

## **Why Dads Don't Talk**

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**by Deborah Tannen**

As telephones ring across the country today, bringing adult children's voices saying "Happy Father's Day," many fathers will feel a special thrill -- but also a special challenge. Since the calls are for them, they won't be able to hand the receiver off in a wink with a habitual, if generous, "Wait a minute. I'll get Mom."

With telephone calls, as with in-person conversations with children of all ages, Mother is often Communication Central, relaying messages like "Your father is upset with you" or "Your father is really pleased that you're here."

There are many reasons why mothers are often pressed into service as chief of communications, and fathers are often out of the talk loop. One is fathers' traditional breadwinner role, which keeps them at work long hours and makes them feel that work is their primary responsibility. Another reason -- a related and, I suspect, overriding one -- is that women and men, while growing up, learned different habits for using talk in relationships.

The assumption that intimacy is created through talk is far more common among girls, for whom a best friend is the one you tell everything to. Among boys, a best friend is the one you do everything with -- or, among men, the one you can count on to remain loyal whether or not you have recently talked.

That concept of what forms the bedrock of close relationships carries over into how men interact with their children. Many fathers show caring by doing things like fixing a bike or by working hard outside the home.

I saw this in my own father when I finally told him (he was in his 80s) how much I had missed him as a child -- and how much I envied my older sister because he spent more time at home when she was small, during the Depression. He responded by saying how glad he was that he was able to work long hours and support a large family by the time I was born.

Many parents are moving away from the traditional separation of labor that kept mothers at home with the kids and designated fathers as sole breadwinners. But communication habits are harder to change.

### **Family roles**

I once asked a large class of college students whom they talk to when they call home. The vast majority said their mothers. Their fathers, they said, would get on the phone only if there was some business to talk about, like a tuition payment that didn't arrive or a request for money. Many fathers seem to feel they should yield the conversational right of way to mothers.

My father certainly feels that way. When I call my parents, my mother usually answers the phone. Typically, we have long, chatty conversations about what we've both been up to; what's happening with

various relatives and friends; how she's been feeling and why.

But if my father answers the phone, he quickly says, "I'll tell mother you're on the phone. She'll be so happy to hear from you." He calls to her and she picks up an extension. It's not long before I realize that I haven't heard his voice for a while because he has hung up.

I don't know if my father disappears because he isn't interested in what my mother and I talk about, or because he feels he isn't needed in the conversation, or because he feels my mother gets first dibs on talking to me. I do know that if I happen to call when my mother is not home, he will talk at length.

Why do so many men defer to women in conversations with adult children? One reason may be that's what they did when the children were young.

In my childhood home, the strongest presence was my father's absence. Many people recall their fathers as absent -- away at work, or away at home: in a workshop, garage or study, or sitting before the television. But even if they were physically present, fathers are often remembered as silent.

One clue to this mystery emerged in a comment one of my students made. She said that when her parents divorced, her father began calling her to get the news directly that he used to get secondhand through her mother. In other words, it's not necessarily that fathers have no wish to talk to their children; it may be that they find it easier to rely on their wives to collect information and pass it on. It may also be that fathers don't know how to get into the kinds of conversations mothers have with children -- especially daughters.

## Comfort levels

Women's and men's different conversational habits may help explain the experience of one of my friends who has two adult children, a son and a daughter. He said he kept up with what was happening in both his children's lives through his daughter. Not only did he feel more comfortable talking to his daughter about personal matters, but so did his son.

In other words, one of the reasons that mothers serve as the family communicator is that many men, as well as women, feel more comfortable talking about personal matters to women. And that may be because men have less practice -- and are less comfortable -- with conversations that involve strong emotions.

I caught a glimpse of this reluctance in my father. Some years ago, at the invitation of the McCarter Theater in Princeton, N.J., I wrote a play that juxtaposed my father's memories of his childhood in Poland with my memories of my childhood with him. When it was finished, I read the play aloud to my parents in their living room.

My mother sat beside me on the couch. My father sat on an upholstered chair at the end of the couch. When I finished reading, my mother, weeping, threw her arms around me, telling me how wonderful she found the play -- and me. My father began talking about something else.

I was stunned. The play was about his life, and he didn't seem to care. But the next day he wrote me a letter telling me how moved he was, and explaining that he changed the subject because he didn't want to show his emotions. His emotions were exactly what I had wanted to see, but he had learned over a lifetime that being a man meant hiding his feelings.

Though more and more men are resisting the cultural injunction against showing emotion, we can't count on our culture and its messages about manliness changing overnight. But we can at least be glad that a

technological advance -- e-mail -- may be easing communication for men of all ages.

I am very lucky to still have my father with me as he nears 93, and that we have been able to take advantage of this alternate pathway to communication. My father began using e-mail at 90, and it has magically knocked down two big walls between us. E-mail provides a direct line to my father, one that doesn't interfere with the long telephone conversations I still have with my mother. I have also found that I can be as mushy as I like in writing, and he responds in kind.

In researching my most recent book, on family communication, I found that many others had similar experiences.

Why would some men find it easier to engage in personal exchanges by e-mail? I suspect it's a combination of the technology (which many enjoy) and the obliqueness of the written word. Many men reveal feelings in dribs and drabs while riding in a car or doing something, which they'd never talk about sitting face to face -- a situation that feels too intense, too bearing-down on them.

Furthermore, once you're in a live, tell-all conversation -- either in person or by phone -- it's hard to call it off. With a computer in between, it's safer: You say just as much as you want to say, then press SEND.

So on this Father's Day, adult children looking to get closer to their dads might consider e-mailing, or calling home sometimes when Mother isn't there. Others might consider doing things with their fathers instead of trying to sit and talk.

Fathers who wish they'd talked more with their children might bear in mind that it's never too late. I have found my father's aging to be a gift. My father old has time for me as my father young did not.