



NEW JERSEY PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

FOSTERING THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP

By Peggy DeLong, PsyD

Now that my children are getting older, I often hear the comment, “Oh, you have teenagers in the house? Good luck!” I suddenly find myself facing all of the issues regarding raising adolescents. As a forensic and clinical psychologist, I am all too familiar with the perils facing today’s teens, including heroin use, social media, and suicide. I am not naïve, and I understand that no child or family is immune. I am, therefore, determined to do everything in my power to build up protective factors. One protective factor that keeps appearing over and over is the teen’s relationship with the parents.

Teens have consistently been given the message that separating from parents is a developmental task, and this has been backed by psychological theory. In trying to meet this task, girls have pulled away from their mothers. Mothers in turn often pull back, believing that it is normal and healthy for their daughters to separate from them and reject them. However, girls have better outcomes when they are connected to their mothers. There is growing consensus that healthy adolescent development actually involves mothers and daughters becoming better at connecting. It is not surprising that teens fare better when their parents provide them with guidance, love, and connection. What better person for a girl to turn to than her mother – a person who has more wisdom, experience, and factual knowledge than peers, who keeps her secrets, does not have hidden motives, and loves her unconditionally.

I am determined to maintain a positive relationship with my daughters through their teen years, and also give to my community by using my professional background in helping other mothers do the same. For this reason, I formed a Mother/Daughter group. The goal of the group is to strengthen and deepen the mother/daughter relationship, address the challenges that teenage girls are facing today, and to provide an opportunity for girls to receive support from other girls, and mothers to receive support from other mothers. So instead of saying, “Oh, you have a teenager in the house? Good luck,” we say, “Oh, you have a teenager in the house? How wonderful!”

The following are some suggestions for fostering the mother/daughter relationship.

- 1) Make a simple bracelet together. Visit a local craft store and buy elastic and glass beads in a variety of colors. The mother and daughter each make a bracelet for each other. Each color bead on the bracelet represents a quality in the mother or daughter that is appreciated, a memory, or favorite activity. For example, purple could represent, “I love when we walk together”, pink could represent, “I love you”, and green could represent, “I love how you are

kind to family and friends.” Each color and related sentiment is then written down on the card and given to the other person along with the bracelet.

- 2) Keep a Mother/Daughter journal. This journal is for mothers and daughters to write back and forth to each other. Sometimes it is easier to write something than to say it, and this could help get the conversation going. Some ideas include: sneak the notebook under your mother’s/daughter’s pillow and write a little love note, leave the notebook out with a drawing for your mother/daughter when she wakes up, let your mother/daughter know you want to have a discussion about a difficult topic, apologize and then start a conversation, write down a worry, and/or write your hopes for your relationship.
- 3) Find an activity you both enjoy. Sometimes, activities bring people together, and keep them together. There may be times when it feels awkward to just “hang out” with your teen, and finding a shared interest gives you something to do together. Some suggestions are baking or cooking, learn a craft such as knitting, going for a hike or walk, or going for a bike ride.
- 4) Play board games. Some fun ones that are guaranteed to include laughter are Pictionary, Taboo, and Apples to Apples.
- 5) Keep a gratitude journal together. Gratitude naturally elevates our mood and fills us with joy and appreciation. Keeping a journal together, or making gratitude a nightly discussion, is a wonderful way to connect on a positive level.
- 6) Make the most of down time. Use the time spent in the car to engage in conversation. Make it an expectation that your daughter will not be using electronics or earplugs while the two of you are in the car together! Resist the urge to go on your own device during down time, such as waiting at the doctor’s office. Instead, use that time to talk. Or just sit and BE together.
- 7) Give to others together. This could be volunteering together at a soup kitchen or food pantry, or working together to collect donations for a homeless shelter or domestic violence shelter.
- 8) Apologize when appropriate. It is important to recognize when we have both intentionally and unintentionally hurt someone’s feelings. It is not always easy to start the apology. Mothers and daughters can make a section in the mother/daughter notebook for apologies. Just write down a little bit to get the conversation started, and then leave the rest for conversation.
- 9) Touch. Touch is important, but it is also important to keep in mind that everyone has her own comfort level and likes and dislikes. To complicate matters, this can change from day to day, and also be affected by mood. Reach out to your daughter through touch, and respect her individual needs of the moment.
- 10) Withhold judgment and criticism. If you want your daughter to be open with you, try not to criticize or provide your opinion when it is not necessary. Sometimes she just wants you to listen. She will be much more likely to come to you with the big stuff when you create a space of openness and acceptance with the little stuff.
- 11) Create humor. It is so important to instill humor in daily living. Some ways to incorporate humor include doing Mad Libs, watching comedies, reading from a book of jokes, and just being silly and goofy together.
- 12) Show love. Here are five simple things to do to show love for your daughter.
 - 1) Put down the devices! If you are eating a meal together, leave all electronics off the table. If you are watching your daughter play soccer, resist the urge to look at your phone. While looking at your phone, you may not miss the play of the year, but your daughter

may see your distraction and receive the message that your phone is more important than watching her play.

- 2) Say “Thank you”. Even if you had to ask/tell your daughter 100 times to clean her room, do chores, etc., when it is done, say, “Thank you.” Everyone wants to be appreciated, especially for completing undesirable tasks. Don’t worry – saying “thank you” for something that is expected and necessary does not undermine the fact that it is expected.
- 3) Say, “I love you.” Yes, it is important to show love. But it is also important to say it. So say it in the morning, say it sending your daughter off to school, say it at bedtime.
- 4) Sneak a love note in your daughter’s lunch or school folder. Or leave it on your daughter’s pillow or computer. Yep, even for your teenager. Especially your teenager.
- 5) Spend some time alone together, just you and your daughter, even if it just for five minutes. Remove all distractions, and really pay attention to what your daughter is saying. Or not saying. Just BE together, in the absence of laundry, siblings, homework, devices. You can sit together and just be still, or pick a topic and talk about it. Just BE together and connect.

Keep in mind that your daughter needs to complete her developmental task of finding herself and developing her individual identity. Remember that during times of difficulty and when she may seem to be pulling away, she needs her mother more than ever, not less.

Margaret (“Peggy”) DeLong, PsyD is a licensed psychologist with a private practice in the Liberty Corner section of Bernards Township since 2002. She provides evaluation and psychotherapy with clients and their families, preschool age through adult. She specializes in grief and loss, trauma, parenting issues, relationship difficulties, and issues related to child protection. In addition, she provides consultation with other health care professionals and preschool staff and parents. She also provides forensic services and has provided consultation regarding child protection matters and expert witness testimony in Passaic, Hunterdon, Warren, Somerset, Middlesex, Essex, and Hudson counties. In her free time, Dr. DeLong enjoys writing, telemark and downhill skiing, hiking, and mountain biking with her family in the Poconos and Vermont.