



Deerfield Parent Network

“Network Notes”

Girl Power: Raising Resilient Girls in 2012

By Mary Waldon, January 18, 2012

Raising a daughter is both the most difficult and most important job in the world. Healthy daughters become healthy mothers, and the positive cycle.

Communication is key to developing a good relationship with our daughters – communication that is collaborative, non-judgmental and pro-active. Create a space to talk with your daughter on a **regular basis**, for example, create a weekly or even daily ritual, such as an evening walk, a weekly manicure, or simply conduct a nightly “check-in” with your daughter. Structure and routine help children develop a sense of security, the same way swaddling an infant in a blanket does. Creating a space to connect with your daughter demonstrates that you value her. Take a class together, go to the gym, etc. Look for opportunities to talk, such as on a car ride.

Be open and non-judgmental. She may be more likely to approach you with problems or share her thoughts if she feels you are receptive. Share your own history and the challenges you faced when you were her age. Be open to new ideas and points of view. Be mindful of **how** you ask your daughter questions, which should be open ended and non accusatory. For example: don’t ask “Who was drinking at that party you were at last night? Do ask “How do you feel about your friends these days?

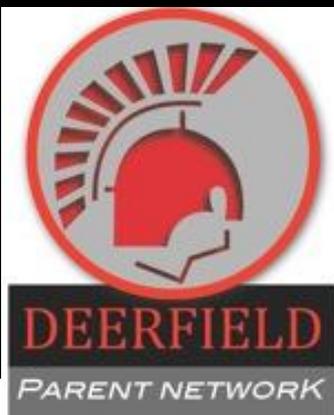
Ask her what **she** thinks; this demonstrates that you value her opinion. If you see a billboard or a commercial that you have an opinion about, ask her what she thinks and use her answer to launch a conversation about your values.

Choose a time to talk when you know your daughter will be receptive – **never** in the morning. Trying to have a conversation with your daughter in the morning is a set-up for a fight and a terrible day at school. Remember to write down your frustration and approach her after school to resolve the issue.

Be aware of your body language; research shows that as much as 95% of communication is non-verbal. Check-in with yourself before you engage your daughter in conversation, i.e., if you are stressed about something, chances are your daughter will pick up on that. Remember to use a positive tone and supportive language.

Be ready to modify the discussion & tune-in to how your daughter is “processing” the conversation. If she seems distracted, for instance, postpone the discussion for a time when you think she will be more receptive. Tell her “You seem like something’s not okay...I don’t want to pressure you.” Remember to ASK, LISTEN & BACK OFF! Give them space when needed. That attitude will prevent an argument (which is okay) from erupting into a fight (which is not okay). Remember an argument is constructive and a fight is destructive.

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Teen girls are experts at “nit-picking” their parents. When that happens, tell her “Both of us need to take a break,” and come back to the conversation later. Parents tend to focus on the negative, rather than recalling the many positive interactions they have with their daughters. Recognize and reward your daughter when a conversation goes well.

Decision-making doesn’t come naturally to teenage girls (after all, the frontal lobe – the part of the brain responsible for decision-making – doesn’t fully form until age 25.) Decision-making is a skill that must be taught. Mothers like to problem-solve for their children, but if daughters are not given chances to solve their own problems, it will be very difficult for them to mature into competent and confident adults. When your daughter is struggling to make a decision, validate the difficulty of the task she is confronting. Listen to what she has to say about it – and resist the urge to problem solve.

Teen girls may act like they don’t need you, but in reality just the opposite is true; they need you more than ever. Ask your daughter questions that cultivate critical thinking. If she’s struggling to decide something, ask her what the options are and what the possible outcomes might be. Help her to define her goals for a given situation.

