

3 Questions a Dad Might Not Have the Courage to Ask His Daughter

Since the launch of the book *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, I've been using John Gray's terminology to describe my awareness that I live on Venus and you, dad, live on Mars. Truth be told, I've been "planet hopping" these past six years since the launch of The Abba Project.

And the more traveling I do between our respective planets, the more I've sought to transport observations from life on your sphere back to mine. And vice versa.

One of the observations I've collected is something that I've discovered about many men. Essentially it's that you are often motivated by crisis or need. Stated otherwise: "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

I think we're all wired a bit that way, in all honesty.

Case in point. My mom is almost 80 years old and was still working as an RN at the VA (Veterans Affairs) just a year ago. As a vibrant and active woman she has always made time for exercise, walking five days a week for an hour or so. But then last February she started noticing a slight shortness of breath so figured she'd better have things checked out. This started the fastball rolling when my dad rushed her to the ER one night. Four days later she was in emergency open-heart surgery.

Her surgeon said he'd performed 14,000 heart surgeries during his career and had never seen an aortic valve so calcified—86 percent. The question then became: How could my mom have been so active and in seemingly fine health with that much blockage to her heart?

Answer: Things had gradually been taking place in her body such that she had acclimated to the changes over time. And because there hadn't been a crisis, there was no motivation to explore the apparent minor signs and symptoms.

But reality suddenly became clear when the crisis arose. It was the crisis that changed everything. It would have been so much better had she tuned into the warning signs before it got to the desperation-emergency-almost-lost-her point.

But that's the way most of us are, don't you think? Again, if it ain't broke, don't check it out or tune in to it or fix it.

Dad, I share that story to highlight that sometimes it's the same way with your daughter (and son, of course). It may seem like things are fine. It may seem like there's not a crisis or a need because she seems OK and hasn't gotten into trouble or given you cause for concern. Or maybe she's been a great kid who follows the rules, gets fantastic grades, and hasn't rebelled. So you assume she's all good and that she'll stay that way.

I want to suggest being proactive rather than reactive. I want to suggest attending to her overall heart health now rather than waiting until there's a crisis. I want to suggest getting close enough to hear her words and listen to what she's *really* saying, to look in her eyes and see how she's *really* doing.

Why not take the time now to tune in by taking steps to "connect with her insides" (. her heart—and her mind, thoughts, ideas, fears, doubts, wonderings, questions, opinions, needs, longings, feelings, dreams, etc.) rather than risking the potential of emergency treatment down the road? At that desperation point it's ten times harder to get a handle on things.

After all, isn't this what you do with your medical and dental health? You go for your annual physical or bi-annual

prophylaxis—teeth cleaning (can you tell I was a dental assistant for 19 years?!). I'm encouraging you to take the same type of healthcare steps in relation to your fathering role. Think of it as "preventive maintenance."

To accomplish this goal I have three questions that you can ask your daughter which will allow her to weigh in on how you're doing as her dad. This may be scary to ask but I challenge you to do it anyway.

Your daughter may or may not be honest with you, but you can still invite her to respond. She may not feel safe to answer if she fears your reaction. Promise her that you won't blow up in anger or get defensive. Tell her that you truly want to hear her heart. If she doesn't have the courage to tell you her thoughts face to face, suggest that she write her response or text it to you later.

The key is that you use her as a reference point for evaluation on how you're doing as a dad. Let her be your guide since it's *her heart* you're wanting to connect with and it's *her heart* you want to win.

I don't know if you'll have the courage to ask these questions. I say that not because I don't think you can do it but because oftentimes it's easy to avoid the things we don't want to hear or know. And because you have no control over her answers, coupled with risking vulnerability in order to have an open-ended conversation like this with your daughter, I realize that it could easily be dismissed. Expect to have every reason in the book NOT to initiate this conversation.

Yet I guarantee that you will have a better, stronger, healthier, and more vibrant relationship with your daughter if you ask these three questions a minimum of once a year (option: meet every six months to re-evaluate).

Are you in? Here's your script should you dare to accept this challenge!

Why not take your daughter on a date and ask:

- How am I doing as your dad?
- On a 0 to 10 scale, what rating would you give me (with 10 being the best)?
- In your eyes, what could I work on to be a better dad to you?

I'd love to hear from you after you ask your daughter these questions. Write me at drmichellewatson@.

- Was it as hard as you thought it would be?
- Did she say what you thought she would say?
- Did you learn anything about yourself after hearing what she told you?
- Did she give you feedback that you can actually use to change course with her and better connect with her needs and heart space?

Dr. Michelle Watson has a clinical counseling practice in Portland, Oregon, and has served in that role for the past 17 years. She is founder of The Abba Project, a 9-month group forum that is designed to equip dads with daughters ages 13 to 30 to dial in with more intention and consistency, and has recently released her first book entitled, *Dad, Here's What I Really Need from You: A Guide for Connecting with Your Daughter's Heart*. She invites you to visit for more information and to sign up for her weekly Dad-Daughter Friday blogs, where she provides practical tools so that every dad in America can become the action hero they want to be and their daughters need them to be. You can also follow or send feedback on Facebook and Twitter.

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