

Daughters: Winning Their Hearts vs. Winning an Argument

A couple of years ago my friend Steve said something that blew me away and has stayed with me ever since. In fact, it's so good that I asked if I could both quote him and interview him.

Quick backstory: Two years ago, Steve's daughter Maddie was just heading into her teen years (a reality that proved to be a more of a daunting challenge than dad had anticipated), and he was strongly invested in learning how to relate better to his ever-changing and maturing girl. It was during our conversation that the following words rolled effortlessly off his tongue:

"It's more important that I win her heart than win an argument."

Does that hit you like it did me? Win her heart rather than an argument. Wow. Powerful.

In that moment I said, *"Steve, if every dad in America understood that concept it would literally change the trajectory of relationships between dads and their daughters because fathers wouldn't pull 'the power card' but would instead seek to understand their daughter's heart needs in a proactive way."*

I loved hearing this courageous dad, guided by humility, say that it matters less that he is right, especially if it means he is trampling on his daughter's heart in the process of holding to that position (and by "heart" I am describing the place where her emotions, dreams, passions, visions and ideas converge).

So here we are, two years later, and Maddie is now in her first year of high school. Dad and daughter are still navigating the topsy-turvy, unpredictable road between independence and dependence, freedom and boundaries, rules and responsibilities, distance and connection.

Some days are better than others, but their love is consistent even when "the dance" isn't.

I asked Steve a few probing questions to further clarify what he meant by his profound quote. I believe you'll appreciate the authenticity of his responses because he's a dad in the trenches just like you.

1. Steve, how do you go about winning Maddie's heart? *I'm sitting here asking myself why I pause when trying to codify how I go about winning Maddie's heart. I wonder aloud (nobody can hear me): Am I afraid? Am I reluctant because I know that I fail so many times trying to win her heart? Who am I to try and suggest that I know the first thing about winning Maddie's heart—when in fact I feel like I fail more times than I don't?*

Even yesterday I said to my wife: "This trying to be a dialed-in dad thing is hard. It would be so much easier to just unplug and chuck it!" No joke.

But this morning, here's what I wrote in my journal ... "Jesus, help me to know how, what and when to coach Maddie. Help me to know how, what and when to close my mouth. Help me to know how, what for and when to be strong for her. And help me to know how, what for and when to just be with her."

You'd have to have been in our home to know the details ... and frankly, I'm not sure I get all the details. But the one detail I do know: I love this little lady! I won't quit ... even when failure seems like my default.

2. What works to win her heart and what doesn't? *My No. 1 strategy to winning her heart: I ... Won't ... Quit. She is my*

little girl, entrusted to me—her daddy. And I will fight for her heart. I cannot demand it. But I will remain engaged ... even when all the chaos of life collides with my visions of what it was like when she was 4, 5, 6 – with her raspy little Lauren Bacall voice.

When I see the beauty that stands before me, in all of her “I am my own person”—I am in awe, this is my little girl, becoming a woman and I get the privilege of being present—I’ll take it. I will clumsily keep trying. I’m going to stay in the game—for her, for me, for her mom, for us ... for her husband.

3. Do you have any other strategies for pursuing your daughter’s heart? My No. 2 strategy to winning her heart—I apologize. I’m broken. I don’t do everything right. I make mistakes. At times I want a do-over. I’m humbled to be her daddy. Pride has no business in being a dad. Let my humility be the measure of the strength of my love. (This is not a pushover kind of thing...)

My No. 3 strategy: I am not afraid to be silly. Humiliation—ha ... bring on the silly—for her sake. Never to humiliate her, but I will cherish the laughter—and Maddie can laugh.

My No. 4 strategy: I will guard her heart— I will fight for her. I’ll do this (hopefully) with a heart of peace toward others, but I will stand up for her, beside her. We will empower her to be an advocate for herself—but I will protect her.

Maybe I’m going off topic here ... but I will make the first move to restore our relationship. I know that I have to be the leader here.

I will see her as a person and not a problem. ... not a problem child ... not a child with “girl problems...” I will tell her “no”—when it’s the right thing to say—even when I assume she is displeased.

4. How do you ground yourself when Maddie escalates emotionally? *Great question. ... What is my ideal, aspirational approach? I recognize that she needs me to stay engaged with her as a person. That she knows that there is nothing that she can do that will change the fact that I love her! I tell her this—when things escalate. Honestly, because when emotions climb and reality distorts (in all of us) I want to ground us with the truth—I love her.*

5. How do you keep yourself from giving into anger when the situation is intensifying? *Well, I fail sometimes. My anger can look much more passive aggressive than expressive. I try to recognize when I slip over to anger and may have to suggest we come back around. I care more about her than being right, and we'll figure the rest out.*

I've seen anger drive kids away; this was my own experience. It was amazing what it did to melt away years of hurt when my dad said, "I never looked at it from your perspective." We are very careful with what we do, or say, in anger ... I recognize it in myself and try to check it, or listen to my bride when anger pokes its head out.

6. Do you have any input for other dads of daughters? *Pride ... dude, you are a Daddy. Bask in the self-evident pride that comes prescribed with being the dad of a daughter. Celebrate her, champion her, empower her—and watch her fly. And be sure that you are the soft place she can come to when the world pushes off on her strengths and gifts, and tramples on her scars and weaknesses. Come on, you're her daddy.*

7. Are there last thoughts you'd like to add? *I know that I'm a gloriously flawed dad—and trying to say how well I do at winning her heart? ... no trophies here. But one thing I do is pray for my daughter to recognize that she need not carry the burdens of the world, her school, her friends ... but also not to ignore her bent towards leadership, justice and a deep sense of empathy. I want to put a bubble around her to guard*

her heart, but I also want her to work out that powerful muscle and grow in her sense of right and wrong, a voice for the marginalized and a defender of the weak.

Being a dad is messy. But I am her daddy ... she gets one of me, and I'm humbled to be her daddy.

Thank you, Steve, for opening up and letting us see into your experience. You have reminded dads of daughters everywhere that it's not about being perfect, but it's about staying attentive to the changing tapestry of your daughter's life.

Thank you for your vulnerability, as you've modeled the importance of being real with your girl—whether you're apologizing and asking forgiveness or being silly and making her laugh.

And last, thank you for letting us see into your heart space as a dad who is proud of his daughter and wants the world to know it. Thank you for teaching dads that winning an argument lasts only minutes while winning your daughter's heart lasts a lifetime.

Dads, why not choose one insight that Steve shared today about winning the heart of his girl and put it into action with your daughter today? {eoa}

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

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