Friendships are another very difficult area for parents to help their teen daughters navigate. As with decision-making, often girls just want to talk about a situation and moms want to problem-solve. The best thing parents can do is help their children to know their values. Values are fundamental to knowing oneself and knowing (and liking) oneself is fundamental to good health. When we say to our kids “just be yourself,” it’s asking a lot because they really have not yet figured out who they are! Ask her such questions as: “Does being in a group make it harder to be yourself?” and “How important is it to fit in?” and “What qualities do you want in your friends?” **Values are the guideposts of decision-making. Values help guide our conscious behavior.**

Being able to self-advocate is also important in navigating friendships. Resist the impulse to step-in. The long-term goal is to build her confidence and communication skills. Role-playing and modeling calm, direct interaction is helpful. Share your own experiences and insights – you’re like an interpreter from the future! Position yourself as a resource for your daughter. When parents try to be their child’s friend, trouble follows. Moms are more at risk of this than dads; one reason is that you may see yourself in your daughter. Most kids want to keep their family life and their life with their friends completely separate. There’s a difference between being interested, supportive, and aware, and trying to be one of the group.

Mood Swings – there is a difference between normal teen angst and clinical emotional deregulation. If you suspect your child may be in the latter category, by all means seek help from a professional, but at the same time, very dramatic mood swings in teen girls can be perfectly normal. Teen girls are undergoing puberty, changing to a new, bigger school with new social and academic pressures all at the same time; these factors account for

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why mood swings are so prevalent among middle school girls. Help your daughter to establish a daily routine. Work toward a regular bedtime, even on weekends. Help her develop a sleep ritual that might include taking a warm bath, drinking herbal tea, etc. Research shows that exposure to back-lit screens (such as on computers or cellphones) stimulates the brain and therefore interferes with sleep, so limit the use of these devices in the hours before bedtime. Encourage eating a good breakfast and offer balanced meals low in sugar and caffeine. Daily exercise is also beneficial to good sleep hygiene.

Encourage your daughter to do things one at a time. This trains the brain to focus and lowers one’s vulnerability to distraction. Help your daughter to understand her own limits and to find her own strategies for managing stress. Encourage her involvement in hobbies and activities that she **wants** to do, not necessarily those things that she **has** to do.

Meditation has been shown to be tremendously helpful at lowering stress levels, and is three times more restorative than sleep. If your daughter isn’t sleeping enough, consider meditation. It’s not necessary to “formally” meditate. The critical thing is to be exposed to silence and complete inactivity. There are even iphone apps about mindfulness that can help as well as books on the subject (by Thich Nhat Hahn).

Self-Image

Focus praise for your daughter on her achievements rather than on her appearance. Show an interest in your daughter’s passions. Let her be the expert at something. Watch how you talk about her intelligence. Research shows it’s better to praise the hard work that went into a good outcome, rather than praising any inborn intelligence your child may possess.

Helping your daughter achieve a positive body-image is perhaps the most uphill battle moms have to deal with, since every TV show, magazine, advertisement, etc., is telling girls how they “ought” to look. It’s important to bring the conversation around to the idea of health, i.e., explain that we only have one body and it has to last us a long time, therefore we have to do what we can to take the best care of it. Model a balanced life, a healthy self-image and your own self-interests & passions. Waldon tells girls in her practice that no two snowflakes are alike, yet each snowflake is beautiful.

Anger

Teens seem to have trouble acknowledging anger. When a teen girl lashes out at her mother in anger, it’s actually a sign of a healthy attachment (it shows the girl feels secure enough in the relationship to risk expressing anger). Parents need to know how to handle their daughters’ anger. Seek compromise and ask for input when working toward a negotiation. Be an example, i.e., role model, for how you want your daughter to behave. With anger, the more a mom pursues her daughter, the more she will retreat. Say “Help me to understand,” and let her come to you; meet her on her own terms. Admitting you don’t get it (even if you do) can really help.

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Disrespect toward parents can be dealt with by explaining that there will be natural and logical consequences to such behavior. Wait for a calmer time, don't try to discuss disrespect when it's happening, for instance, in the morning before school. But at the next conversation, explain to your daughter that she needs a lot from you and that if she continues to be disrespectful, you will be a lot less inclined to help her with those needs. Tell her that you love her, and know she is going through a lot, and that you can even get her help if needed, but it's not okay to be disrespectful.

Find more information about Mary Waldon visit her website, www.marywaldon.com.