I was eleven years old when I went from playing with dolls to being an adolescent in a bad place. I was dealing with low self esteem. I had a lack of friends, and this new environment, middle school, was something different. I cried daily. I distanced myself. I exhibited all the signs of depression, but as far as I knew, I was just sad. I no longer stood out. I wasn’t the tallest kid in school. No longer was I the smartest girl. I was not prepared for the transition from elementary school. I wasn’t the big fish in the pond anymore.

My sadness was no different at home. I had slowly come to the realization I was no longer daddy’s little girl. He treated me differently the older I got. Our daddy daughter dates became a thing of the past. Our inside jokes and laughs faded. It seemed I was no longer the best friend I’d always been to him.

My mom noticed a change in me but he did not. So I confided in her because she made me feel so comfortable. Sitting in between her lap in our gold-decorated living room, surrounded by the smell of coconut Blue Magic hair grease and Cantu conditioner as she did my hair is when we had our best talks.

“I feel like me and dad are drifting apart.”

“Well maybe you should talk to him about it” she said as she gently parted sections of my hair, and applied hair grease down my scalp with her fingertips.

I dreaded talking to my dad about our vanishing relationship. I wanted him to know I felt because I didn’t want how I felt to be true. But one day, while sitting in my room surrounded by my purple-painted walls, and pink accents, we had the conversation. It was my safe space, and I was comfortable expressing myself in it.

“I feel like you don’t love me anymore,” I found the confidence to say, but as the words fell on my father’s ears, I knew they were a poor choice.
“You think I don’t love you anymore?”

I could see hurt on my dad’s face, but his energy and tone conveyed betrayal and anger, and so did the rest of our talk. Oddly, he ended the conversation with, “Business first play later.”

It wasn’t the first time my dad said those words. It was the first time I looked at it negatively, and not like the corny dad advice I always took it for. I just wondered when the conversation went left. I remember that moment playing out like a Lizzie McGuire episode, where the main character has these inner-thought narrations. I poured my heart out about how I felt our relationship wasn’t the same, and the conversation shifted to cleaning the house before I went outside. My sadness quickly turned into confusion and hostility. I lied in my bed, balled up in covers, and cried.

The next day, I played outside with friends, which seemed like the only thing that brought me some happiness. My dad pulled up in his Yukon truck with an angry glare in his eyes.

“Go home now,” he scolded.

Confused by his actions, I walked back home, remembering I didn’t wash the dishes. I assumed he was going to preach to me about “business first [and] play later.”

I was wrong. When he entered the house, he took off his belt. I received the worst whooping in my life. It wasn’t the physical pain that made it that way, but the emotional pain it caused me.

I can still see the rage in his face as he popped me with the belt while I was trapped in the corner of my room. I remember the pitch of my cries as he yelled, “business first play later.”

He mistook my words, telling him “I forgot [to do the dishes]” for “why are you doing this?” That seemed to strike a much meaner nerve in him. To top it all off, his mic-drop moment was throwing the other night in my face: “Now you can cry and be sad and say I don’t love you.”

I was frightened, but not more than I was angered, enraged, resentful, and disappointed. Why whoop me for not washing a few dishes? Why whoop me after I
expressed how I felt? Why throw my words in my face? It’s like he did that because he was hurt about how I felt.

I realized my dad was a hypocrite.

He whooped me, and fussed about not following the “business first play later” model, but he didn’t follow it either.

He smoked cigars with his friends before helping my mother around the house. He ignored simple requests like washing a load of laundry. That realization made me resent him more.

My mom came in later to comfort me, and talk to me about what took place. I sobbed under her comfort, warm-loving embrace, and the vanilla scent of Bath and Body Works lotion.

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By high school, not much had changed when it came to my feelings about school life. It was such a parallel to what I went through when I was eleven years old. I transitioned from my regular common core classes to advanced classes. My program isolated me from my core friends as well. The classes were on different floors; we had different teachers; different lunch times, different testing sites; and different curriculum. It felt like I had moved to a completely different school, miles away, but I was still at the same old Murrah High.

I sunk into a bed of depression, self pity and anxiety. The rooms in school got colder in the winter as I wrapped a blanket of depression around my body. Like before, my mom noticed my sad, empty state, and always offered her support and shoulder to cry on. She was there for me when I was at my lowest point, and it hurt me that my dad wasn’t doing the same. I can’t even describe our relationship. It was like we operated in a cycle of “How was school?” and “Are you doing OK?”

Awkward silences filled the room when we were the only two present. I missed being able to go to him, and open up about things. I didn’t have my dad’s shoulder to cry on. I needed it at the time. I tip-toed on eggshells. I never brought up things that upset me, and only participated in small talk when he was around. Often, I walked out of those uncomfortable spaces we shared.

My dad stands six-feet-five inches. His build is sturdy, he has big hands and a
powerful voice. I was never intimidated by him before. Yet, I felt so small, even though he once made me feel so big. I mustered up the courage to have another sit down with him. I had everything planned out. Bullet points of what to say was scripted in my brain, how to say it, and everything to touch on, but when the time came, I blanked. Standing in his room, feeling the dullness of its gray walls that had the smell of cigars bouncing off them, the old, raggedy couch, and Sports Center booming through the TV, did not put me at ease. This time, we were in his domain. If I couldn't get my point across in my room, then I couldn't get it across in there.

“It’s just hard for me to talk to you,” is what I managed to say.

“You could always talk to me about anything,” he said. “I know I seem like this tough guy, but i’m not. I won’t get mad or yell or fuss, just come and talk.”

I felt reassured and thought maybe I can talk to him about things, but at the same time I didn’t. He said it was OK to talk, yet he never showed it. And still, after saying it’s OK to talk, he drifted to “business first play later.”

The “you could talk to me” speech flew out the window. I rolled my eyes, and thought it literally never fails. I was over the whole “business first play later,” especially when it was something he didn’t live by, and I did.

I can’t help but to live by it. I spent my next-to-nothing Sky Zone checks on things I needed for school and necessities. Before I got the chance to consider shoes or clothes or hanging out with friends, my next paycheck was already planned for more important things. And ironically, I don’t credit this to my dad, I credit my mom. My mom has constantly exemplified the saying day in and day out. Using her last to get me and my sister things for school projects, events, and programs. She made sure all the bills that keep our house running are paid before any of our wants are fulfilled. She puts herself on the back burner for the sake of priorities. She taught me “business first play later” by example. My dad only taught the words. She is the reason I live by them, why I’m hesitant about shopping, taking free time, and self pampering. She’s the reason why I think what do I have to do before I do anything unimportant.

You’re probably thinking, I thought this story was about your relationship with your dad. Well it is, but it isn’t. It’s a lesson that words mean almost nothing if actions don’t accompany them. All my life my dad has told me “business first play later” but showed the opposite. There were days He hung out with his friends, chilled in his room watching Sports. He did whatever he pleased before taking

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care of business around our house.

My mom has shown me countless times without opening her mouth, and that is what stuck with me.

My dad silenced me. He made feel like five-year-old Jazz, a child who was too little to speak to him like an adult, and he’s never shown me different.

My mom allowed me to have a voice. She welcomes me with warm open arms to express myself to her in any and every way.

My dad threw tantrums. My mom was understanding, empathetic, and compassionate.

Don’t get me wrong, I learned from both my parents.

My mom taught me “business first play later.”

My dad taught me actions speak louder than words.

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