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# Daughters Talking About Their Mothers: A View from the Campus

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# DAUGHTERS TALKING ABOUT THEIR MOTHERS: A VIEW FROM THE CAMPUS

This is a revised and expanded version of a talk given at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women's Daughters and Mothers Colloquium, February 11, 1984.

**Revised 1991**

If a mother expects to smooth out her relationship with her daughter when she goes to college, she will probably have to wait a few years. Late adolescence is not a time for mutual understanding and reconciliation between most mothers and daughters. Many college-age daughters' views of their mothers is not very favorable, nor is it particularly realistic.

Between 1980 and 1985 I collected from my women students at Wellesley College over 150 autobiographical accounts on adolescent development in response to the twin questions Who am I? and How did I get to be who I am? The young women have written about the major turning points in their lives; their triumphs and their losses; their joys, happiness, as well as sadness, anger and guilt; their relationships with friends, lovers, and, of course, their parents.

The reader needs to keep in mind that these first-person accounts are primarily collected from young women who have financial privilege either from their families or from scholarships. They are also the type of student drawn to a course on adolescent psychology where one of the major course requirements is to write an autobiography. Wellesley is a small, highly selective, private liberal arts college for women. In the 1980's, the majority of Wellesley students, approximately 85 percent, were white. While Wellesley women are not representative of college students, let alone adolescents in general, the richness of their autobiographical accounts deserves scrutiny, if only to propose hypotheses to be validated from a more representative college-student sample.

## ADOLESCENT-PARENT SEPARATION

Adolescence is a period during which a young person prepares to leave the dependency of childhood to become an adult on whom others can depend. One of the ways in which adolescents prepare themselves for adulthood is through separating from their parents. This does not mean that adolescents will stop loving the parents or relying on them for emotional support. Rather, it means that parents will no longer be the only, or the most important, people in the adolescents' lives. Distancing will make it possible for adolescents to love and care for others as well as for their parents.

Separating from parents is a process all adolescents must go through if they are to function well as adult members of society. Adolescents must be able to switch primary emotional attachments from the family of origin, where they were raised, to a family they may create. Going beyond the usually understood family unit of partner and/or children, a family may encompass any number of arrangements where people make commitments to be in each others' lives, either as friends or lovers. Whether or not this commitment includes a choice of raising children is not so much the issue as the potential ability to do so. Indeed, the survival of the species depends on adolescents separating from their parents in successive generations in order to focus attention and care on the generation that follows them. In early adolescence, distancing from parents is achieved by coming to rely on friends as a source of emotional support. Later, a young person becomes able to invest emotions in a family he or she may create.

Adolescent-parent separation is not and has not necessarily been experienced as a stormy process in all cultures throughout history. Because modern Western culture burdens young people with an additional task, that of becoming independent, distancing from parents can be a stressful process for both adolescents and their parents in North America. Traditionally, personal independence (or autonomy) had been a Western ideal deemed as a highly desirable characteristic for men. Today, "becoming one's own person" is a goal many young women also strive to achieve. As a result, both adolescent men and women have come to see separating from parents as learning to stand on their own feet. Separation, thus, has become complicated by seeking independence. Repudiating one's parents to gain autonomy is now common among all adolescents. Mark Twain said of his father nearly a hundred years ago that when he was a teenager, his father was the dumbest man in the world but the old man wised up considerably when Twain reached his twenties. Twain's view is reflected in my sample of Wellesley College women by many daughters' unfavorable views of their mothers during the college-age struggle to achieve autonomy.

### **Adolescents Who Do Not Experience Conflict With Their Parents**

Even in North American society, many adolescents experience no conflict when separating from their parents. I can identify two such groups, traditionalists and unconflicted independents. The first is made up of adolescents who, for a variety of social and cultural reasons, do not go through a struggle to become independent. Young women brought up in a traditional household who expect to marry and to raise a family usually experience a smooth transition from the daughter to the wife role. Among my Wellesley students less than 10 percent can be characterized as traditionalists.

The second group is adolescents who do strive to become independent yet are able to see parents as role models and to rely on them as sources of support rather than as adversaries. Among my students, most of these unconflicted independents start their autobiographies somewhat apologetically.

My growing up was very smooth, I wasn't even aware that adolescence is supposed to be a time of storm and stress. My life must seem so boring.

