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My Father and Me:

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Our Relationship after the Divorce

 What happens to children after their parents are divorced? What are children thinking during the divorce? There are so many questions that children have about changes in their life during and after their parents go through a divorce. Parents should take the time to talk to their children about what is going on. According to Kim Leon, a specialist in Human Development and Family Studies, “the support of an adult who knows them well, understands their thoughts and feelings, and helps them express those thoughts and feelings makes a world of a difference” (pg 3). Other studies talk about how children feel and how divorce affects them later during their personal and romantic life. When I was three years old my father packed up his stuff and moved up to Oregon, leaving my mother, nine year old sister J., and myself behind. It is said that father-child relationships can be influenced greatly by living arrangements, which is the case here with my father moving to another state (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). How could we possibly have a strong relationship with him if he moved away? I was young when the divorce happened so I focused on toddler research and how young children are affected by divorce; however, I was also able to relate the research on older children to J.. We have both noticed many effects of having a father who lived far away for the majority of our childhood. When doing research I was able to find many articles that related to my childhood and my young adulthood.

 The first memory I have of my childhood is the night that my father left. I do not remember much after that until later in life, but I specifically remember all the details of that night, waking up, seeing his truck packed up, and waving as he drove away. After that night my J. and I would only see him on certain holidays, and during the summer. Those first few years of life are crucial times when children are forming attachments and relationships, learning how to communicate with others, and learning the ways of the world (Leon, 2004). With a father who was rarely there during the important times in my early years of life it was apparent that I would have some problems. “During childhood, it is largely the father, not the child, who determines the frequency of the contact that will be present in their relationship” (Peters & Ehrenberg, pg 102), my father was nowhere near me to be there and form attachments.

 Growing up I used to tell people that I did not have a father, I would write to a pen pal in class and the letter was passed onto my mother who had to explain to me that I did have a father, but that I just did not get to see him very often. In a study on divorce seen by young children, done by Ebling, Pruett, and Pruett, children “paint an inconsistent picture of fathers’ roles in the post-divorce family” and that divorce “left them feeling vulnerable and beleaguered” (pg 11). This was my exact feeling. Did I really even know what a dad was? I would see my cousins with their dad, and friends with their dad’s, but to me, I knew that he existed, yet I referred to myself as not having a dad.

It is said in an article by Peters and Ehrenberg, in the *Journal of divorce and remarriage,* that a mother’s involvement plays a strong role on the father-child relationship. If the mother is open to the children having a strong relationship with the father then there are better chances of the children having a bond with their father. My mother used to try her hardest to make sure that we were still able to talk to him and see him. She would take us to the store so we could send him cards and every Christmas morning when we were sleeping she would arrange for my dad to come so that when we woke up in the morning he was there on the couch. I cannot remember a time when I was young that I heard my mother say any bad things about my dad. I am sure she was thinking and feeling them, but she did not want to put thoughts like that into our heads. Both my mother and father tried to keep my sister and me out of the divorce. They would not bad talk the other when we were around which I am extremely grateful for.

When in Oregon my dad remarried and eventually when I was about 11 moved back to California. At this point I was heavily involved in dance classes and sports at school and he was still living almost 2 hours away. I did see him more, but still not enough to have a strong relationship with him. When I was with him though I wanted to do everything he did. If he was outside working, then I was out working right next to him. If he was changing the oil in the car then I was laying right beside him under the car. It is said in the article on father-child relationships that fathers maintain a stronger relationship with sons after divorce than they do with daughters because they have more in common with them such as sports and outdoor activities (Peters & Ehrenberg). I think this is why I was always doing outdoor activities with my dad. I figured that if I was interested in doing things that he was doing then he would want to hang out with me more. It was in a sense a form of acceptance to me. I still wanted to be daddy’s little girl, and was determined to try to change him. It did not work and half the time I would leave his house crying or upset.

