there is no father-figure—a grandfather, uncle, or older brother—who has provided the veil of protective covering over a young woman? What if there is no father or father role model who has provided appropriate affection while guarding her virtue?

Far too many of these young girls long for affection, beg for attention, and, yes, look for love in all the wrong places.

Dr. Meg Meeker, author of *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters: 10 Secrets Every Father Should Know* (Regnery Publishing), is

convinced that the fundamental relationship between a girl and her dad can affect all areas of her life. In fact, says Dr. Meeker, who knows how truly vulnerable young women are in today's culture, the way a father treats his daughter can determine how she will relate to men during the remainder of her life. Young women need the covering of strong, involved dads.

Here are excerpts from an interview Carrie Gress did recently with Dr. Meeker, with added commentary of my own.

Gress: A father is a daughter's best ally seems to be the consensus of your book . . .

[W]hat is the unique offering of a father to a daughter that a mother cannot offer, especially in her relationship to God?

Meeker: [A] father is a daughter's great ally, which today is not only overlooked, but is directly attacked. If you look at the typical sitcom, the father is portrayed as someone who is comical, humorous and just plain dumb, and as though he has something to learn from his daughter.

Research shows that a father's influence builds up self-esteem, helps his daughter to avoid sex, drugs, alcohol, and stay in college . . . a father carries an authority in his daughter's eyes. This authority is not ascribed to the mother, not that she is not important, but a father's influence is different.

When a girl is little, her dad is her primary male love relationship. When he gives her something as a man, she learns lessons about men, setting a template in those early years on her heart about what to expect, to think, to feel, and know about men from there on out, affecting even her relationship to God, because Christ is a man.



Bartlett: Our gracious and loving God is also our Heavenly Father! After sin entered the world, He provided the protective covering of patriarchy. A father, as the head of the family, is not to “lord over” wife and family. Instead, with Jesus as his model, a father can seek to guard his family by serving them unselfishly, doing battle against evil, and leading to a future of hope.

A modern girl is at risk emotionally, physically, and psychologically by the influences of an off-track feminist movement, sex education beginning at an early age, an emphasis on being “sexy,” so-called “reproductive” rights, and a welfare state that discourages the commitment of marriage.

Even in a culture that has turned its back on God and, thus, lost appreciation for patriarchy, exciting opportunities exist. A father can squelch the ridiculous notion that “equal” means “being the same” by helping a daughter understand the created, yet complimentary differences between male and female. A father can explain to his daughter how men think and why modesty in dress and behavior is a good thing. A father’s interest and appropriate affection can help a daughter grow confidence and take the time to discern agape love from worldly love.

Gress: What are the specific characteristics of a dad that help daughters in their development?

Meeker: One of the big ones is a sense of protectiveness. It is intuitive in a dad’s heart to protect and guard a daughter. Our culture, however, has been training men not to do that because gender neutrality has become such a big deal.

The reason this is very important is because, particularly in the area of sexuality, dad has an enormous role. Girls are under sexual siege, with aggressive marketing, especially in clothing, from the age of 6 on. If a father, feeling protective, says, “I don’t want my daughter going to school in a jog bra,” and mom says, “No, this is the way girls dress,” a

father needs to trust his judgment. Sometimes his intuition is better on this one.

Another is that dads in general tend to be very pragmatic and solution-oriented, discovering first what the problem is, and then how to get to the solution. Sometimes women are insulted, because we think differently, but this difference is wonderful. A man says, “Now, what’s the problem? What can we do?” This pragmatism can serve a daughter well in teen years.

For example, perhaps a boyfriend has broken up with her. A girl will feel sad, think she is too fat, too stupid—all kinds of things get added to the frustration in her own mind. But dad compartmentalizes, “What’s the problem? What can we do to solve it? Just because he broke up with you, doesn’t mean all these other things are true.”

However, the most important thing a father can do is live a life of integrity—living truthfully. A daughter, within 15 seconds, can tell if her father is in a bad mood, good mood, telling the truth or not, etc. Those fathers who don’t live truthfully do a great disservice because a daughter doesn’t believe in him, doesn’t trust him. Dads think they need to earn heroism, but they really don’t. The role of a hero is just given to him until proven otherwise. Most dads don’t know this.

Bartlett: Dads don’t realize they are heroes because this concept has either never been passed on to them by their own father, or they have ignored or forgotten God’s Word that mightily reminds them of their powerful role. Either way, they are left ill-equipped to battle the culture that beats up on them and tries to destroy their confidence. There is a Man, however, who forgives and then faithfully encourages every human father to try—over and over again, to be the man God designed him to be. That Man is Jesus Christ.

(Part Two of this article is set to appear in the summer 2008 edition of LifeDate. Interview excerpts from Zenit.org, 2/25/07. Used by permission.)

