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# Children Put 'Mom' and 'Dad' on a First Name Basis

For Attention, Power or As a Test; Parents Address the Shift



What's in a name? If you're a parent or a teacher, a lot, especially if your child starts calling you by your first name. WSJ's Diana Kapp and Tanya Rivero discuss. Photo: Getty

By **DIANA KAPP**

**77 COMMENTS**

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Hayden Mathias digs for her buzzing iPhone, and taps the FaceTime icon. "Oh, hey Dave," the tall, blond haired eighth-grader says to the face filling her screen.

Is it her boyfriend? Her slacker biology lab partner? Guess again.

Dave is Hayden's dad.

For more than a year, the 47-year-old Denver software sales executive has been Dave to his 13-year old youngest daughter.

Children are ditching Mom and Dad for "Linda" and "Sam" in plenty of households. The shift may come because parents have

ceded authority in their homes, or from teen one-upmanship of their authority figures, mockery or a sign that too much maturity is being expected of them.

"Is this happening more than it used to? Of course," says Madeline Levine, a Marin County, Calif., therapist specializing in teens who views the shift as fallout from an era of overly permissive parenting. Some therapists and psychologists characterize the phenomenon as classic teen boundary-testing and attention-getting behavior that generally starts alongside acne and one-word answers. In some cases, though, children of all ages are putting themselves on a first-name basis with moms and dads.

Children, of course, have been given leeway over the past few decades to be less formal with several types of authority figures. Many call friends' parents by first names. Some teachers forego the more traditional Ms. or Mr. But, parents should take their new monikers as a sign of something going on in the family, say experts. Whether or not to put a swift kibosh on the practice or ignore the name change depends on the situation.

"Put it in the context of what's going on, ask yourself 'What is the cause?' " says Judy Rosenberg, a clinical psychologist in Sherman Oaks, Calif. " 'Am I their emotional support, or are they mine?' Or is it 'Can I have a little power?' " she says.



Hayden Mathias, 13, takes a walk in Denver, Colorado with her father, Dave, after school. *NATHAN W. ARMES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

In some cases, children may be trying to see what they can get away with by testing their parents' reactions to something they know is an unwelcome behavior. Some teens may be pushing to knock the family off balance in reaction to divorce or other family stressors that have already been forces of imbalance.

Or it can be a signal that moms and dads are too lax, experts say. Using first names can sometimes feel more friend-like for both the parent and the child—a relationship style that can get complex fast, psychologists say.

Hayden Mathias isn't looking to challenge her father's stature, or befriend him. She simply wants to get his attention.

"He honestly doesn't answer to Dad," says Hayden. "I say 'Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad,' and then I say 'Dave,' and he pops up. Now I can't help it."

Hayden describes Dave as "extremely busy," traveling a lot for work and on weekends juggling swim meets, and rugby and soccer matches for his three children.

He admits to being tin-eared and distracted. "With Hayden, I think it legitimately came out of an actual child's need," he says, adding that he's fine with his new title. "I'm just glad she can get through to me."

At the Hass household, using the name Jay is a form of ribbing—on the surface. When the Chestnut Hill, Penn., venture capitalist correctly identifies an indie band, or snags a killer parking spot, Charlotte, 23, quips, "Good boy, Jay." What is underneath this? "Hmm," says Ms. Hass, who has been calling her parents by their first names since she was about 17. "In our house, we kids kind of run the show," she says. "I guess it has something to do with that."

Children are trying to understand the nature of their power and control in their relationships, says clinical psychologist John Duffy, who estimates he hears a young person refer to a parent by name several times a month in his office in Chicago's western suburbs. "It's a bit like using a curse word for the first time, or starting to drink coffee," he says.

Ms. Levine says parents should be firmer, not friendlier, as children transition to adulthood. Insisting on being called Mom and Dad helps maintain important boundaries and hierarchy.

Joe Dworetzky, 63, a writer and illustrator in San Francisco is aware that his instinct to forge a friendship with his son is a mixed proposition. "Being friends with your kid is a little self-indulgent," he says, adding that his 14-year-old son Alex calls him Joe or Joe-boy or Jose.

The allure is the notion that you are more in touch with what's going on with your child, says Mr. Dworetzky, adding, "But, isn't pushing boundaries what kids Alex's age are supposed to be doing?"

Mr. Dworetzky's low-key authority seems to be working for both father and son. "Kids at that age don't want their parents to see themselves as their bosses," says his son Alex, who characterizes their relationship as "maybe 75 percent of the time it's totally friend-based, and 25 percent he really acts like the dad, it is all business, and he's telling me to do this or that," he says. "I think that's a really good ratio," says Alex, an avid squash player.

Simin Rahebs can relate to parents looking for new ways to connect with their children. The Orange County, Calif., engineer enjoys being on first-name basis with her two children. They ditched Mom for Simin a decade ago at ages 10 and 12.

"It felt more like I was their buddy, like they trusted me," she says. She thinks initially they may have picked up on her habit of talking to herself, as she often says things such as, 'Oh Simin, why did you do that?,' she says.

Some therapists say the best response is no response, either because ignoring anything is often the quickest way to make it stop, or because parents should be picking their battles.

Another possible reaction may be to engage a child in a conversation about the name change. "It really opens up the discussion about family dynamics," says Pamela Bolen, a marriage and family therapist in Dallas who has called her mom Joy since age 4.

For parents who do think this battle is worthwhile, Ms. Levine advises to simply say 'I'm your mom or I'm your dad and I expect my correct title.' She says children will often resist going back to the traditional titles.

San Francisco writer Ethel Rohan, 47, had a complete reversal on her reaction to her 7- and 10-year-old girls calling her Ethel. When they began years ago, she didn't care. Later, her own mother became very ill with Alzheimer's disease and she realized she wanted to savor being called Mom. "There's only two people in this world who can call me Mom," she says.