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Daughters, Dads and Domination

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There are many childhood moments for dads and daughters -- the final push in the first solo bike ride, executing a corner kick, learning to Parallel Park. In all of these, the father is the patient teacher, the daughter the wide-eyed apprentice.

What happens to time-calibrated roles when a daughter has to make life choices that are a bit more complex, personal and lasting than "keep the handlebars steady, and don't stop peddling?"

For many high-achieving women in my study of the changing relationship between daughters and fathers, the transition can be difficult. They find themselves walking the often thread-thin divide between contribution and control. Some maintain their equilibrium, others don't.

Without the precise balance of contribution and independence, however, women may find -- instead of a pathway to the benefits of experience -- a constriction that cuts off the oxygen to their own plans and dreams.

Margo, a litigator for a major Chicago law firm, said "my father came from a poor background; his father died when he was seven. So he wanted more than that for me. He pushed me hard toward medicine or law. He even picked out my first year courses in college. I ended up choosing law -- although I guess you can't really call it a choice."

It was, as things turned out, a less than perfect fit. Even though she commands an excellent salary -- more in a year than her father made in five -- she is keeping brutal hours on the partner track, doing work she finds unfulfilling. "My cases are big, boring, and they can go on for years," she said. "I think Sisyphus might have been a lawyer. I spend all year pushing a case up the hill, then there is an appeal, and it rolls right back down again."

Her mother, she said, was a teacher -- a profession her father told her from childhood wasn't good enough for her. "But I think I would like it," she said. "I think I could be good at it. Besides, I want to have kids someday. I don't see that happening with the hours I work now. Some days, I really feel like I'm living somebody else's life. But I've put so much into this; it's hard to simply abandon it. Besides, it would just about kill my dad. He is very proud of what we've accomplished."

Jessica, a fast-track manager in a computer-services firm, has a different issue. It's not that her father believes she is too good. It's that she is never good enough. He is her most loyal supporter and most relentless critic.

"He has always been my role model," she said. "We talk almost every day. He wants the best for me. He believes in me. But it seems like all I hear is criticism -- that I'm not working hard enough, that I need to lose weight, that I need to demand more challenging assignments. He even tells me I don't have enough friends. He has this ability to make me feel powerful, and then awful," she confided. "The bad feelings seem to stay around longer than the good ones. I take his opinion seriously. When he is hypercritical, I just take it to heart so much."

Women who find themselves on the wrong side of the divide between unconditional support and uncompromising control must stake a claim to their territory -- and defend it. They must be focused on their goals, but clear about whose goals they really are. They must be unafraid of conflict. They must accept advice, but reject direct orders. They must live their own lives on their own terms. In other words, they must be exactly the women their fathers raised them to be.

*The data I compiled and the patterns I've observed are presented as collective experiences. I have honored the confidentiality I promised, by changing names and disguising identities.