

Daughters[®]

For Parents of Girls

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IN THE KNOW

SuEllen Hamkins and Renée Schultz on the Mother-Daughter Project



Hamkins & Schultz

Is it inevitable that as a girl grows into her preteen and teen years, she and her mom spar and grow apart? Absolutely not, say psychotherapists SuEllen Hamkins and Renée Schultz, coauthors of an inspiring how-to guide, The Mother-Daughter Project: How Mothers and Daughters Can Band Together, Beat the Odds, and Thrive Through Adolescence (Hudson Street Press, 2007). A mom-daughter group can help keep the bond strong even through difficult times. But here's the twist: Creating moms-only space is vital to serving girls best. Daughters recently spoke with Hamkins, mom of two daughters, 18 and 13, and Schultz, mom of an 18-year-old daughter and 24-year-old son, from their Massachusetts homes.

Supporting Mom's needs

Ten years ago, watching our care-free seven-year-old daughters riding their bikes through the neighborhood, ponytails flying in the wind, it frightened us to consider that there might come a time when these vibrant and affectionate young girls would want nothing to do with us. We began talking and asking ourselves questions: How can mothers *continued on page 6*



LET'S TALK

Creating loving discipline—together

By Catherine Dee

Mom: Last night I looked at the clock when you got home—2 a.m.! That's way past your curfew.

Paige: I can't help it if Cami didn't leave sooner—she's the driver.

Mom: Well, you're going to have to find a way to meet curfew. That's our rule, and you've broken it several times lately. In fact, you're acting like you don't even have rules these days—when's the last time you walked the dog like you promised you'd do?

Paige: All you ever talk about is rules! Can't you see how busy my life is?

Mom: That's it—you're grounded for a month!

Paige: Fine—ruin my life. I hate you!

If you've had an exchange like this with your daughter—one that left you feeling guilty because you overreacted and angry because she became hostile in return—you know the consequences of ineffective discipline. You don't want your

daughter to be cowed by fear of "punishment" and motivated solely by avoiding parental wrath. But you do want a girl who'll respect your mutually agreed-on rules and guidelines, circumventing those

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blow-ups and holding up her end of being a respectful household member. And you want her to develop self-discipline and responsibility that will guide her as she heads toward adulthood.

If the whole concept of discipline sets you on edge, take heart. Working with your daughter to set healthy limits can succeed, and there are many effective alternatives to "Because I said so."

Consider the advice of Alfie Kohn, author of *Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason* (Atria, 2005). Kids do best, he believes, when parents offer unconditional love and make kids part of the decision-making process. Being too lenient is not productive because they need boundaries to learn how to make wise choices. But you're not serving their development if you overdiscipline and "succeed" in getting total obedience, either.

A girl who strives for unfailing observance of parental expectations and rules may miss out on developing self-reliance skills, says Dr. Elisa Medhus, the mother of teens and author of *Hearing Is Believing: How Words Can Make or Break Our Kids* (New World Library, 2004) and *Raising Everyday Heroes: Parenting Children To Be Self-Reliant* (Atria, 2003). "It's easy to intimidate children to become perfect little angels," says Medhus. But an angel can also be "afraid to choose, afraid to try, afraid to fail—and therefore afraid to grow."

Controlling parents are conveying to their kids the message that they love them conditionally—that is, only when they achieve or behave, says Kohn. "It makes good sense to shift away from the usual strategies for doing things to kids and toward ways of working with them," he notes. So instead of trying to get your daughter to just follow the rules, you can concentrate on helping her make decisions and solve problems.

Let go of lectures

"Discipline shouldn't include lectures, unsolicited advice, and rescue from mistakes borne of irresponsibility," says Medhus. It should be an interactive process that encourages a girl to develop her own self-discipline, so that she'll become self-confident, competent, moral, and independent. The goal is for her to see you not as the enemy but as a helpful guide and advocate.

One relatively easy way to encourage self-discipline is asking questions. This sets up an internal dialogue for your daughter as she considers her options now and in the future. Instead of focusing on how mean and unfair you're being, she'll naturally focus on herself and the actions needed to make good decisions (including ones that respect mutually agreed-upon household rules).

Try to avoid finger pointing, criticism, or shaming when you're posing questions. Control your urge to interrupt, give a "better" answer, or use an angry or hostile tone. If you ask your questions calmly and respectfully, she'll have no motivation to retaliate—and little choice but to answer for herself.

Maintaining an aura of objectivity also helps, as difficult as that may be in the heat of the moment. How? Use impartial descriptions and give specific information.

Describing a problem impartially could go like this: "Hmm. I see that it's 6 p.m. and you haven't started your math project as we agreed you would. Do you want to get going on that?" That's likely to be a more productive approach than "I've had it with your procrastinating! Your math project is due tomorrow, and you're sitting in front of the TV like a lazy slug." The first is informative, objective, and calming. The second is accusatory and subjective, creates antagonism, and actually takes more time and effort.