Curiously, these women, some of whom come from two-parent families, do not single out a special relationship with one parent or the other. Even if their parents do not live together, they suggest an equal measure of love and respect for each parent. Unconflicted independents tend to come from families in which the adults shared a strong parental bond; they showered their children with love but were not reluctant to set limits for them. Students from single-parent families also show respect for the care-giving parent's ability to nurture and to set limits. In the families of unconflicted independents, be they single- or two-parent families, adolescent attempts at gaining independence from parents is often over matters both sides agree are trivial relative to the love and respect they share. The unconflicted independents make up approximately 15 percent of my students, leaving 75 percent whose views of their mothers are unfavorable, judgmental, or otherwise conflicted.

## Sources of Conflict

The struggle to become one's own person often entails repudiating parents as role models. Much as a young woman might admire her parents, aspiring to be like them suggests that she is not independent of them. Adolescents focus on what they do not like in their mother, or father, to assert their autonomy. Yet venturing into the cold, cruel world with a tender new identity is as scary as becoming the adults, the parents, they have repudiated. Fear of the unknown creates a need in an adolescent to be nurtured by parents--the reliable stand-bys children have always depended on for love and comfort. This pattern of alternating rejection and dependence can be quite confusing for parents. If parents have been forcing themselves to keep their distance out of consideration for their adolescents' need to separate, the child who wants nurturing may feel rejected or neglected by a distancing adult. When adolescents rebel, they need something to rebel against.

I came home drunk a few times during my senior year in high school. My parents never said anything. They never told me what I was doing was wrong. They just remained silent. It was as if they were afraid to let me know they were angry. I was hurt that they didn't care enough to yell at me. I realized I could not trust them.

This is something of a no-win situation. When adolescents remain close to parents they feel smothered; when they venture out too far and the parents do not go after them, they feel alone and neglected. It is no wonder so many parents dread their children's adolescence.

What adolescents seem to want is what everyone else wants: to be loved and respected for who they are. Yet this can be a challenge because adolescents are constantly re-inventing themselves in their search for an independent identity. What they seek from their parents is more than acceptance for who they are. They want their parents to love and accept them for what they are becoming. Parents who feel confused about who the adolescent is that they are dealing with may find solace in the knowledge that the adolescent still looks up to them for attention and approval.

Parents themselves can complicate the separation process as well. In some families, adolescents' developmental struggles coincide with or even precipitate developmental changes in the parents. One can be a middle-aged parent's attempt to redirect his or her adult life toward greater or lesser involvement with the family, both of which can have consequences for adolescent-parent separation. For example, a mother in her 40's, who has come to terms with her own conflicted relationships, may want to devote more time to her children. She will be reluctant to let go of a daughter who wishes to separate and may be seen by the daughter as an overbearing, overinvolved mother. Conversely, a father who redefines his family role to meet his own mid-life personal and career goals may have counted on his adolescent daughter not to need so much of his time. The daughter may see her father's redirection of focus as

abandonment of her and may feel pushed out by her father before she is ready to leave. The way parents handle the separation process is one of the major determinants of how much or little conflict will be experienced by the adolescents. Parents who are reluctant to let go or who are perceived as rejecting are poorly viewed by their children.

Adolescents who express unfavorable views of their parents fall into two general groups, overt sufferers--those who refer to open confrontation with parents, and silent sufferers--those who reveal hidden, inner conflict. For both groups, sources of conflict with parents are similar. Most are relatively small matters such as choice of friends, dating, curfews, eating habits, style of dress or hairdo, and doing chores. (There tends to be remarkable similarity between parents and adolescents over larger issues such as general values, religion and political outlook, even if this agreement is not openly acknowledged by adolescents.) A few adolescents are additionally burdened by sadness or anger related to feelings of insecurity, lack of self esteem, losses, traumas, or too many parental demands. Whether the parental battle is out in the open or buried deep inside the adolescent appears to be a reflection of the family's style of conflict resolution rather than the number or magnitude of the issues troubling the adolescent. Since the popular media have focused so much attention on adolescents warring openly with their parents, I will dwell, instead, on the group I call the silent sufferers.

