

DAUGHTERS, FATHERS,
AND THE CHANGING
AMERICAN FAMILY

Our Fathers, Ourselves

DR. PEGGY DREXLER

"A fascinating journey into the world of fathers and daughters—a place at once familiar and fraught with mystery. *Our Fathers, Ourselves* will give you a whole new understanding of the man you call 'Dad.'" —ARIANNA HUFFINGTON

This page, from left: Dr. Peggy Drexler; Drexler's new book, Our Fathers, Ourselves. Opposite: Peggy Drexler's daughter and husband, Katherine and Mickey Drexler, to whom she dedicated her new book.

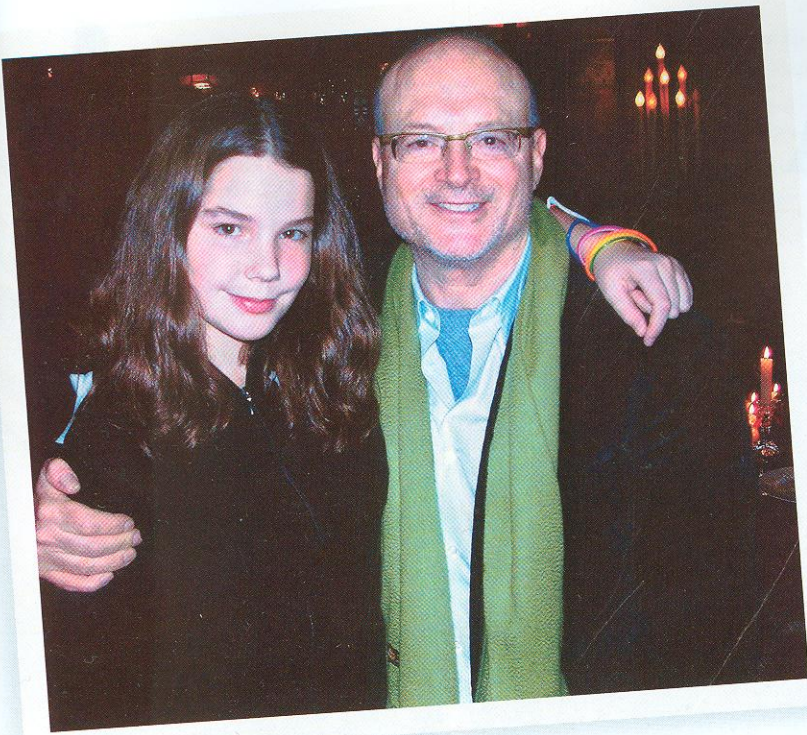
A CONVERSATION WITH DR. PEGGY DREXLER

Q: You mention early in the introduction that your father died when you were three—before you could remember him. What led you to write about the father-daughter relationship?

A: There is certainly a connection between losing my father at such a young age and my book. I've always had an interest in families. You don't have to root around too deeply in my psychological makeup to connect the dots between not having what I considered to be a "normal" family and trying to understand what families are and how they work. It played a part in getting my Ph.D. in psychology, my work in gender studies, and my first book, *Raising Boys Without Men*. That book was a validation of sorts. I found very happy, very suc-

cessful families being headed by one woman, or two women. I saw the outstanding boys they were raising. I saw successful, normal families that defied the old, rigid definitions.

In this book, I wanted to flip the perspective—instead of mothers raising sons, I wanted to explore fathers raising daughters. It's an age-old relationship that has been subjected to uncharted forces. No matter where you look—education, sports, jobs—women are out in the world in numbers equal to men. They are competing and winning in all walks of life. All of that is very different from the times when the father's main job was to protect his daughter, and prepare her for the hand-off to another man. At the same time, because of the economy and



because of the explosion of female choice and opportunity, the father is no longer the unquestioned lawgiver in the household.

We think we know all there is to know about the father-daughter bond but, in fact, it is growing and changing. The worlds of fathers and daughters are more alike than at any time in history. The hope and attention that once went mainly to sons, now goes to both genders. I thought it was time to revisit the relationship, and look at it in a new context.

Q: What do you think binds fathers and daughters in their unique relationship?

A: The research is clear and consistent that fathers are the first way in which daughters learn about men—good men, loving men, indifferent men, bad men, absent men. The relationship with her father is a living classroom. It's either a great help in forming healthy relationships with men, or it can be a great hindrance. All fathers need to understand how powerful they are in shaping their daughter's confidence and expectations with men. It's not a deal-breaker when he's absent, but a healthy father-daughter relationship is a running start to healthy self-esteem. I met women with distant or absent fathers, for example, who told me they had trouble flirting with men, or even with normal banter at work. They simply didn't have the practice growing up. They didn't have that first man in their life.

Some women were treated with respect, even gallantry, by their fathers, and they demanded nothing less from the other men in their lives. Conversely, some were treated with insensitivity, or even emotional cruelty. And their attitude is: "Been there. Won't do it again." Sadly, there were those who followed the classic assumption that women will seek to repeat what they experienced growing up.

The most appropriate bond is one woven out of unquestioned love, consistency, high expectations, and a lot of hands-on participation. Even though it's far short of the tragedy of abuse, there is also real damage done by emotional

distance and indifference. Girls see themselves through the eyes of their fathers and what they see is a tremendous factor in self-worth.

Q: Who stood out most in your case studies?

A: First of all, every woman had "daddy's girl" issues. No matter how successful or how content they feel in their marriages and families, women—despite everything they have achieved—still have not liberated themselves from the need for daddy's approval. Regardless of whether they had a great dad, no dad, or a bad dad, virtually all longed for their father's support and appreciation. Even when a father was badly flawed, I still found a reservoir of hope and belief that the relationship could be repaired. I was also surprised to find that, even in a great marriage with a loving and stable husband, a woman's relationship with her own father can cloud how she views the relationship between her daughter and her husband.

Q: What do you hope a reader will take away from the book?

A: I hope that they feel this is a book about them—real women, real lives, real issues. If they can connect with the stories of the women in my book, then they may be able to better connect with the relationship they have with their own fathers. By doing that, I hope they come to realize that a great father-daughter relationship is not automatic. Like any relationship, it sometimes takes work, patience, and perspective—even forgiveness.

Q: This book is not just for fathers, but mothers, too. What is the most important lesson you would offer to them?

A: Don't feel left out. Because the world of fathers and daughters is moving closer together, it in no way means that the world of mothers and daughters is moving farther apart. It's just that some of the old and sometimes hurtful lines of gender demarcation have fallen.

It's not always easy. I remember a few months when my husband was between companies. He started to do what I considered "my job" with our daughter—like rides to school, and shopping. I couldn't help feeling a little resentful. He was on my turf, and he was good at it. But I think we all have to encourage that kind of closeness; not be threatened by it. It's a partnership, and one of the partners has the chance to be more to a daughter than fathers might have been in the past.

Q: You dedicated your book to your husband, for helping your daughter become the woman she is. How did their relationship serve as inspiration for you?

A: He's a great father, and that is something to celebrate and treasure. In a sense, I was dedicating the book to all the great fathers. I can see him in her in so many ways. I can connect the time he has spent with her with the woman she is. But there is a twist in my case. Having lost my father so young, I spent a lot of time wishing and wondering—what would it be like to have a father always there, always in my corner? What's it like to have that unconditional love? I get to experience that every day. ♦