Give her power

Say it's a curfew that's causing clashes. Consider having a conversation in which she comes up with possible reasons that curfews are wise—surely she'd agree that getting her sleep is healthy and that it's reasonable for parents to feel assured that their daughters are safe. Perhaps she could propose ways to meet those objectives while also suggesting some compromises for times she'd like to stay out later.

"Giving her choices shows her that you respect her ability to make decisions and that you're willing to give her a reasonable part of the power and attention she wants," explains Medhus. She could also offer ideas for the consequences of breaking the rules. Discipline works best if you can agree on expectations and routines and set up natural consequences, says Joe Kelly, author of *Dads & Daughters: How To Inspire, Understand, and Support Your Daughter* (Broadway, 2003). (See Kelly's tips on discipline in Dad's Desk, p. 16.)

Medhus advises being a minimalist to keep expectations clear and prevent a girl from tuning out. "The more we yak, the harder it is for our children to contemplate their behavior inwardly," she explains. Use one- or two-word statements, quick facial expressions, and gestures. For example, if your daughter is running over a limit on phone time, just say "Enough," and sweep your index finger across your neck.

Humor can work wonders in defusing a verbally explosive situation. If your daughter throws her coat on the floor after school, Medhus suggests telling her: "The jacket fairy is on vacation." Making light of the

situation shows her that you're not interested in fighting with her; hence, she has no basis for retaliation. It sends the message that you won't take ownership of her problem and that her issue will never be more important to you than it is to her. Most important, you're letting her know you have faith in her ability to solve her own problem.

Model responsibility and emotional maturity

Reinforce your support of her appropriate behavior by modeling your own self-discipline, and be sure you play by household rules as well. Playing the "adult privilege" card undermines effective discipline. Daughters recognize "Do as I say, not as I do" as inherently unfair, and the disconnect it creates in their minds does more damage than good. Your role modeling is extremely powerful. "The effect is magnified when you 'think out loud' your observations and feeling about both successes and failures," says Medhus.

Girls also learn how to deal with feelings invoked by

working out rules when dads and moms demonstrate emotional intelligence, says Kelly. "Everyone feels angry, happy, sad, loving, grateful, afraid, safe, confused, regretful, proud, and loved. So make sure you are feeling and expressing all of those emotions responsibly," he says. She'll learn how to understand and manage her own range of emotions. She'll also see that discipline is about love and compromise, not about asserting power to make one person feel better by putting down another.

Whatever healthy discipline strategies you pursue with your daughter, remember that it's all about respect, connection, and her internalization of good decision-making habits. The goal is for her to learn self-discipline that will help her now and for the rest of her life.

Catherine Dee (www.empowergirls.com) is the author of award-winning books for girls including The Girls' Guide to Life and The Girls' Book of Wisdom.

Communication—not control

It was midnight on Saturday night, and Chloe still wasn't home. Her parents exchanged disgruntled looks and began to discuss how to handle their teen daughter's second missed curfew that month. Had she forgotten or had time simply slipped away? Was she testing them or did she not even care? And in the end, because she'd broken an important rule, did her reasons really matter?

The curfew issue brought Chloe's parents to my therapy office, and they were both concerned that Chloe was beginning to bend the rules too much. Her dad insisted that the rules were reasonable, so Chloe should obey them no matter what; her mom seemed open to other options. I suggested they focus on one general parenting goal: establishing a respectful and trusting relationship with Chloe.

Exerting power and control through a "letter of the law" approach would probably cause her to close up and hide activities she thought her parents wouldn't like. And it would cut off Chloe's opportunity to benefit from their advice. After all, girls are just like adults—they want to talk things out and gather advice. Yet too often they rely on advice from peers who are as young and immature and inexperienced as they are—kids who may be competitive with them or jealous of them; kids who get their information from exaggerated, distorted media; or kids who use alcohol and drugs to deal with uncomfortable emotions or

situations. A girl gains so much more from talking to a parent or stepparent—someone who knows her better than anyone else, loves her most of all, and has her best interests at heart.

Over time, I continued to talk with Chloe's parents about ways to improve communication. Chloe was basically a responsible young woman, but her dad continued to demand complete adherence to the rules. Her mom instead reacted to Chloe's occasional mistakes by trying to listen without criticism. And Chloe learned from those mistakes as her mom shared her own wisdom and experience.

Today Chloe is a remarkable adult, and she continues to have a close relationship with her mom. Her dad? Sadly, they hardly have any relationship at all. Chloe wasn't a perfect kid—no kid is. And we parents aren't perfect either. What a daughter needs from us is the simple assurance that we'll act as trusted mentors and coaches, and that foundation of communication and trust is the greatest gift we can give her.

Joanne Stern, Ph.D., is a psychotherapist and speaker and the author of the forthcoming book Parenting Is a Contact Sport: The Single Key To Being the Best Parent You Can Be. The mom of two daughters, she lives in Colorado.