

Raising Daughters

by Brette McWhorter Sember

It is important to encourage daughters to pursue any activity they wish as long as they are truly interested and are willing to give their full attention to it.

Raising a daughter may be the most challenging and rewarding task you ever undertake. Whether we are male or female parents or caretakers, we need to understand some of the essential issues that surround the life-long process of raising our daughters through all their ages and stages.

The Daughter/Son Difference

Girls are essentially different than boys in many, many ways, explains clinical psychologist Dr. Roni Cohen-Sandler, author of "I'm Not Mad, I Just Hate You!" A New Understanding of Mother-Daughter Conflict and a contributing editor to *Girls' Life Magazine*. Primarily, "girls are more emotional and more verbal." She cautions that girls grow up believing that their needs are secondary to those of others, they take things more personally, and transitions in their lives, such as divorce, puberty, new schools, etc., are more critical for girls than boys.

Body Image

50% of the parents interviewed for this article believe body image to be the biggest obstacle facing daughters in our society. Everywhere girls turn, they are confronted with images of women who are impossibly slim or who are revered for their looks. The pervasive message in our society is that women are judged on their appearances. Very little is done in the popular media to support the notion that women should be appreciated for their talents, their skills, their intelligence or for their emotional intelligence.

This is a much discussed topic among experts. Dr. Cohen-Sandler suggests that the best way to combat the body image problems society creates is to "[s]tart early, by developing a strong parent-daughter relationship in which girls feel valued for who they really are and what they do as opposed to how they look or, worse, how parents would like them to be." Dr. Cohen-Sandler also emphasizes that how mothers view their own bodies has a great impact on how girls will view their own bodies. "When mothers model acceptance of their own bodies, this underscores the lesson so girls learn tolerance of themselves." This may sound difficult to implement, but

mothers in the trenches agree.

Shelley H. of Ontario, Canada, says that she and her three daughters believe that "the better we feel on the inside, the better we feel when we look in the mirror."

Another mother, Heather in Nashville, Indiana, states that she is "trying to lay a foundation that emphasizes health" to avoid future body image problems for her daughter.

Joy Bartol-Snyder of Brookfield, Wisconsin, tells of the time she found two photos of a model in a magazine. The first photo showed a woman who fit perfectly in her clothes and had gorgeous hair and makeup. The other photo showed her from behind, with the clothing pinned and duct taped to her body without it even fully covering her. Her hair was pushed forward, clipped, pinned and supplemented with pieces of Styrofoam. This was a pivotal moment for her daughters, who realized how less than perfect even this beautiful model was. They were then better able to see that even models aren't perfect.

Self-esteem and Confidence

Self-esteem and confidence can be related to body image problems, but many girls grow up not only having negative thoughts about their bodies, but also about their talents and abilities. "The greatest challenge I have faced in raising a daughter is attempting to instill confidence in her," offers Brigitte Thompson, mother to a seven-year-old daughter in Williston, Vermont.

Self-esteem and confidence are bolstered when parents recognize their daughters' special talents and skills. This does not have to be limited to artistic, athletic or academic skills, the most commonly recognized talents. Each girl does something well, whether it be a special connection with animals, mechanical ability, or anything else she demonstrates an ability for. Dr. Cohen-Sandler suggests that parents offer praise for these abilities, but cautions that parents need to be "honest and specific in their praise... false praise won't build self-esteem; it will just destroy the parent's credibility."

Linda Dupie of Arlington, Virginia, has learned an important lesson about self-esteem with her daughters. "When I let my low self-esteem show through, it sends the

message to my daughters that if mommy doesn't believe in herself, why should I."

It is important to encourage daughters to pursue any activity they wish as long as they are truly interested and are willing to give their full attention to it. Self-esteem is something that develops gradually over a lifetime. There is no quick fix. Parents must take a long-term approach and constantly offer support and encouragement to their daughters as they develop.

Will Glennon, author of several books about parenting (including *200 Ways to Raise a Girl's Self-esteem*), columnist for *Daughters* magazine, and member of the Dads and Daughters (a non-profit organization) advisory board, points out that "self-esteem is not enough...high self-esteem without wisdom and deeper consciousness only results in bigger and more dramatic mistakes" and urges parents to give their daughters "a very solid understanding of their own values and a very well-developed capacity to sort through their feelings."

Mother of two, Laura D. in Phoenix, Arizona, suggests confidence is boosted when girls are "taught how to be strong and not care what everybody else is doing. They need to learn to follow their heart [sic], and trust themselves."

Mothers, Fathers, Brothers and Daughters

Mothers and fathers impact daughters differently. Will Glennon advises mothers to "be the daughter you want to raise...it is never too late," indicating how important a role model a mother is to a daughter.

"While mothers are aware of their impact on daughters, fathers almost universally underestimate their importance," says Dr. Cohen-Sandler. Because of this, an organization called Dads and Daughters (www.dadsanddaughters.org), a national non-profit membership organization dedicated to supporting and improving the father-



daughter relationship, has been founded by Joe Kelly. Kelly states that "Dad is the first male that daughters get to know well, so how I act, what I say, my attitudes, and how much positive attention I give her will influence her idea of what to expect from men for the rest of her life."

Will Glennon agrees with this assessment and says, "It is fathers who will have the most influence on her understanding of men and therefore in many ways on her own self-esteem."

Kelly recommends that all parents read his Ten Tips for Fathers at <http://www.dadsanddaughters.org/tentips.htm> for more information about how parents and especially fathers can have a positive impact on their daughters.