As I got a little older my feelings towards him started to change. I was no longer confused as to where he was. I was now getting angrier that he was not around. I had a very good friend in high school and was at her house almost every day. When she was 11 her father died of cancer. Her mother remarried an amazing guy who took in her family like they were his own. One day I can remember that really got to me was when she told me how sorry she was that my dad was not around. For someone whose father had died to tell me that really got to me, but throughout the years her step father was there for me when I needed that father figure or if I needed an older males advice he was there for me to call or go talk to. I would learn what it was like to have a male in the family through him with the “social learning theory…that behavior can be learned through observing the actions of others” (Cui & Fincham, 2010). Throughout this period of my life my mother was there for my sister and me whenever we needed anything. Leon says that “The most important thing you can do is to continue to nurture your child and provide structure for him or her” (pg 5). My mother did just that. She worked five sometimes seven days a week to ensure that my J. and I were able to receive the things that we needed to get a good education and have a strong successful future.

 A lot of things changed when I was 13 and my step-mom became pregnant by another man. She had a boy, R., and my father has raised him as if he were his own son. I do not think my relationship would have been much different if it was my dad’s child, but it was not. They are divorced now and my dad has R. fly down at least once a month if not more, and on holidays and over the summer, and will fly up to Oregon where he lives to see him. This has caused many issues with my father, J., and me. We feel a lot of the time like we were the forgotten children receiving “less nurturance and emotional involvement from [our] father” (Peters & Ehrenberg 2008). It does not make sense to us why he would spend so much time and give a child that is not biologically his so much love and affection and then completely disregard J. and myself, who are his own biological children. There were a handful of times when he would take us camping, or take me to my father daughter dance, but then not be there for a while, leaving me with mixed thoughts and feelings about how he felt. It was like he would get my hopes up when we were together doing family things, only to smash them harder every time he did not follow through and keep it up. It is still to this day a constant struggle to get him to want to spend time with us or to make the time to spend with us because in his eyes since we are grown up now we do not need him to be there. In my eyes though, I never had him growing up, so I still need him in life now, and will always want him in my life.

 Being a child of a divorced family has affected my personal relationships immensely. My father left me when I was only three years old, meaning that growing up I never had a male figure in my life. When I started dating I noticed that I would tend to try to fill that void in my life. Dating was also hard because I did not know what to think or expect. I did not ever experience a “father’s ability to teach through examples, to express love and affection openly, and to be encouraging and supportive” (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). He was there every once and a while to visit with, and I was able to talk to him on the phone, but it is just not the same as having him there every day to come home to. When my relationships with boys started to get more serious I noticed that I would get more anxiety. I would fear that I would let this male figure get close to me and then they would walk out on me. It takes me a very long time to trust someone enough to let myself get close to them because if my own father could walk out on me then why wouldn’t some boy that I am dating? I am starting to get better, but I still get myself worked up from time to time and I just have to take deep breaths. Contrary to a research study done by Cui and Fincham (2010), I do not have commitment issues and I am not afraid to get married because of the fear of divorce. Because I am not afraid of marriage, I do not see divorce as a solution to my problems. I think that I may not be afraid because in the research study the children were older and witnessed their parents married and divorced, whereas I only remember my parents divorced. Since I did not see them when they were struggling with marriage I do not have anything bad to think about when thinking of marriage. I look towards the marriages that I know are successful and think of that instead.

 When I think about my own family and what I want I think about everything that I had and didn’t have and how on a weekly basis I am calling my mother upset about something that has happened with my father that made me upset or disappointed. When I am married I do not plan on divorcing. If there is a problem I will try my hardest to work through it because the last thing I ever want to do is put my children through what J. and I have had to go through. I do not want my children to wonder what life would have been like if their parents were still together, or have to go to mom’s house for Christmas, but have Easter with dad. I want us to be able to pack up the car on the weekends and go on little adventures to the beach, snow, or camping, all as a family. I do not want my children to miss out on summer activities and birthday parties because they are with their father in another state. Lastly, I want my family to be the one that other people look at and say that’s how a family should be, not the family they look at and feel bad for.

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