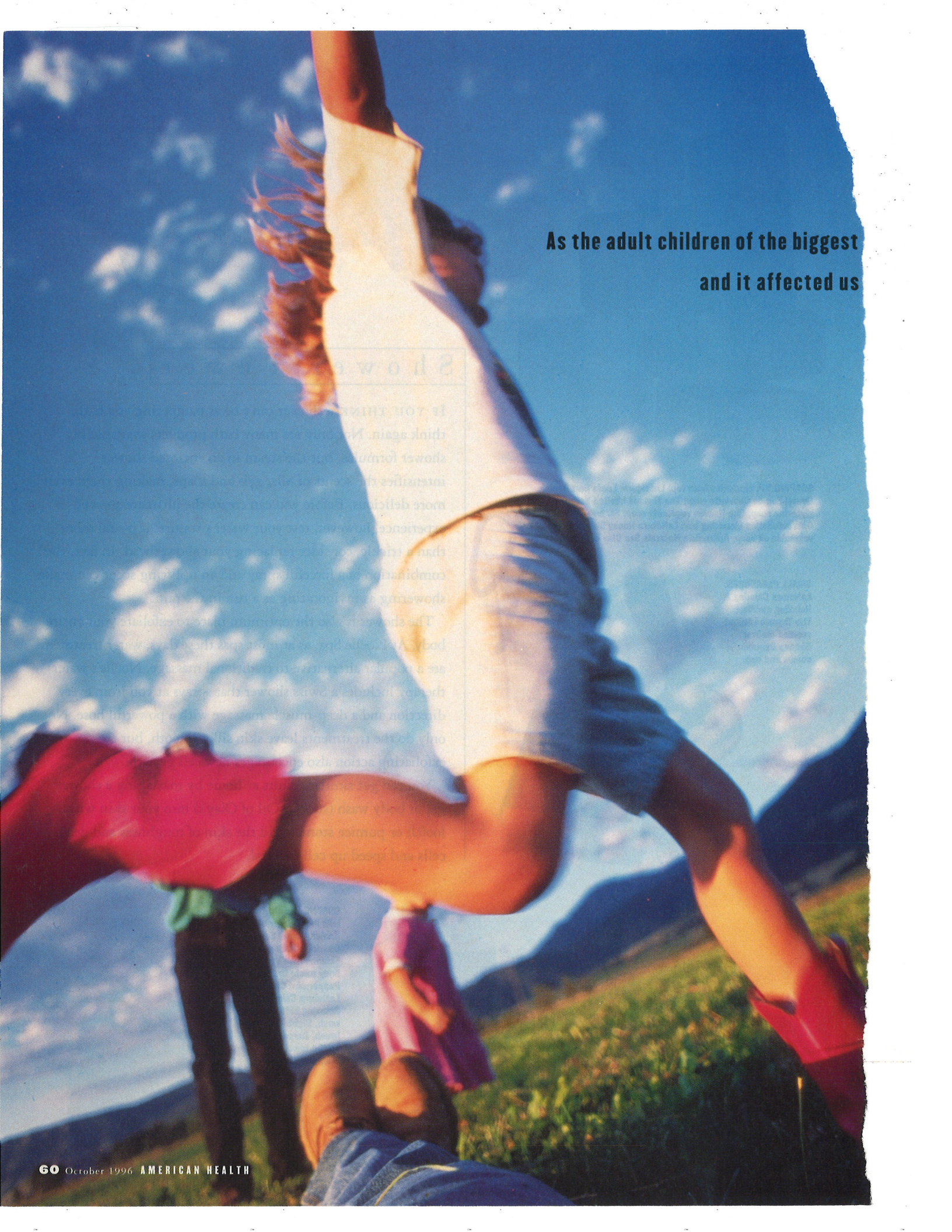


American Health



“Never Daddy’s Girl”

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**As the adult children of the biggest
and it affected us**

**divorce generation ever, many of us grew up with absent or deadbeat dads—
deeply in work, love and family life. How do we get beyond the pain—and move forward?**

never daddy's girl

By Melinda Blau

IN 1968, WHEN SHE WAS 14, Barbara Friedman's* parents divorced, and her handsome, charismatic father left their home in the suburbs for New York City. At first Friedman enjoyed the fact that her dad treated her like one of his girlfriends, taking her to discos and chic Sunday brunches. But her enthusiasm faded as he repeatedly forgot their appointments, broke dates and refused to offer her financial assistance. Gradually he disappeared almost completely from her life.