Relationships with brothers can also have an important influence on girls. Carol Eagle, psychologist and author of *All That She Can Be*, says "Girls who have brothers in their lives are better equipped than brotherless girls to see boys clearly" and notes that "[g]irls who have brothers understand the directness of boy language, and they're able to use it themselves." She cautions that "[b]ecause boys are often direct at asking for what they want and making sure they get it, a girl in the family may find that her needs come last." She also points out that girls need to learn to cope with their brothers independently, stating that "If you jump in to save your daughter each time she fights with her brother, she will learn she needs to be rescued."

Peer Relationships

How family members interact with each other and with daughters in the family has a great impact on how girls will handle their own relationships with peers and boys. It is important to encourage girls to treat others as they wish to be treated and to demand that they be treated with respect in all relationships. All the experts interviewed for this article recommend that parents do this from the very beginning to enable girls to

"While mothers are aware of their impact on daughters, fathers almost universally underestimate their importance," says Dr. Cohen-Sandler.

Girls 2 Women

at The Forum

Saturday, September 28,
9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Mothers & their daughters (ages 11-14) can participate in a fun, informal health education program fostering communication and lifelong relationships. Rani Cohen-Sandler, PhD, author of two best-selling books encouraging positive mother-daughter relationships, will be the keynote speaker.

Sponsored by The Health Museum and held at 1375 E. 9th Street. Fee. Register: 216-231-5010.

Continued on page 16

Continued from page 15

develop healthy relationships with both male and female peers.

Edwina Lewis of Houston, Texas, says she taught her two grown daughters "to have boys as friends first so the relationships will be natural."

Maintaining Communication

Many parents find it easy to communicate with their daughters, as opposed to their sons, up until the teen years. Teenage girls are notorious for their emotional reactions and closed mouth tendencies with parents. Parents should be sure to lay a solid communication foundation and develop trust with their daughters before the teen years. Dr. Cohen-Sandler suggests that parents listen to their daughters, refrain from interrupting when they do talk, and make empathetic comments instead of offering suggestions. "If in doubt, ask your daughter 'How can I be helpful to you?'" she recommends.

Will Glennon says that when talking to daughters parents should "deal first with the emotions that exist around an issue so they can

be defused, clearly articulated, and then seen as separate from the other aspects of the issue."

Crystal Cook, mother to a pre-teen daughter in Knoxville, Tennessee, notes that "the more we talk honestly about issues, the more she trusts me." This underscores the importance of honesty in developing trust and keeping the lines of communication open.

Traditional Expectations

Even today, many girls grow up with the feeling that certain fields, jobs and activities are off-limits or discouraged for girls.

"I think the opportunities for girls abound, but I think the obstacle comes in when people convey a message that there are things girls can't do," says Lisa Beamer, mother a four-year-old girl in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Parents can counteract this by allowing girls to see women in non-traditional roles. The annual Take Our Daughters to Work Day,

founded by the Ms. Foundation (www.ms.foundation.org), which encourages parents to bring their daughters to work once a year, allows girls to witness workplaces and, hopefully, let them see women succeeding in many roles. Parents should also encourage girls' interests by making sure they have the materials to participate in any activity they choose. Another excellent strategy is to have girls read (or read to them) biographies of women who have been successful in non-traditional fields (such as *Herstory: Women Who Changed the World*, edited by Ruth Ashby and Deborah Gore Ohrn, and *Girls Who Rocked the World*, by Amelie Welden).

When you raise a daughter, you could be raising the first female president of the United States and/or the mother of your grandchildren. Give her the tools and support to be all that and more.

Quotes from Carol Eagle are excerpted from an interview in the May/June 2000 issue of Daughters newsletter. Reprinted with permission by Pleasant Company



Resources for Parents

Organizations:

Dads and Daughters:

www.dadsanddaughters.org

Ms. Foundation (Take Our Daughters to

Work Day): www.ms.foundation.org

Melpomene Institute: www.melpomene.org, an organization focusing on women's and girls' physical activity and health

Magazines:

New Moon Network (www.newmoon.org),

magazine for parents of daughters

Daughters (P.O. Box 37407, Boone, Iowa 50037-2407, 888-849-8476) a newsletter about raising daughters

Books:

Fathering by Will Glennon

I'm Not Mad, I Just Hate You by Roni Cohen-Sandler and Michelle Silver

The RollerCoaster Year: Raising Your Child Through the Maddening Yet Magical Middle School Years, Broadway Books

Things Will Be Different for My Daughter by Mindy Bingham and Sandy Styker

Raising Our Athletic Daughters: How Sports Can Build Self-Esteem and Save Girls' Lives by Jean Zimmerman and Gil Reavill

Raising Strong Daughters by Jeanette Gadeberg

100 Books for Girls to Grow on by Shireen Dodson

200 Ways to Raise a Girl's Self-Esteem by

Will Glennon

Cherishing Our Daughters: How Parents Can Raise Girls to Become Strong and Loving Women by Evelyn Bassoff

Resources for Girls

Organizations:

Girl Power, Department of Health and Human

Services: www.health.org/gpower

Universe Girl: www.universegirl.com, careers

for girls in math, science and technology

National Association for Girls and Women in

Sport: www.aahperd.org

The Teen Connection:

<http://home.att.net/~teenconnection/>

Smart Girl <http://www.smartgirl.com>

Magazines:

New Moon (www.newmoon.org), written by

girls for girls

American Girl (www.americangirl.com)

Girls' Life (www.girlslife.com)

Teen Voices (www.teenvoices.com)

Books:

Deal With It! A Whole New Approach to Your Body,

Brain and Life as a Girl by Esther Drill

Girl Pages: A Handbook of the Best Resources for

Strong, Confident, Creative Girls by

Charlotte Milholland

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens

Fireside Books

The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book for

Girls Pleasant Co.

I am Beautiful: A Celebration of Women in Their

Own Words by Dana Carpenter

The Teen Trip: The Complete Resource Guide by

Gayle Kimball