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Walk Carefully, Dad. Your Daughter is Watching

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Its been a bad couple months for fathers and daughters.

There is Rudy Giuliani, whose daughter refuses to even talk about him (and a son who says he won't campaign or even vote for him). There is the cringe-inducing Alec Baldwin voice mail meltdown. And the sad spectacle of a crawling-drunk David Hasselhoff, struggling with the mechanics of hitting his mouth with a hamburger, as his daughter videotaped it all while begging him to stop drinking.

Pure gold for the tabloids, but as a psychologist and someone who lost her own father at the age of three, I've been thinking a lot about the girls.

Hasselhoff can say that was three months ago, and he's fine now. Baldwin can say it's all just parental alienation and that even though he called his 12-year old daughter a "thoughtless little pig", their relationship is just fine.

Sorry, fellas. You might think things are okay and that the relationships are fine. But in corrosive encounters like these between dads and daughters, the girls never walk away unscathed. They move on. But they don't forget.

I've seen it in the relationship problems of the hundreds of young women who have passed though my office. I've heard it in the hundreds of hours of interviews I've conducted for a book on fathers and daughters.

The father-daughter dance is as delicate as it is charged with meaning.

You can argue the myth or reality that the first man the daughter falls in love with is her dad; or that girls look for their fathers in the husbands they choose. That is often true. But just as often, it's not.

What you can say with far more certainty is that a father is the first man a daughter gets to know on intimate terms. And the idealization of daddy is very real. In my case - and many girls who grew up without fathers - I invented one. He was perfect.

Dads aren't perfect. But for a time, they need to appear that way. There is plenty of time for reality later.

That idealization stage is critical for a girl's view of the mysterious XY side of the chromosomal divide. It shows a girl that men are loving, caring, strong and protective; totally, completely and unequivocally in her camp. Or it shows her something else.

When a father's imperfections become blazingly apparent early on -- such as hearing him call you a pig - it warps a young girl's sense of place and security. She is left to try to make sense of dad's behavior. He doesn't love me enough to stop drinking. I must have done something horrible (or be something horrible) to make him say such mean things to me. If he can be like this to my mother, will he be like this to me?

There is a sad irony here. As girls rush on to playing fields and into business, there is a new opportunity for a whole new kind of father-daughter bond. The traditional role of provider and protector has evolved, potentially at least, into a much richer job description: friend, coach and mentor. Daughters know that. They see it all around them. So when a father squanders this new opportunity, the pain is now even greater. Girls are supposed to want to spend time with their dads. When they can't, confusion deepens and guilt sets in.

So, to fathers everywhere: be who you are, do what you will. But don't fool yourself. Your daughters are watching your every move. And chances are very good that what they see will play a big role in the woman they become.