Friedman, now 42, tried to put the past behind her and eventually mar-

**Names have been changed.*

PHOTOGRAPHED BY AUGUSTUS BUTERA

ried a "great guy." But even after 10 years together, she admits that her husband still sometimes triggers the old feelings of disappointment—for example, when he doesn't keep a promise. She's also saddened when she thinks of her two-month-old son. "My father hardly visits or calls to ask about him," she says. "I don't expect him to be any more involved as a grandfather."

Friedman's difficulties are part of a larger phenomenon marked by the rise of divorce and the decline of fatherhood. According to Donald Hernandez, Ph.D., author of *America's Children*, among kids born in the 1950s, 32% spent part of their childhood in a one-parent home, usually with Mom. As the divorce rate accelerated, so did the percentage of one-parent families. Up to 40% of daughters of divorce gradually lost contact with their fathers completely; countless more saw them only sporadically. Today many of these women are coping with the fallout from these short-

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Now, however, the devastating impact that paternal absence has had on many women—even when their fathers stayed home but were emotionally absent—is beginning to be understood. Two decades of research have found that an emotionally engaged father is crucial to a girl's developing sense of self, to her academic and worldly success, and to her social and emotional well-being. "High-achieving women in science, sports and business tend to have close relationships with their fathers," says Henry Biller, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Rhode Island in Kingston and the author of *The Father Factor*.

Unfortunately most women haven't forged this connection. Reports from

A MODEL FOR FUTURE RELATIONSHIPS Vicki Duhl,* whose parents separated when she was five, says her father put in appearances at major family occasions, like birthdays and holidays, but was never dependable. "Most of my contact with him was by phone," she says. "And as an adult, I found myself involved with similarly unattainable men."

Again and again, the 34-year-old public relations executive tolerated guys who would say, "I'll see you—maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow," and leave it at that. Finally Duhl saw a therapist. "I went in discussing my last disastrous relationship and ended up talking about my family, especially my father."

Duhl's experience isn't unique. Most experts believe the father-daughter bond is the template from which a girl's future male relationships are drawn. In fact, studies show that a woman's satisfaction in marriage and her feelings about her sexual adequacy often have more to do with her childhood relationship with

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circuited relationships: low self-esteem, and problems in romantic relationships, family life and work.

Interestingly, no one thought much about the absence of fathers when the divorce rate began to mushroom in the '70s. Sure, the kids might miss him, but how important was he really—especially for girls? Indeed, hands-on fa-

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her father than with her adult relationship with her husband. "The most common pattern I see in my office," says San Francisco psychotherapist Joan Minninger, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Father-Daughter Dance*, "is women whose hearts are still breaking because they could never get acknowledgement from Daddy." The grown daughters of these men says Dr. Minninger, tend to idealize their absent dads and may spend a lifetime trying to get their attention. "It's as if they call central casting and say, 'Send over someone with whom I can re-experience my childhood.'"

In general a woman looks for the emotional climate her father provided. If he rewarded her at times with his attention, then ignored her, she's likely to continue to strive for that occasional compliment, much like a player at a slot machine who keeps pulling the handle, hoping to get rich. "She looks for that attention from other men as well—a boss, boyfriend or friend," says Dr. Minninger. "And she'll work like a dog to get it." But women whose fathers aren't around when they're growing

BRIDGING THE GAP WITH DAD

Whether you want to rekindle your relationship with your father or simply put some of the bad feelings behind you, try taking these steps:

- ◆ **Write a letter.** When it comes to re-establishing ties with a distant father, letter-writing is the "single most powerful step" a woman can take—whether or not you actually send it, says Victoria Secunda, author of *Women and Their Fathers*. "Use the opportunity to tell him all the things you've never said or to ask the questions you've never asked."
- ◆ **Get to know your father as an adult.** Women who fare best in the wake of their parents' divorce tend to have a more balanced view of their parents. To that end, New York City family therapist Judith Stern Peck, M.S.W., suggests meeting your father, "as an adult, in the here and now." One of Peck's clients, for example, dresses in business clothes when she plans to see her father, which keeps her in touch with her grown-up self. To gain a new perspective on who your father really is and how he got that way, Peck also suggests fact-finding missions—asking other family members what he was like as a boy or what his parents were like.
- ◆ **Set new terms.** Think about what you need from your father now—a phone call once a week, a lunch date without his wife or girlfriend, more holidays together. "Taking a stand is hard," says family therapist Monica McGoldrick, author of *You Can't Go Home Again*, "and it won't necessarily change your father. But it will help you feel more valued in your own life."

up also tend to be wary of romantic commitments: They want intimacy but also fear it. "They often leave relationships. They tend to be on the defensive, always heading for the door," says Victoria Secunda, author of *Women and Their Fathers*.