### **Silent Sufferers**

Silent sufferers report feelings of insecurity, loneliness, sadness and anger under a relatively calm and obedient exterior. A few are even able to hide the ravaging effects of major disorders like bulimia and the humiliation of rape or sexual molestation from their parents. The silent sufferers' view of their parents is not very favorable, but neither is it very harsh. Their parents are often portrayed as demanding perfectionists. A silent suffering daughter often feels she is a failure personally and also a source of disappointment to her parents. She feels she cannot go to her mother or father because opening up to them would risk even greater shame and rejection. Many such young people feel helpless and hopeless.

...I was caught red-handed under the house, which was expressly forbidden. Luckily it was not Mom who caught me or I know I would have the sorest bottom around. Instead it was one of the boys next door. Kevin was a typical 15-year-old teenager hot shot. Kevin gave me two alternatives, one-- tell Mom, or two--follow him into his secret fort. Again, being the naive and innocent girl I was, I chose the latter. Dumb choice! For the next three years I was blackmailed, abused, childmolested, or raped, whatever you want to call it. I was too scared to say anything to anybody....For many years I never told anybody about it. I kept all my emotions inside me, locked up from those who could find out.

This young woman who was sexually molested remained silent, but some Wellesley silent sufferers wrote about turning outside their family for support to trusted friends or lovers. Feeling misunderstood and neglected at home, they reported that they easily came under the influence of people who led them to believe they loved them for who they were. Many also reported later regretting turning their backs on their families because the "trusted" friends or lovers did not prove to be trustworthy.

Not every silent sufferer remains silent or comes under the influence of friends or lovers. One silent sufferer dealt with her overly critical mother without the help of a friend or lover but with the help of supportive adults in a unique and creative way.

All through elementary school, I was teased for being fat. Even worse were my mother's criticisms. She really didn't want me to be fat, so she criticized me and called me "fatso" in front of my friends and relatives. Apparently she thought that this would embarrass me out of eating. These episodes became particularly upsetting when in the tenth grade I tried out to be a cheerleader. (A very important event.) My mother used to say not only that I was fat but also that I wasn't athletic. I was chosen to be cheerleader and when I told my mother, she didn't even act happy for me. She still criticized me. I got so upset that I wrote to the Teen Column in the newspaper in my town. The editors devoted a whole Sunday column to my letter. At the end of the letter, they wrote that I should show my mother the letter and tell her I'd written it to make her aware of how much she was hurting and not helping me. I was crying when I showed her the letter, but that was what finally got through to her.

Silent sufferers make up about 25 percent of my students. Because I only have access to daughters' views, I cannot be certain that the parents did not notice or care about their children's suffering. What is clear, however, is that the daughters believed that their parents did not understand or like them. Their belief, perhaps mistaken, that their mothers did not care is what colors the silent sufferers' views of the mother-daughter relationship.

## THE SPECIAL MOTHER-DAUGHTER BOND

Such mother-daughter conflicts holds for parents' problems with adolescents regardless of gender. Yet there is something special about mothers' and daughters' bonds that shapes their conflicts because it is a relationship between two people of the same gender and also because the people are women.

While men in North American culture have been expected to center their lives on publicly visible accomplishments, women have been expected to center their lives on relationships and on more personal accomplishments. Hence many women are



socialized to view their identities as being closely tied to the relationships they form and maintain. To the extent that mothers and daughters have internalized this dimension of what it means to be a woman, the mother-daughter bond is between principals primarily focused on the relationship. As a result, the relationship is likely to have more care lavished on it than bonds between fathers and sons or fathers and daughters or mothers and sons. It is likely to be more intense, enduring, rewarding, as well as more disappointing than any others because the culture leads everyone to expect more in relationships from women.

One way gender similarity makes its influence felt on mothers and daughters is in parents' choices of which child to raise in their own images. Many adults regard their own upbringing as a rough draft in need of revision. They make their revisions in the way they bring up their children. The child on whom the most meticulous "editing" care is shown tends to be the same sex as the parent. When women talk about wanting to have a daughter and men about wanting a son, the underlying desire is often to re-write their own childhood. Consequently, a special aspect of the mother-daughter relationship, which grows out of the similarity in gender, is that many mothers identify more with their daughters than with their sons.