Dad: A Girl's First Hero (Part Two)



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This article continues with excerpts from an interview Carrie Gress, of the ZENIT news agency, did recently with Dr. Meg Meeker, with added commentary of my own.

Gress: You say there is a clear connection between depression in girls and young women and sexual activity. How can a father's love help protect against this in our sexually saturated culture?

Meeker:

Depression in girls is all about ungrieved losses accumulated in the heart. This connection can be backed up with medical data . . . When girls approach sexuality, a huge emotional component is involved. When a girl is sexually active once, and it doesn't matter if it is oral sex or intercourse, she incurs a loss. In the physical act, she has lost something in her heart, her virginity, her respect for herself. When girls feel this, if they don't acknowledge that they are hurt and that something has happened to them, then they will live with unresolved grief, which leads to depression.

. . . [I]f a young person has a bad sexual experience . . . [boy or girl may] immediately think they did something wrong—not, "Maybe I shouldn't be doing this." In order to correct this "wrong," they will try to make up for it in some other experience, which leads

to a downward spiral of messy relationships, physical risk, and emotional damage.

Ironically, while our culture is now immunizing girls against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), we endlessly market sex to them, paying little attention to all of the layers of risk. This . . . would never happen with cigarettes or alcohol, where we would give kids an immunization against lung cancer yet promote smoking. This problem is missed . . . because sexual freedom has come to be seen as a right.

Bartlett: The modern feminist movement, presuming to lead young women toward greater freedom, actually helped lead women

into a state of unhappiness. As some have confessed to me, they were actually taught to live as irresponsibly as irresponsible men. But, the Father God does not abandon the depressed, unloved, or unhappy

woman or man. Jesus Christ, God who came to earth, experienced the feelings and emotions of humanity. He knows the best plan for our lives. He knows our design. He knows our deepest needs. He offers His hand to lead us out of despair and toward a future of hope.

Gress: You suggest the importance of raising a daughter with humility, emphasizing that she should see the world like a pioneer, asking, "What can I do for others," instead of like a princess who lives with a sense of entitlement. How can this contribute to her long-term happiness?

Meeker: . . . Parents just want their kids



to be happy, but they perceive incorrectly that it comes from receiving pleasure, so when children receive, receive, receive, happiness does not come . . . Despite our material wealth, depression rates have never been so high. Clearly we are missing something. Parents have been duped. What works is when we teach kids to serve, to look beyond themselves. Real joy and happiness comes when kids understand that they have a purpose in life, and a mission to fulfill. The only way to get them to understand this is to look beyond self and doing good for others.

This is the source of real transformation, but this can't happen without humility, the opposite of which is pride. When parents instill humility, a kid understands that he or she is important, and loveable, but not separate from others in their humanity. If a kid really wants to feel good about himself, humility brings people closer, whereas pride separates.

Bartlett: Children who grow up knowing that they are handmade by the God who sacrificed for them are boys and girls who will know why to respect themselves and others. They will learn to be kind to others and patiently anticipate good things in proper time. A girl may better understand, for example, that even though she longs for a boy's attention, her thoughtfulness and humility will lead her to refrain from wearing "sexy" clothing or calling attention to herself with provocative behavior.

Gress: There is repeated mention in the book that a father should do all he can to keep a family together. Why is this so important, and what can men do to care for their daughters if they find themselves divorced or widowed?

Meeker: . . . [A]s a culture [we] have failed to teach boys to live courageously, which means to live with profound discomfort. In not being taught how to live, men have been failed.

All the psychology, pediatric, and medical

literature says divorce is at the top of the list of putting kids at risk for all high-risk behaviors. It is an enormous factor in kids' emotional, mental, and physical health. My job is to try to help fathers stick it out with difficult wives until their daughters are older. The longer they can wait, the better it is for kids. Kids need full cognitive skills to cope with the trauma of divorce, and men need to call upon courage to gut it out.

A father who is separated from his daughter must maintain as strong a connection as possible, which means big phone bills, letters, pressing his way into her life in a gentle but firm manner. Stick with her over the long haul. Even when the daughter pulls back, the father has to be the grown-up. If you get your feelings hurt, forget it, it's not about you. Don't take it personally, maintain your integrity and rely on God to give you the strength to persevere.

And angry mothers need to know that you can divorce your daughter's father, but she can't. She has emotional needs, no matter what damage has been done. Give her the right to have a relationship with her dad.

Bartlett: There is always hope! Even when earthly fathers fail, the Heavenly Father remains faithful. Even when earthly fathers despair and disappoint not only their children but themselves, the Perfect Man, Jesus Christ, remains the constant source of forgiveness and new life.

So, when you watch a father walk his daughter forward to meet her groom, when you see him place her hand in the hand of her young man, and you see the love in her eyes gaze first at dad and then turn to her husband—think on all these things.

(Part One of this article can be found in the spring 2008 edition of LifeDate. Interview excerpts from Zenit.org, 2/25/07. Used by permission.)