Of course, some women escape the negative effects of having an emotionally distant father, perhaps because there are other male role models in their lives or because they're exceptionally resilient. But for about 75%, according to Dr. Biller, the long-range effects can be far-reaching, particularly in terms of damaged self-esteem. "If your father doesn't think you're worth noticing, eventually *you* may not think you're worth noticing," points out Metuchen, NJ, family therapist Monica McGoldrick, M.S.W.

TROUBLE ON THE JOB Not surprisingly, the impact of having a distant father can be seen in the workplace as well. In fact, many women behave as if

lunch with her father, she sent him an E-mail, telling him how important it was for her to get "some good listening and involvement from you." Richardson knew mere words wouldn't change her father, but for her this was a cathartic step. And the fact that he's asking a few more questions about her life these days tells her that they're at least moving in the right direction.

REWRITING THE SCRIPT

Just being aware of your father's emotional impact, say experts, will go a long way toward helping you navigate life's challenges. These

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...when the divorce rate first began to mushroom.

their boss were a stand-in for daddy. "She may have a date or an important family commitment," says Dr. Minninger, "but when the boss says he needs a project out tonight, she's likely to put his goal ahead of hers just to get that elusive 'Thank you.'"

Research chemist Jocelyn Richardson* 36, whose father divorced her mom when she was 16, has had trouble saying no to superiors at work or to anyone else in the office who needed a favor. "I'd always be the one to say, 'I'll take care of it,'" she says. In the past, her feelings of insecurity have also driven her into sexual relationships with supervisors. "My dad never made me feel worthy, so I tried to buy love through seduction." Richardson says she sought the praise she never got from her father, who, like her, is also a scientist. "But he barely knows what I do," she says. "And when he does compliment me, it's always a perfunctory 'That's nice, dear.'"

LOOKING BACK—AND AHEAD Over the past two years, Richardson has taken steps to change her behavior. And after a recent, typically frustrating

seven strategies can also help:

◆ **Look at how the past—specifically, your relationship with your father—is shaping your present.** The first step toward changing unhealthy behavior, such as taking on far too much at work or repeatedly hooking up with unavailable men, is recognizing destructive patterns and understanding where they come from.

◆ **Focus on yourself.** If you've spent more energy trying to please Dad than tending to yourself, shift your attention. Make time to write in a journal; share your thoughts, disappointments and hopes with good friends; or talk to a counselor.

◆ **Give yourself permission to mourn.** Seek out situations that help you *feel* the loss of your father instead of avoiding it, say, by talking to other women about their fathers or by reading books with father-daughter themes. "The grieving process is a first step toward regaining self-esteem," says Julianna Simon, a family counselor in Vergennes, VT.

◆ **Listen to your better judgment.** When that little voice in your head tells you something doesn't feel right—particularly in relationships with unreliable

men—let yourself hear it. "Women with emotionally distant fathers typically overlook bad behavior from their partners," says Dr. Minninger. "But when these relationships end, they often say they knew something was wrong from the start."

◆ **Choose people and experiences that don't give you a "rush."** Instead of opting for the drama of a difficult man, "wean yourself from the highs and lows and go for the nice guy instead," says Dr. Minninger.

◆ **Know that every man is not your father.** Whenever you feel yourself moving toward the door in a relationship, separate what happened then from what's happening now. For instance, if you feel inexplicably furious if a partner occasionally disappoints you, remind yourself that he isn't your father.

◆ **Applaud yourself.** Build your self-esteem by openly acknowledging your accomplishments—choosing a partner who's loving and available or, if you're a parent, on *not* being distant from your own children. ■

Melinda Blau is the author of *Families Apart: 10 Keys to Successful Co-Parenting*.