### **Identification and Overidentification**

A mother's identification with her daughter is likely to enhance, beyond that of her experience with her son, a mother's joy, pride, and enjoyment as well as possible disappointment in her daughter. When identification with the daughter merely heightens the mother's emotional reactions to the daughter, all is well and good. When a mother overidentifies with her daughter, the mother-daughter bond can have dire consequences for the adolescent-parent separation process. Overidentification erodes the boundaries between a mother and her daughter and makes the daughter's separating from the mother, as well as achieving independence, a difficult and painful process for both of them.

There are, of course, degrees of overidentification. In my students' autobiographies I encounter the milder forms more frequently than the extreme forms. In mild cases of overidentification the mother is seen as trying to impose her own standards of excellence or of beauty on her daughter or she is seen as overly controlling or protective of her. The daughter reports feelings of low self-esteem, hurt, and resentment toward this mother. Many daughters also report that, while such mothers' overinvolvement was often a cause of numerous fights during high school years, the separation that college brings makes young women more understanding of their mothers. Daughters often attribute their mothers' controlling behavior to love and wanting the best for them. This new-found understanding sometimes lasts through home stays. More often, however, students write about returning to Wellesley from vacations with resentful and hurt feelings very close to those they experienced in high school. Typical of vacation experiences are mothers being controlling and daughters overreacting. After a grace period of a few days this familiar pattern leads to the same old fights. A daughter's understanding of her mother's point of view as well as coming to grips with what she does to fuel the conflict seems to come to a daughter after adolescence.

More serious but less frequent overidentification cases involve the mother attempting to fulfill her own needs through her daughter.

...My mother's words and actions towards me were an important factor in my lack of self-confidence, which inhibited my identity development. Last year in psychology I learned about the importance of the need for unconditional positive regard. This is something that was (and is) missing from my relationship with my mother. I have always felt that my mother wishes I was a different person, preferably my cousin K. K. is my mother's sister's daughter. We were born just three months apart. She is everything my mother would want her daughter to be. She has always been popular with boys. She is athletic, she is also a very good student and active in the student government. In short, she is very much like my mother when she was growing up, and nothing like me. I could not help but be aware of how I suffered in comparison with K., for my mother frequently brought it to my attention. She frequently told me what K. was doing and held her up as an example. ("K. has been doing X, Y, and Z. Why don't you do something similar?") My father has told me that my mother has always been competitive with her sister (her only sibling), and I guess she wanted to use me to compete.

This student continued to have a conflicted relationship with her mother. Understanding that she was used made it possible for the daughter to be angry at her mother without feeling guilty about her anger. The young woman was past blaming herself for failing her mother and past feeling guilty for blaming her mother. Going beyond the anger to accept her mother as an ordinary person with particular strengths and weaknesses may take this daughter some more years.

The most severe cases of a mother's overidentification with her daughter, which rarely show up in my students' autobiographies, includes the mother-daughter identity fusion. In such cases the mother's overinvolvement with her daughter violates all aspects of the boundary between two individuals. When a mother takes on her daughter's thoughts and her feelings, she ends up denying her daughter's separate existence. This kind of fusion is psychologically crippling for the daughter and devastating to the daughter's view of her mother.

A mother's tendency to identify with her daughter and the dangers of overidentification should not be seen as peculiar to mothers and daughters or the female gender. Overidentification can happen in any parent-child combination. Similarity in gender only increases the likelihood of mother-daughter identification. A daughter's making peace with an over identified mother requires many years of soul searching.

Another similarity in gender factor occurs when daughters look to their mothers to learn how to become a woman. Some daughters like the women they see in their mothers, some do not. In large part nothing succeeds like success. A mother who is pleased with herself and her choices in life is more likely to be held up by her daughter as a good role model.

Aside from my friends, my mother has affected me the most. She instilled in me some of the morals that I have today about marriage, love, and alcohol and drugs. She is so much more than my mother; she is my confidante, my best friend, my favorite teacher, and the best psychologist. Perhaps I want to be like her. She is happy, she is smart (She went to Wellesley!), she raised two children, and has chosen a wonderful husband. Deep down, I am old fashioned like she is. I want a husband and a family just like she has....I often wonder what I will be like in twenty-five years, and whether we will be alike then. My choices that I have had to make are different from hers at the time. My difference in choices may be enough to make us different in a few years.

