

Doing for Our Daughters

By Mary Anne Duggan, Ph.D.

As I helped my friend Tracy move into her new apartment after a difficult split with her husband, we did the usual: unpacked dishes and arranged furniture she brought from her old house. But when we got to assembling the new IKEA-like kitchen table, my friend went pale. She had never done such a task; her husband, just like her father before him, always did for her what are often thought of as stereotypically male activities. Another friend of mine uses the translation of a Korean phrase to describe Tracy's upbringing: "She's like a flower in a hothouse garden."

For me, I am grateful that my parents took more of a "wild weeds" approach to parenting. When I was 10 years old, I tried to build a CB radio in my bedroom so I could communicate with truckers — a sort of Facebook for the growing-up-in-the-70's-set. My father, an engineer, could have easily jumped in to make it work, but he did not. As a result, I spent hours cobbling together a CB connection and actually heard a "good buddy" or two. I didn't make a workable CB radio, but I believed I had it in me to do so precisely because my father did not take the controls out of my hands.

Unfortunately, what happens more often, and usually on a subconscious level, is that parents will help their daughters with certain technical activities that they will leave to their sons to accomplish on their own. Such a practice might be considered "benevolent sexism" — out of love and a wish to protect, we sometimes have different expectations for our daughters.

The effects of benevolent sexism reach farther than just the fear of assembling Swedish furniture. According to a 2010 study by the American Association of University Women, implicit bias is an important factor in women's under representation in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields. We must allow our daughters to start a campfire and fix the family computer if we have any hope of them considering a career in STEM. But without real efforts to provide these experiences for our daughters, we fall into the pattern of taking the box of matches or USB cord away from them.

If my friend had experienced building a table as a child, it may have helped her beyond just putting together a place

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to have dinner; building is a metaphor for life. After all, you are faced with these assorted pieces in front of you, and from chaos something brilliant is created. In the beginning, you have no idea how it will all work out, but in the end it does (even if sometimes there are pieces left over).

Perhaps the greatest problem is when girls and women develop a sense of learned helplessness around certain activities like baiting a fish hook or changing a flat tire. Feelings of "I can't" can create a dependency on those who "can." It is important our daughters are raised to believe they can do anything. My father may have had this in mind when I was tinkering with the CB radio, or he may have hated the idea of me talking with middle-aged men on long road trips.

The problem for those of us who were raised to feel we can do anything is that sometimes we forget how we got here. And because we have such a sense of empowerment, we also tend to swoop in and do for our children. However, in this age of helicopter parenting, it's actually what we don't do for our daughters that might make the difference.

Sometimes parents will help their daughters with certain technical activities that they will leave to their sons to accomplish on their own. This usually occurs on a subconscious level and may be considered a form of benevolent sexism.

Girls need to have experiences with stereotypically-male activities. Doing so increases their beliefs in what they can accomplish and lessens their dependency on others as they grow older.

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