



The Influence of a Father on a Daughter's College Decision

Setting the Stage

Utah Women and Education Project researchers conducted in-depth research in 2010 to discover why more young women around the state were not attending and graduating from college. We discovered that fathers in Utah have a significant influence on their daughters' college choices, regarding graduating from college, not attending at all, or attending then dropping out.

What did fathers do to help their daughters love learning and desire to attend college? In our research, a young woman who graduated from college was significantly more likely to have had a father who did the following throughout her upbringing:

- Read to her.
- Helped her with school projects and other homework.
- Took her to cultural events and other activities.
- Attended school events.
- Created learning experiences for her inside and outside the home (e.g., gave her the materials and directions to build something and guided her as needed; taught her to change a tire; worked with her to plant a garden).
- Set a positive example through prioritizing education for himself (e.g., observed him reading books, heard him ask questions to others, watched him earn a college degree, and discussed with him what he had learned).
- Helped her develop lifelong learning skills.

Participant Quotes

One college graduate in our study stated: "My father has helped me develop a deep love for learning. I remember when I was in 2nd grade, I had an obsession with reading; my dad would suggest books to me, and sometimes even read the books at the same time as me so that we could discuss the plots. I remember always trying to read as quickly as he would when we were reading books at the same time

so that he wouldn't have to wait for me to turn the page, of course, he didn't really mind waiting for me."

Another college graduate explained: "At dinner, my dad would ask each of the kids what we learned that day in school. We were not only asked to tell what we learned, but also express understanding of the subject."

Study participants included 245 women between 18-32 years of age. They were White (89.9%), LDS (80.4%) married (44.1%), and from 16 different counties (Salt Lake/Utah, 56.2%).

A third young woman in our study who never attended college said: "I think my father tried to ruin learning for me. He made fun of me when I got put in a special reading class because I didn't know how to read, and when I learned to love reading, he would take my books away. When

I was in 5th grade, he grounded me for 4 months from doing everything but multiplication tables; he wanted me to be able to do them all in 30 seconds, 1-12. Which, I did, but now I can hardly remember any of them. I don't talk to my father anymore, he was a jerk, and I don't want anything to do with him."

A Fathers Education

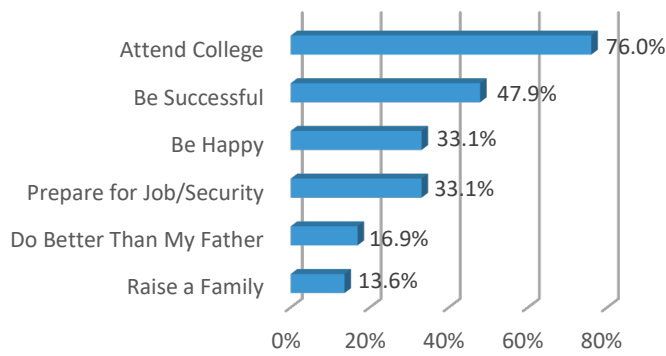
A father's educational level has a profound influence on the choices of his daughter(s). According to our data, the higher the educational attainment of the father, the more likely his daughter will:

- Develop a love for learning.
- Have a father who sets a positive example of gaining knowledge and learning.
- Have a father who started talking about college when she was young.
- Receive more encouragement and support to attend college.
- Prepare for college attendance (e.g., save money for college, discuss financial aid, take AP and concurrent enrollment courses, visit a college campus, request information from a college, apply to a college, get accepted or admitted to a college, and receive a scholarship or grant to attend college).

Other Findings

We asked the young women of Utah in our study what their fathers wanted them to do with their lives. All of their responses revolved around the six themes outlined in the following graph:

Figure 1: What Utah Fathers Want their Daughters to Do with Their Lives



Other findings included the following:

- Fathers who tell their daughters they want them to attend college are more likely to have daughters who attend.
- Fathers who talk to their daughters about the importance of college in 1) preparing for a job and 2) having more future security are likely to have daughters who earn college degrees.
- Fathers who provide more than superficial encouragement, spend time with their daughters, and offer financial, emotional, and practical assistance (e.g., financial support, help with grants/scholarship applications), will more likely have college-graduate daughters.

One young woman who had dropped out of college after one semester stated: “My dad thinks that education is important, but college is a waste of money. He wants us to get paid well but is not willing to help pay for us to get an education.”

Another study participant who never attended college said: “I believe my dad wants me to be successful in life but doesn’t necessarily think college is necessary to do so. It is expensive, and he didn’t finish but things are alright for him, so he thinks that it is possible.”

One woman who had just returned to finish college explained: “He was definitely disappointed when he found out that I was leaving school to become a stay at home mom and still tells me every day that I need to go back to school. I do finally realize that if I want a better life I need to go back.”

A final respondent who was currently attending college stated: “My father thinks education and college are

important...My whole life my dad has always believed in us and has been there for us. My dad wants me to be a good mother and do what I love and what’s important to me. He helped me develop a love for learning by showing me how important school is. He would stay up till late hours in the night to make sure we understood our homework and was always there to help us.”

Taking an Active Role

Everyone

Help fathers understand the critical role they hold in encouraging and supporting their daughters to attend and graduate from college.

Fathers

- Talk directly to your daughters, starting as young as possible, about attending and graduating from college. Include reasons why college is beneficial.
- Encourage your daughters to begin saving money for college while they are young. Create and contribute to a college education fund.
- Read to your daughters, help them with their homework, and attend their school/social events. Use one-on-one time to create and share learning activities with them.
- Get a college degree. If you already have one, talk to your daughters about your positive college experiences. If you don’t have a degree, then discuss the positive aspects of attending.
- Be very clear and open about your wishes for your daughters’ futures. Make sure they know their strengths and that you believe in them—help them know they can succeed.

Conclusion

Fathers play a critical role in their daughters’ decision to attend college. As fathers come to a greater understanding of their influence, they can better support their daughters’ growth in all areas of their lives. This will in turn improve the long-term wellbeing of women, men, and families in communities and in the state as a whole.

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