

Dads need to tell sons about health exams, sex and diet. Usually they don't.

By **Eve Glicksman**



April 12, 2020 at 11:00 a.m. EDT

Darrell Sabbs connects with men at focus groups or lunch-and-learns who have mechanics but not doctors. At health fairs, he gives out information about heart disease, cancer prevention, sexual health and other subjects vital to men's wellness.

Sabbs, a community engagement and outreach coordinator for Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital in Albany, Ga., also works with boys who could be their sons — teens whose lives have been upended by accidents, violence, unwanted pregnancies and absent fathers.

"The body doesn't come with an instruction manual," Sabbs says.

If a boy doesn't have a healthy male role model, he probably will act out on instinct and make bad choices when angry, depressed or lonely, Sabbs says.

Hearing advice from Mom isn't the same thing, he says: "Men don't realize the pull and power they have. Some things Momma just can't translate that Dad can."

Households where fathers don't discuss health matters with their sons are more common than you think, says Ryan Berglund, a urologist in the Glickman Urological & Kidney Institute at the Cleveland Clinic.

When he asks men for their health history, he often hears something like this: "My dad died at 75. He had a prostate problem. I think that's what he died of but I'm not sure."

Men often are vague about family health history, Berglund says. This is crucial information for doctors, however.

"Shared genetics is an important data point," he says. Having a father who had prostate cancer doubles a man's risk of getting it. Knowing this, a physician might begin prostate cancer screening for such a patient at an earlier age.

Troubled by this gap in men's knowledge, Berglund and his colleagues launched a [survey](#) in 2017 to find out how many fathers talk to their sons about health. "It can have a substantial impact on outcomes," he says. Heart disease, stroke, diabetes, some cancers, mental illness and high blood pressure all can run in families.

While [70 percent of the 500 men contacted](#) said a father or father figure had discussed health at times while growing up, the conversations typically excluded anything about sex, diet, urological health or annual health exams. Roughly half did not know their family health history before going for their first physical as an adult.

Darryl Davidson, director of the [Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative](#) and coordinator for several [men's programs](#) for the

city, leads courses guiding fathers on how to care for their children's health and their own. One class was a how-to on taking children to the doctor, for instance. How often should they go? What to ask the doctor during the appointment? Information about vaccination schedules, dental care and the like.

Isn't this common sense?

"Not even close," he responds. The men in his free monthly classes did not have fathers who modeled these responsibilities. They don't know what different medical specialists do or how to keep their children safe, he says.

"It can be hard to find the right words to talk about health if your own father didn't talk to you about it," Berglund says. But he reminds fathers that it is less about their discomfort and more about doing the right thing for their sons. Testicular cancer can strike teens at age 15. Fathers should be instructing sons how to do a monthly testicular self-exam while in the shower, Berglund says as an example.

Kids need accurate information to take care of themselves, says Armin Brott, an adviser for [Men's Health Network](#) and [columnist](#) on men's health who provides resources at [Mr. Dad.com](#). "Do you want them digging around on the Internet or getting unreliable information from friends?"

Beyond advising kids to wear a bike helmet or lay off the cheeseburgers, "Dads need to be the ones to tell their sons that it's ok to feel pain or that they don't need to be bleeding to ask for help," Brott says. Boys don't get this message from the culture when sportscasters praise athletes who play through injuries and ignore pain, he says.

Brott suggests that fathers plan pointed conversations about more difficult subjects when watching a movie together. Ask your children whether the character using drugs made good choices. The same approach could be applied when discussing consensual sex, depression or violence.

Mitch Luxenburg, a father of four in Cleveland, understands more than most about being open with his children about health concerns. Now 48, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer at 36 and lost his wife to breast cancer not long before that.

"It's not where we sit down and have lectures," he says, but he redirects them if they aren't eating healthfully or focusing on their mental health.

Luxenburg stresses to his children the need to establish an ongoing relationship with a physician to reap prevention and early detection benefits. In addition, he has told them to seek second medical opinions. Luxenburg's signs of cancer were missed by the first doctor he saw. Knowing his dad had prostate cancer, though, he was "on the lookout for this issue" and consulted a second physician who confirmed his hunch and started successful treatment promptly.

Latrice Rollins, assistant professor of community health and preventive medicine at Morehouse School of Medicine, studies fatherhood and the particular health issues of African American men. Black men have a greater incidence and higher mortality rate than white men for conditions including stroke, many cancers, heart disease, AIDs, diabetes and homicide.

Fathers are "an underutilized resource" in stopping the cycle of racial health disparities, she says. Educating sons about their heightened health risks as African American men could go a long way toward prevention and early treatment.

One obstacle is that men are notoriously reluctant to ask for directions — or any other help. "Men don't tend to reach out or seek resources that can benefit them," Rollins says, despite a wealth of free health information available online or through community health organizations.

But today's fathers are doing better, the Cleveland Clinic survey found. Millennial fathers were more likely to have conversations with their sons about health than dads of previous generations, the data showed.

"Our fathers didn't talk about feelings, emotions or health," says Luxenburg, a Gen Xer. "We have to make sure we don't repeat their mistakes."

Posting as SilverSpring31

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TreeLady 10 months ago

Women tend to be told only the essentials to manage menstruation. Neither of my parents ever talked to me about my health, let alone sex.

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Okme boM 10 months ago

Indeed, it's wrong to assume that mothers are talking to their daughters about health issues. Mine certainly never did.

Like 👍 11 Link ↻ Report 🚩



yazoo_the_fuzzy 10 months ago

My best friend in junior high didn't even get that talk from her mother. Can you imagine how horrifying that would be to have your first period and not even know what was happening or why?

