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What Can I Do?

A SERIES TO HELP UTAHNS ENGAGE



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What Utah Fathers Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Their Daughters

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP
Project

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide specific answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP)** hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah girls and women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2019 gathering of 25 fathers who are raising school-aged daughters in Utah. Knowing that fathers profoundly affect their daughters’ growth and development throughout the years, their discussion focused on culture, family dynamics, personal development, confidence and resilience, and education and career preparation.

CULTURE

Utah fathers recognize the strong influence local culture can have on the way their daughters develop their sense of self. The state’s distinct environment, with its own set of social norms, can affect girls and young women in both positive and negative ways. Fathers can work to support their daughters’ efforts to navigate cultural influences by doing the following:

- Make conscious efforts to be more aware of the messages girls and women receive about roles, stereotypes, biases, limitations, self-worth, values, and confidence; discuss these messages with daughters and work together to minimize harmful effects.
- Examine their own unconscious biases and how these may be affecting their daughters, including differences in how they treat daughters versus sons.
- Treat all girls and women with dignity and respect; teach daughters what they have the right to expect.

- Identify and celebrate strong role models for girls and women (from literature, popular culture, personal networks, and the larger community).
- Find opportunities for daughters to be exposed to other cultures, people, and places, to help them see the great diversity among girls and women in various environments and contexts.
- Pay attention to and avoid gender distinctions that have no real meaning (e.g., different toys, different types of activities for boys and girls); expose girls to a wide range of opportunities and experiences so they can personally discover what they love; empower girls to be true to themselves.
- Work to combat the pervasive messages girls receive about the “ideal” body type and the objectification/sexualization of girls and women. Discuss ways girls can reject these pressures and emphasize that their value doesn’t come from their looks.
- Demonstrate open-mindedness when it comes to other girls’ and women’s choices and behaviors; avoid judging and recognize there are many pathways to creating a successful life.

FAMILY DYNAMICS

As fathers interact with daughters and other family members within the home, they can contribute to positive attitudes and behaviors that support the growth and development of girls and young women:

- Be an ally for daughters in all areas, but especially in advocating for them when it comes to gender equity. Girls will appreciate fathers who “talk the talk” but also “walk the walk.”
- Spend time with daughters: listen to them, share ideas and advice when needed, prioritize unstructured time, and participate in things they enjoy.
- Treat daughters as individuals, and ensure they know they are unconditionally loved and accepted.
- Model flexibility and balance when it comes to responsibilities within the home (e.g., dads participating in caregiving, moms showing leadership and public engagement); ensure children understand that in many families, these roles are fluid and shift over the years.
- Eliminate gender distinctions when it comes to chores and other responsibilities and allowance/pay for work (it is common to pay for work typically done by boys, but not the work girls often perform).
- Work to create a home culture of financial equality, where men, women, boys, and girls all have the chance to learn about the family economy and make decisions about money.
- Give daughters the chance to set, work toward, and achieve goals, recognizing that confidence grows through action, effort, and hard work.
- Create a safe space for daughters to actually fail (not just learn about failure theoretically) and celebrate the learning that follows; hold them accountable for their mistakes and help them develop the grit that comes through trial, perseverance, and reflection.
- Help girls learn to be okay with feeling uncomfortable but avoid the temptation to “break” daughters in the name of teaching them about the real world.
- Challenge daughters to overcome fear and do hard things; avoid the word “can’t,” encourage them not to give up, and foster a growth mindset.
- Lead by example by boldly going after things (successful or not, daughters will benefit by watching the effort and then reflecting on it).

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

One of the greatest ways fathers can strengthen the impact of girls and young women is through providing opportunities for learning and growth. Engaged fathers can do the following:

- Encourage daughters to take the lead in identifying and pursuing their interests and talents (fathers should avoid pushing their own interests on daughters).
- Foster independence by providing opportunities for girls to learn a wide variety of life skills including those that often default to men, such as home repairs, car maintenance, and financial literacy (e.g., debt management, saving, investing).
- Support girls’ intangible learning experiences; teach them emotional intelligence, rational exploration, decision-making skills, flexibility, and adaptability; these skills are best taught by example, followed by opportunities to practice.
- Encourage girls to stretch by seeking activities that involve risk, such as competitive sports, invention or entrepreneurship, speech and debate, academic or artistic competitions, and student government.

CONFIDENCE & RESILIENCE

In addition to supporting their daughters’ personal learning and growth, research shows that fathers play a significant role in helping daughters develop confidence and resilience:

- Be aware of factors that diminish confidence (e.g., focus on physical appearance, rigid gender stereotypes, overuse of social media, perfectionism), and actively work to combat them.

EDUCATION & CAREER PREPARATION

Fathers can serve as powerful role models for their daughters in terms of education and professional preparation. There are numerous ways fathers help their daughters succeed:

- Set expectations for girls from a young age that they should plan to attend and graduate from college; help them realize this goal through ongoing college preparation and financial readiness.
- Build enthusiasm for higher education by taking girls to visit colleges, having them meet with women college students, discussing possible pathways, and helping them save their own money.
- Ensure daughters know they will likely spend many years in the labor force and that education and skills training gives them more and better options for employment.
- Involve daughters in their own professional lives; fathers’ experiences can be very educational for girls.
- Help daughters learn professional skills such as business communication, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, negotiation, and management.
- Expose girls to a wide variety of professions and industries; show them female role models in diverse fields; find opportunities for them to job shadow, intern, and work part-time to explore and learn.

CONCLUSION

Research has repeatedly demonstrated the critical role fathers play in their daughters’ personal, social, emotional, and professional development. As fathers come to a greater understanding of their influence, they can better support their daughters’ growth in all areas of their lives. This will in turn improve the long-term wellbeing of women, men, and families in communities and in the state as a whole.

Utah Women & Leadership Project • www.utwomen.org • uwlp@usu.edu

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