

**It's 2001,** and WWE Wrestling is playing in my living room. Tonight's storyline is a scripted feud between CEO Vince McMahon and his dysfunctional family. Vince's children have unsuccessfully attempted to boot Vince out of his own company, and now they're begging their father for forgiveness.

I watch Stephanie, Vince's doe-eyed daughter. She flaunts her sparkly hair clips and a leather miniskirt around the wrestling ring, absolutely nailing the role of a spoiled brat in her twenties. "Daaaaddy, I've made some reaaaally bad mistakes," she says in her best baby voice. Then she clings to her father's leg as security escorts her off the ring.

My eight-year-old self cringes. Something about this exchange feels incestuous. Maybe it's the way Stephanie says "daddy". As if her womanhood is at the mercy of Vince's role as a father, a role he exerts with power and control over his family. In Cantonese households, it's typical for kids to call their dads "deh-dee". But in the years that followed, I vowed to utter the word as little as possible.

Today, I'm eating my words though.

## The term is chameleonic

According to *The Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, the earliest use of "daddy" outside of the parental context was in the late 17th century — by sex workers who used the word to refer to pimps or older male customers. That use continued through to the 20th century, when Black female blues artists helped popularize the term in their music. Bisexual icon Bessie Smith was a key early example of this. Her 1923 song "Mistreatin' Daddy" describes a woman's fantasy about getting revenge on a lover and "sitting on another daddy's knee" if they cross her again.

Daddy got even bigger in the 1970s, when leather subculture was adopted more widely in gay communities. They embraced new forms of masculinity in opposition to America's post-WWII white picket fence ideal; "daddy/boy" relationships weren't uncommon, either. This dynamic helped many gay men find care and mentorship as they explored their queer identities. And until recently, the space we'd typically expect to hear "daddy" was in the context of BDSM, where a dominant partner often roleplays as a paternal figure for a submissive partner. Its 21st century iteration strips the term of all remaining seriousness and shows that "daddy" is here to stay — but its meaning is always evolving.

# A History of Daddy

by Victoria Chan

✕  
1681

***The earliest known sexual use of the word "daddy" in France.***

✕  
1924

***Bessie Smith records "Mistreatin' Daddy" for Columbia Records.***

✕  
2001

***Vince McMahon's daughter calls him Daddy on WWE.***

✕  
2023

***Call Her Daddy was ranked as the second most popular podcast on Spotify.***

## We're in a daddy renaissance

Over the past decade, the sexual use of "daddy" has bulldozed its way to the forefront of our cultural zeitgeist. But rather than referencing literal fathers, it's associated with an energy, a mindset, a way of life. Someone who is "daddy AF" is the boss of all bosses. They're willing to take charge with confidence and self-possession — all while being hot as hell. To quote writer Alana Hope Levinson, the best thing about "daddy" is that they "can be anyone, regardless of gender, age or parental status."

To those that think the democratization of "daddy" has ruined the word, I'm here to tell you that you're a couple years too late. People have been using it to describe everything but their dads since the time King Louis XIII made powdered wigs a thing. The more we unravel the term, we find that like wigs, "daddy" unleashes the ability to subvert, fantasize, and experiment with our identities.

## It's giving "both/and"

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about "daddy" is that the term is rooted in individual preferences, fantasies, and dynamics, rendering it both meaningful and meaningless at the same time. As therapist Sarah Epstein wrote in *Psychology Today*, the basis of a "both/and" mindset is that "multiple things can be true at the same time," giving it the power to "crack your world wide open." The modern use of "daddy" does just that, freeing us from heteronormative thinking, sexual repression, and the patriarchal constraints of traditional fatherhood.

You can channel daddy energy whenever you like. Or you can place yourself on its receiving end, if you're in need of some TLC or just having a brat summer. A post from a George Michael subreddit described his 1987 hit "Father Figure" as a song about someone who would "protect you and give you the most pure and raw love they could give." And if that's what constitutes a daddy, what's stopping you from being your own?

If you ask me, that's daddy AF. ✨