Many adolescents are not as generous as this writer toward their mothers. Among my students, only about five percent said they wanted to be "old fashioned" like their mothers. Many times the youthful choices a mother made, which were appropriate to her circumstances, are viewed by her daughter a quarter of a century later as inadequate and unattractive.

I admire my father's abilities...and I am repulsed at the hindrance of my mother's. She is a fellow member of the community of women who bow to fulfill men's expectations for their own security needs. I am afraid the continued existence of women like her will lead men to expect such subservience from all women. My mother's position is very threatening to me.

This student writer is not yet aware that her much-admired father is also responsible for the unequal power structure the parents have set up in the family. When she understands the interdependency of family roles she may come to see her mother in a more sympathetic light.

### **The Impact of the Women's Movement**

The changes over the last two decades regarding the life that is appropriate for a woman can affect the mother-daughter bond in unique ways. Some mothers have responded to the liberating effect of the woman's movement by trying to revise early life choices that they have come to regret. Studies of adult women's development show that in the 1980's many women achieved a sense of autonomy only in mid-life. Struggling to gain their own independence can make mothers less emotionally available to their

children at a time when adolescents are also struggling with their own independence. For daughters whose mothers had been over identified with them, their mothers' new-found liberation is a welcome relief. For others, a mother who at mid-life resolves to make new and better choices for herself serves as a positive role model and an inspiration. But for daughters who had expected to lean on their mothers from time to time as they negotiate separation and independence, a mother's preoccupation with her own struggle for autonomy can be a source of her daughter's disappointment. In these cases admiration for their mothers' mid-life accomplishments will often have to come later, when daughters begin to see their mothers as human beings separate from themselves.

Because these autobiographies were written in the 1980's, many of my students' mothers came of age well before the widespread effects of the second women's movement in the early 1970's. These mothers and daughters belong not just to two separate generations but also two different cultures. Their generation gap can fuel their differences, and, hence, their conflicts.

Some students in this category identify with their fathers more than with their mothers. Today many women have the same choices as these daughters' fathers, but their mothers did not have them when they were young women. These daughters see their mothers as powerless and subservient, hence a less attractive figure to emulate and they appear to be blaming their mothers for their powerlessness.

Some daughters wrote about feelings of solidarity with their mothers whose powerlessness they understood in the context of a patriarchal society, in general, and their fathers, in particular. They blamed their fathers for domineering ways. The emotional closeness the daughters felt for their mothers, however, did not always make for smooth relationships. This is probably because a mother who is perceived to be oppressed is not a positive role model. A powerless mother is also not able to protect her daughter from a domineering father.

There were a number of students in my classes whose mothers were always employed outside the home and students whose mothers are self-proclaimed feminists. Many of these young women showed pride in their mothers' professionalism and feminism. But conflict between these mothers and their daughters depended more on whether a mother was overprotective or neglecting than it did on a mother's commitment to feminism or whether she worked out side the home. Indeed, for a few such students their mothers' dedication to career or even to feminism seemed to provide a convenient focus to reject the mothers in the daughters' quest for separation and independence. If a daughter feels compelled to repudiate her mother in order to feel she is an independent person, she will reject her mother regardless of whether the mother subscribed to the post-World War II homemaker role or whether she was a career woman or a feminist.

## **The Impact of Different Sexual Orientation**

Approximately 10 percent of my autobiographers wrote about being a lesbian or reported that they were exploring their sexuality and were not sure whether they were gay, straight or bisexual. Because no students wrote about their mothers being anything other than heterosexual, I assume that, in this group, any orientation or exploration other than heterosexuality amounted to making different sexual choices from the mothers.

Student autobiographies revealed that mothers and daughters handled differences in sexual orientation in the same way they handled other differences. Mothers who were encouraging of their daughters' independence did not see a daughter's exploration of heterosexuality, lesbianism, or bisexuality as a source of irreconcilable differences. Mothers who were more invested in their daughters turning out exactly the way they wanted them to turn out were disapproving and rejecting of sexual exploration or choice.

Some daughters who were lesbians were not "out" to their mothers. It appears from my small sample that daughters who believe their true selves are not acceptable to their mothers see their lesbianism as another aspect of themselves that they need to hide and to feel guilty about around their mothers.

