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Friday December 15, 2006

## Without a dad around, my daughter needs her doting grandfather

by rachel sarah

*Fathers be good to your daughters,  
Daughters will love like you do.  
Girls become lovers who turn into mothers  
So mothers be good to your daughters, too.  
— John Mayer's "Daughters"*

If you know anything about my dad, you know that he's your stereotypical Jewish mother caught inside a man's body. That's a good thing, considering the fact that I don't really have a Jewish mother. It's all up to my dad.

He dotes on his 6-year-old granddaughter on Monday afternoon when he picks her up at school: They drink Slurpees together at the latest kid's movie, shop for school clothes and eat chicken noodle soup at Saul's in Berkeley.

My dad has been the key man in my daughter's life since she was born. He's

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the one who dotes on her,  
the one who gives her  
what her biological father  
has never been able to,  
because her father hasn't  
been in our lives since she  
was 7 months old.

An affectionate, chubby,  
red-cheeked 66-year-old  
with a strong Boston  
accent, my father is a pro  
at making up silly songs  
spontaneously and  
speaking in a gibberish  
that only the two of them  
understand.

But also, like your clichéd  
Jewish mother, my dad  
has had his share of  
boundary issues. He calls  
me every day. He's known  
to be overprotective — and  
sometimes overbearing. I  
am forever grateful to him  
for being so involved in his  
granddaughter's life, but  
I've wished at times that  
he'd let me — the grown-  
up — have a bit more  
space.

One recent afternoon, I am  
in the midst of a cluster of  
moms at my daughter's  
school as they find fault  
with their husbands:

"He has no patience for  
tantrums!"

"Doesn't he know any  
better than to offer cookies  
while I'm making dinner?"

Without thinking, I jump  
right into this mother-moan  
session: "Oh yeah, I have  
those same problems with  
my dad."

The mothers stop talking.  
One of them kindly nods  
her head at me.

That must have sounded  
really weird. My dad is not  
my husband. But,  
goodness, sometimes he  
acts like he is.

How did our boundaries

get so blurred? Maybe it all started when he kindly stepped right into his grandchild's life to be the male role model every child needs.

When she was a baby, he strapped her into the Baby Bjorn for long walks. He's spent every Mother's Day with us for the past five years. Somehow, unbeknownst to me, he still swings his first-grade granddaughter onto his shoulders for a ride.

But most of all, my Jewish dad gives to my daughter unconditionally. It's more than just reliability and affection; I know that he will never walk away from Mae as her own father did. It all seems like the perfect deal, right?

Not quite.

My father likes to call the shots. He doesn't think she eats enough. He says that I do not discipline properly. He doesn't want his granddaughter to wear hand-me-downs. (After much exasperation, I've finally concluded that this is not really about clothing. He comes from a line of Jewish Polish refugees who dressed in second-hands, and anything new and stylish gives him a certain pride.)

When he feels out of control on the inside, he wants to control everything around him. This can really rile me up. Although I often want to yell "Time out!," I take a deep breath. I dread losing yet another important man in our lives.

After my last spat with Dad — when he told me, once again, how embarrassing it is that his granddaughter wears used clothes and I

told him to “please go home now” — I tucked my daughter under the covers and kissed her forehead. I knew that I’d always be there for her.

It’s just you and me, I thought.

Then the phone rang.

“I’m sorry,” my dad said. “I’ll try to be more careful about what I say.”

I let the incident go, feeling grateful to my dad for giving my daughter what her biological father can’t — and for helping me to understand that with or without a dad, we’re doing just fine.

**Rachel Sarah’s** book, “Single Mom Seeking: Play Dates, Blind Dates, and Other Dispatches from the Dating World” (Avalon/Seal Press) was recently published. She can be contacted at [rachel@singlemomseeking.com](mailto:rachel@singlemomseeking.com).

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