Like 👍 1 Link ↻ Report 🚩



ReaderofWaPo 10 months ago

Too many parents won't go near these subjects with their kids. School programs, like Sex Ed, is the best way to go and make sure they get real facts/information.

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rickinfinity 10 months ago

Once you make sure those school programs actually deliver real facts/information to students. I'm looking at you, Georgia.

Like 2 Link Report



expatNY 10 months ago

It's one thing - and very important - for parents to share their and family medical issues with their children. (Nearly all females on my maternal side have thyroid issues including my 21 yo daughter.) However, too many adults are clueless when it comes to the physiology of the human body. And let's not even mention anti-vaxxers. Taboo-less health education in schools can go a long way to teach kids to know their own bodies.

Like 10 Link Report



Curmudgeon10 10 months ago *(Edited)*

In this day and age, aren't kids lucky if they actually have a father they know? Telling them useful stuff is a luxury.

Like 9 Link Report



jay2drummer 10 months ago

I mean, maybe if you confuse right wing alternative facts for reality.

Like 6 Link Report



Curmudgeon10 10 months ago

Out of wedlock birth rates nothing to worry about jay?

Like 6 Link Report



jay2drummer 10 months ago

Nope, they really aren't. And, they also don't speak to whether children have fathers, just whether their parents are married. Just because you want to live by a millennia-old book doesn't mean said book actually has merit.

Like 9 Link Report



Curmudgeon10 10 months ago

Well, I think we can all agree that when you look at society, education, crime, and literacy, children growing up without fathers in the home (yes, sadly, it does correlate rather well with out of wedlock births) has been a huge PLUS for the country. More is better!

Like 3 Link Report



jay2drummer 10 months ago

Actually, I'd say in many cases, yes, growing up without fathers has been a huge plus, since there's a reason those women choose not to live with those fathers. Society has become immeasurably better since we stopped pressuring people to stay in bad relationships just for the sake of "God will be sad if you end it."

Like 6 Link Report



Curmudgeon10 10 months ago *(Edited)*

Yes, good we see eye to eye on this. Women: all good. Fathers: mostly bad.

And that out of wedlock birthrate in the African American community must mean that black men are much, much worse fathers than their counterparts in other communities. Correct?

Like 3 Link Report



PrepareToday 10 months ago *(Edited)*

jay2drummer hits the nail right square on the head. Why is this never mentioned? I divorced when my children were 2 and 5. No woman leaves a good husband when she has no income and a child still in diapers.

C'mon folks - why isn't this simple reality understood by the so-called conservatives ? (BTW I know more conservatives on their 3rd and 4th marriages than any other group.)

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julcubdish 10 months ago

And certain groups are particularly responsible for this.

Like  Link  Report 



Give Thanx 10 months ago

My introduction to sex education? I remember as a small child seeing neighborhood dogs mating, crying and asking my brother what was happening...Then in the early 70's, the Catholic School I attended attempted to teach Sex Education via the "Becoming A Person" curriculum...In Junior High we had Health Education where there was the requisite dunce who asked the teacher if one could get VD off a door knob! By High School there was a few teen age Mothers, usually They dropped out of school and the Father enlisted in the Army...Sex was a hard topic to discuss around the dinner table. We can learn a hell of a lot more in the age of the internet...

Like  9 Link  Report 



LeeH1 10 months ago

When children are climbing on the monkey bars, their mother says, "Be careful!" The father says, "Climb higher!" Children need to hear both messages.

Like  7 Link  Report 



paz in terris 10 months ago

That is a truly painful level of sexism and oversimplification.

Children benefit from having two parents, *if* both parents are healthy, loving, engaged, responsible and informed. All too often, one parent is not any good at the job, and takes no interest in it.

Both those messages can come from one parent. There are also other perfectly

functional arrangements for childrearing.

Like  4 Link  Report 



LeeH1 10 months ago

Sounds pretty depressed and negative. Passive aggressive behavior like this is not good parenting, either.

Like  2 Link  Report 



Carlamoo 10 months ago

Someone also needs to tell boys that they should be doing monthly breast self-exams, too. It's true that breast cancer is much less common for men; it's also true that that's one reason it's more lethal when they do get it.

Like  7 Link  Report 



CountDemoney 10 months ago

Plus self prostate exams.

Like  Link  Report 



johnlocke1 10 months ago

That literally, ain't going to happen, ever.

Like  1 Link  Report 



jay2drummer 10 months ago

Shame, because it's super easy to do and really can be a life saver.

Like  Link  Report 



Flowman165 10 months ago

Many people are woefully ignorant of the most basic medical knowledge. Who is supposed to teach them? The parents are often just as ignorant. People who don't take the trouble to educate themselves, or lack the innate intelligence to do that, are going to go through life just like their parents did.



rtc1 10 months ago

You could have stopped at “woefully ignorant”

Like  2 Link  Report 



mpmayland 10 months ago *(Edited)*

When my Dad sat me down to give me what I supposed was going to be "the talk" about sex, it turned out to be a lecture on life insurance. I guess he chickened out and assumed I'd figure it out for myself from friends. I did have sex. Never bought life insurance.

Like  4 Link  Report 



John Marus 10 months ago

One could turn out to be more expensive than the other. When it rains, wear a ring coat!

Like  Link  Report 



jay2drummer 10 months ago

A lot easier to wear that raincoat when you have it on you, which you are more likely to do if you read the weather report before going out.

Like  1 Link  Report 



Can not say 10 months ago

Why did the Post assign a woman to write this? They would not have dared to have a man write a similar article about women. Blatant sexism by the Post editorial staff.

Like  3 Link  Report 



jay2drummer 10 months ago

That's demonstrably not so, as they have male writers writing about issues that primarily impact women all the time.

Like  1 Link  Report 



bkkexpat 10 months ago

If a man wrote a similar article about women, he would be condemned nationwide.