Even though all daughters whose sexual orientation was different from that of their mothers regarded this difference as something significant to be reckoned with, its particular impact on the mother-daughter relationship depended on the nature of the relationship. There was no case in which a daughter described a mutually respectful, loving and understanding relationship with her mother that was shattered by the daughter openly being a lesbian. Indeed, many daughters who had good relationships with their mothers continued to have good relationships after they "came out" to them. Conversely, in already conflicted relationships, a daughter's lesbian is exacerbated existing mother-daughter differences.

## **MINORITY DAUGHTERS' VIEWS OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR MOTHER**

By and large, minority students' accounts of their mother-daughter relationships did not stand out from other students' accounts. This may be due to the social class background many minority and white students at Wellesley share. I observed the same patterns described by white students and students of color. Minority students seemed to have their share of unconflicteds, traditionalists, silent sufferers, and rebels. Yet, there were also differences worth noting between white and minority students' accounts.

From the autobiographies I observed that many minority families with financial resources tend to be protective of their children, somewhat more so than similar white families. Whether this protectiveness is viewed as overprotectiveness by the daughter seems to depend on whether the family achieved social and financial security in the

current or in previous generations. Daughters whose parents have struggled, or are still struggling, to achieve financial comfort are more understanding of their parents' protectiveness. They feel grateful that their parents want to shelter them from racism and discrimination. These daughters view themselves to be in solidarity with their mothers. There was a sentiment of "being in the struggle together." They respected their mother as a person and respected her choices and especially the sacrifices she made. Even when a daughter felt restricted in her choices, she wrote that she understood why her parents were being protective of her. This pattern of solidarity with mothers was most clearly exhibited among some of the African-American students although it was observable among other minority students and some white students whose parents had just achieved or were struggling to achieve financial comfort. On the other hand, many minority students whose families were financially secure for more than one generation seem to react more negatively to being sheltered, similar to the way white students react to overprotectiveness.

Among the Asian and Pacific Islander students, patterns related to when a family acquired financial security also held true, but these were complicated by a generational gap in acculturating to North American culture. The generational gap seemed to influence the mother-daughter bond in several ways. One was the lack of role models in the family for the daughter, which left the daughter feeling isolated. Such young women wanted someone to show them how to negotiate the conflicting demands of being a successful, modern young North American woman and also a respected member of their parent's native culture. They did not think they could turn to their mothers for that. Rather, some of these young women were given the responsibility of helping their mothers negotiate the North American culture. The autobiography of this young Asian woman whose family immigrated to the United States when she was in elementary school is a poignant example of the difficulties in straddling two cultures alone.

When I became fifteen, I felt my pain had started....The nature of my pain was unclear to my young heart, but I just knew it had started....everything had its own place. Yet, as far as I was concerned, I felt as if I was floating around. I could instinctively feel that there was so much possibility and also ambiguity about my future. The world suddenly looked so large and complicated. I felt like I was a helpless baby thrown into the universe. Everything was working in order, and it was my own responsibility to find and secure my place there. I did not know where to start. That was the start of my pain.

Another way the generation gap affected the Asian and Pacific Islander daughters can be seen in the more North Americanized daughters' impatience with their mothers' traditional, old-country ways. Further complicating the mother daughter bond in many of the Asian and Pacific Islander families was a very strong norm of respect for elders.

Curiously, being brought up to respect her parents did not seem to generate so much respect for the mother in this group of daughters, but it did produce abundant

guilt over feeling disrespectful toward the mother. Especially among Asian and Pacific Islander daughters who come from several generations of privileged families, a mother's overprotectiveness and traditionalism led to some overt, but mostly to covert, feelings of anger. Because of the high value placed on respect for parents, some of these daughters were often consumed with guilt.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO MOTHERS FOR IMPROVING THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER BOND

The patterns in the autobiographical accounts suggest possibilities for improving the mother-daughter bond. I address my recommendations to mothers because mothers are in a better position than their daughters to improve the mother-daughter relationship by changing their own behavior. The average mother at mid-life has more motivation for improving the mother-daughter bond and more experience in relationship skills than the average adolescent daughter. Whereas most adolescent daughters are motivated to separate and create distance between themselves and their mothers, most mothers wish to preserve or strengthen a connection with their daughters. In terms of relationship skills, again on the average, adult women are better able than adolescent women to observe how their own actions contribute to creating or maintaining certain patterns in relationships.

