What Utah Fathers Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Their Daughters

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide specific answers to that question, the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah girls and women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2019 gathering of 25 fathers who are raising school-aged daughters in Utah. Knowing that fathers profoundly affect their daughters’ growth and development throughout the years, their discussion focused on culture, family dynamics, personal development, confidence and resilience, and education and career preparation.

CULTURE
Utah fathers recognize the strong influence local culture can have on the way their daughters develop their sense of self. The state’s distinct environment, with its own set of social norms, can affect girls and young women in both positive and negative ways. Fathers can work to support their daughters’ efforts to navigate cultural influences by doing the following:

• Make conscious efforts to be more aware of the messages girls and women receive about roles, stereotypes, biases, limitations, self-worth, values, and confidence; discuss these messages with daughters and work together to minimize harmful effects.

• Examine their own unconscious biases and how these may be affecting their daughters, including differences in how they treat daughters versus sons.

• Treat all girls and women with dignity and respect; teach daughters what they have the right to expect.

• Identify and celebrate strong role models for girls and women (from literature, popular culture, personal networks, and the larger community).

• Find opportunities for daughters to be exposed to other cultures, people, and places, to help them see the great diversity among girls and women in various environments and contexts.

• Pay attention to and avoid gender distinctions that have no real meaning (e.g., different toys, different types of activities for boys and girls); expose girls to a wide range of opportunities and experiences so they can personally discover what they love; empower girls to be true to themselves.

• Work to combat the pervasive messages girls receive about the “ideal” body type and the objectification/sexualization of girls and women. Discuss ways girls can reject these pressures and emphasize that their value doesn’t come from their looks.

• Demonstrate open-mindedness when it comes to other girls’ and women’s choices and behaviors; avoid judging and recognize there are many pathways to creating a successful life.

FAMILY DYNAMICS
As fathers interact with daughters and other family members within the home, they can contribute to positive attitudes and behaviors that support the growth and development of girls and young women:
• Be aware of factors that diminish confidence (e.g., focus on physical appearance, rigid gender stereotypes, overuse of social media, perfectionism), and actively work to combat them.

• Give daughters the chance to set, work toward, and achieve goals, recognizing that confidence grows through action, effort, and hard work.

• Create a safe space for daughters to actually fail (not just learn about failure theoretically) and celebrate the learning that follows; hold them accountable for their mistakes and help them develop the grit that comes through trial, perseverance, and reflection.

• Help girls learn to be okay with feeling uncomfortable but avoid the temptation to “break” daughters in the name of teaching them about the real world.

• Challenge daughters to overcome fear and do hard things; avoid the word “can’t,” encourage them not to give up, and foster a growth mindset.

• Lead by example by boldly going after things (successful or not, daughters will benefit by watching the effort and then reflecting on it).

EDUCATION & CAREER PREPARATION
Fathers can serve as powerful role models for their daughters in terms of education and professional preparation. There are numerous ways fathers help their daughters succeed:

• Set expectations for girls from a young age that they should plan to attend and graduate from college; help them realize this goal through ongoing college preparation and financial readiness.

• Build enthusiasm for higher education by taking girls to visit colleges, having them meet with women college students, discussing possible pathways, and helping them save their own money.

• Ensure daughters know they will likely spend many years in the labor force and that education and skills training gives them more and better options for employment.

• Involve daughters in their own professional lives; fathers’ experiences can be very educational for girls.

• Help daughters learn professional skills such as business communication, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, negotiation, and management.

• Expose girls to a wide variety of professions and industries; show them female role models in diverse fields; find opportunities for them to job shadow, intern, and work part-time to explore and learn.