I also want to emphasize that responsibilities for the relationship continue to fall disproportionately on the mother through the daughter's adolescence. It is only when a daughter reaches adulthood that it is appropriate to expect her to take equal responsibility for maintaining and nurturing the mother-daughter bond. Indeed, a daughter taking on responsibilities for maintaining the mother-daughter relationship can be considered to be one of the female rites of passage to adulthood.

Adolescents who successfully separate from their parents and attain a measure of independence without much pain and conflict tend to come from families that practice the "love and limits" method of child rearing. Research suggests that parents who give a child a lot of love and allow consideration for the child's points of view but are not reluctant to set limits tend to raise self-reliant, socially competent, and responsible adolescents who have good relationships with their parents. A clear delineation of parent and child roles appears to be a key ingredient in parents' ability to set appropriate limits for their children. In such families it is clear to all members who in the family will love, nurture and advise on what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in a child. It is also clear who in the family will be nurtured and guided. Such distinct delineation of parent-child roles avoids blurring boundaries between generations. Boundaries between the parents' and child's generations minimize the likelihood of a parent overidentifying with a child or a parent turning to the child for nurturance and guidance.

In single parent families, mothers who seek adult nurturance and guidance from their peers while they practice love and limits with their child are quite effective in maintaining a good mother-daughter bond. The temptation to cross generational boundaries may be greater in single parent families where there is no adult partner to

turn to. It is important to avoid the temptation to make a daughter a confidante. In two-parent families, a strong parent to parent bond makes it easier to practice the love and limits method of child-rearing, without one parent undermining the other. With a strong parental bond the generational boundaries are clearly defined.

In families with weak parent-to-parent bonds, if both the mother and the father refrain from allying with a child against each other, the adults can continue to be effective parents, maintaining positive relationships with their child even if their relationship as a couple does not work well. Indeed, research on the outcome of divorce for children points to the importance of maintaining parental relationships between mother and father even as the couple relationship is dissolved. Unfortunately, when a mother and a father do not get along, there is often a tendency for parents to drag the child into the middle of its couple conflicts.

During the worsening of {my parents'} marital situation, my mother and I started to confide in each other. Through our talks, I learned a lot about the situation and the things my father did to make it worse. As these conversations continued, I heard much about the personal problems between my parents also. A closeness developed between my mother and myself--a closeness which had the potential for serious problems... I started having problems in school and sought the help of a school psychologist. Counseling brought out my anger towards my mother. I am mad as hell at her for subjecting me to the problems between her and my father. Many of them are quite personal and not the type of things with which I as a daughter should have to deal. Somehow, I felt it was my duty to listen to her, which I know now it is not. I think my mother needed to have someone else who was angry at my father for the same things for which she was angry at him. I have realized that I have been used as a way to strike back at my father, that by our combined anger we could make things as difficult for him as he made them for us.

In troubled couple relationships that continue through separations and through divorce, a key factor in maintaining a positive mother-daughter bond rests in mothers avoiding the temptation to treat an adolescent as a peer. If a daughter confides in her mother, that is quite appropriate. Providing advice, support, and affirmation to a child are among the primary roles parents play. The reverse, a parent seeking advice, support, affirmation from the child, is inappropriate. When parent-child roles are reversed, the child not only loses the parent figure but is simultaneously burdened by adult problems the child did not create, can barely understand, and cannot resolve.

When a mother-daughter relationship, or any parent-child relationship, is conflicted, it is always useful to know what the other parenting partner may be doing to promote that conflict. To a certain extent, unraveling the complexities of the



mother-daughter bond depends on understanding the role played by the father. A mother's relationship with her child is influenced by whether the child's father respects the mother and supports her, or whether he puts her down and undermines her to form an alliance with the child behind her back. Attempts by parents to find child allies within the family often backfire, although the alliance may temporarily bring a parent and child closer together.

When a mother recognizes that she has been overprotective or overidentified with her adolescent daughter or that she has been unavailable and neglectful, my recommendation is for the mother to approach the daughter to talk about how the daughter felt while growing up. Two issues need to be addressed in such a conversation: the mother's acknowledgment and regret for her daughter's possible distress and her explanation for her maternal behavior. It is very important in this discussion for the mother not to deny what her daughter might have felt about her while growing up, nor to make her daughter feel guilty about having negative feelings toward her mother. Only after acknowledging the daughter's distress should the mother begin to explain to her daughter what led her to mother the way she did. This is to be presented as an explanation, not as a defense nor as an apology for the mother's behavior.

It is important that the daughter not be overwhelmed with the mother's difficulties in this conversation. The mother should not present herself as a long suffering martyr, nor should she set up a competitive situation over who has had more pain and suffering in her life, herself or her daughter. Many daughters feel guilty about being angry at their mothers who have had difficult lives even if the anger is justified. A daughter's guilt over being angry at her mother rarely, if ever, produces a closeness between the mother and the daughter. Rather, it creates more complicated feelings and the daughter's need for greater distance from the mother.

The daughter and the mother may not see eye-to-eye after one such conversation. Many conversations in which the mother acknowledges the daughter's feelings and explains her own choices may be necessary for a daughter to come to terms with her mother as a separate person with her own strengths and weaknesses.

Such a rapprochement is likely to be painful for many mothers. Mothers can feel hurt by their daughters and desire greater distance to protect themselves from further hurts. One of the times a mother's hurt feelings can complicate the rapprochement with her daughter is when a daughter blames the mother for being subservient to men. Such blame can be especially painful for mothers who experienced considerable conflict in squelching their own independence and needs for achievement to take on a subordinate role to their husbands. Some of these mothers who were conflicted about becoming subservient to their husbands may have a hard time validating their daughters' doing what they themselves could not do. They may even feel betrayed and abandoned by daughters who aspire to equality with men. These mothers may have to do internal healing to be able to encourage their daughters' independence drives instead of obstructing them.

What does an adolescent daughter want from her mother? She wants to be loved and accepted for who she is rather than criticized for her failings. She wants to know that her mother cares to get to know the person she is becoming. If she has suffered, she wants her hurts acknowledged by her mother, even if her mother had nothing to do with the hurts.

Many mothers may feel that this is, indeed, how they have been treating their daughters. Yet their daughters can remain angry, aloof, and perhaps even disdainful of them. I believe that the less-than-favorable view that characterizes many college-age daughters' accounts of their relationships with their mothers is in large part a reflection of the daughters' developmental stage of adolescence. Mercifully, that period of a child's life is relatively brief. As a last resort, when a mother finds herself in a stormy relationship with her adolescent daughter in spite of her best efforts, she may take comfort in the fact that the storm will blow itself out. The daughter will eventually find an independent identity and will come to see her mother as a separate human being with her own strengths and weaknesses. Then, the daughter will be able to see how her own actions may be contributing to discord between herself and her mother. She will then be in a position to take responsibility for maintaining a good relationship with her mother. Time is on the mother's side if she is able to believe in her own integrity and wait about ten years. Many daughters who had been openly rebellious or quietly defiant begin in their twenties to make peace with their mothers. Making peace, which often begins at this time, is a continuing, long-term process.

There is no guarantee that all mothers will sooner or later make peace with their daughters. Some daughters can be difficult, or even impossible, just as some mothers can be. If a mother feels she has done her best to make amends, she needs to let go of her anguish over not having as good a relationship with her daughter as she would like. A degree of peace can be achieved on both sides by knowing that each woman has tried her best to improve the relationship they share with the other.

## NOTES

1. The direct quotations that follow are reprinted with the writers' permission. Author identities have been changed to protect privacy. I am grateful to all my students for their candor and generosity in sharing their personal stories, which made this work possible. The sources of my information--Wellesley women who took a course in Adolescent Psychology--and the nature of my information--autobiographical accounts--have necessarily limited the scope of my observations on daughters' views of their mothers. There are many more patterns in mother-daughter relationships, many more sources of joy as well as pain for both sides.
2. My observations of the impact of a daughter's sexual orientation different from the mother is made from a very small and select subsample. The impact of sexual orientation differences need to be viewed as tentative; caution should be exercised before making generalizations based on them.
3. Most of the minority students in my classes were of African-American and Asian and Pacific Islander origin. Because only about 15 percent of my students were minorities, the observations about minority mother-daughter relationships must be viewed as very tentative. Any generalizations made from this small a subsample must be taken with extreme caution.