

Why Mothers and Daughters Fight -- All the Time, Over Everything

by Deborah Tannen

- "My daughters can turn my day black in a millisecond," says a woman whose two daughters are in their thirties.
- "Sometimes I'll be talking on the phone to my mom, and everything's going fine, then all of a sudden she'll say something that makes me so mad, I just hang up. Later I can't believe I did that. I would never hang up on anyone else."

But I also hear comments like these:

- "No one supports me and makes me feel good like my mother. She's always on my side."
- "I feel very lucky and close with my daughter, and particularly since I didn't have a close relationship with my mother, it's very validating for me and healing."

Mothers and daughters find in each other the source of great comfort but also of great pain. We talk to each other in better and worse ways than we talk to anyone else. And these extremes can coexist within the same daughter-mother pairs.

Two sisters were in an elevator in the hospital where their mother was nearing the end of her life. "How will you feel when she's gone?" one asked. Her sister replied, "One part of me feels, How will I survive? The other part feels, Ding-dong, the witch is dead."

The part of a daughter that feels "How will I survive?" reflects passionate connection: Wanting to talk to your mother can be a visceral, almost physical longing, whether she lives next door, in a distant state, in another country -- as if she is no longer living on this earth. But the part that sees your mother as a wicked witch -- a malevolent woman with magical power -- reflects the way your anger can flare when a rejection, a disapproving word, or the sense that she's still treating you like a child causes visceral pain.

Popular culture, like individuals in daily life, tends to either romanticize or demonize mothers. We ricochet between "Everything I ever accomplished I owe to my mother" and "Every problem I have in my life is my mother's fault." Both convictions come laden with powerful emotions.

Women as mothers grapple with corresponding contradictions. The adoration they feel for their grown daughters, mixed with the sense of responsibility for their well-being, can be overwhelming, matched only by the hurt they feel when their attempts to help or just stay connected are rebuffed or even excoriated as criticism or devilish interference. And the fact that these pushes



The Mother - Daughter relationship can be fraught with unexpected challenges

Especially disappointing -- and puzzling -- is that hurt feelings and even arguments can be sparked by the smallest, seemingly insignificant remarks. Here's an example that comes from a student in one of my classes named Kathryn Ann Harrison.

and pulls continue after their daughters are grown is itself a surprise, and not a pleasant one.

A woman in her sixties expressed this:

"I always assumed that once my daughter became an adult, the problems would be over," she said. "We'd be friends; we'd just enjoy each other. But you find yourself getting older, things start to hurt, and on top of that, there are all

these complications with your daughter. It's a big disappointment."

"Are you going to quarter those tomatoes?" Kathryn heard her mother's voice as she was preparing a salad. Kathryn stiffened, and her pulse quickened. "Well, I was," she answered. Her mother responded, "Oh, okay," but the tone of her voice and the look on her face prompted Kathryn to ask, "Is that wrong?"

"No, no," her mother replied. "It's just that personally, I would slice them."

Kathryn's response was terse: "Fine." But as she cut the tomatoes -- in slices --she thought, Can't I do anything without my mother letting me know she thinks I should do it some other way?

I am willing to wager that Kathryn's mother thought she had asked a question about cutting a tomato. What could be more trivial than that? But her daughter bristled because she heard the implication "You don't know what you're doing. I know better."

When daughters react with annoyance or even anger at the smallest, seemingly innocent remarks, mothers get the feeling that talking to their daughters can be like walking on eggshells: they have to watch every word.

A mother's questions and comments which seem to imply that a daughter should do things another way can spark disproportionate responses because they bring into focus one of the central conundrums of mother-daughter relationships: the double meaning of connection and control. Many mothers and daughters are as close as any two people can be, but closeness always carries with it the need, indeed the desire, to consider how your actions will affect the other person, and this can make you feel that you are no longer in control of your own life. Any word or action intended in the spirit of connection can be interpreted as a sign that the other person is trying to control you.

There is yet another reason that a small comment or suggestion can grate: It can come across as a vote of no confidence. This is annoying coming from anyone, but it's especially hurtful when it comes from the person whose opinion counts most—your mother.

Unaccountable as this may seem to mothers, the smallest remark can bring into focus the biggest question that hovers over nearly all conversations between mothers and daughters:

- Do you see me for who I am?
- And is who I am okay?

When mothers' comments to daughters (or, for that matter, daughters' comments to mothers) seem to answer that question in the affirmative, it's deeply reassuring: all's right with the world.

But when their words seem to imply that the answer is No, there's something wrong with what you're doing, then daughters (and, later in life, mothers) can feel the ground on which they stand begin to tremble: They start to doubt whether how they do things, and therefore who they are, really is okay.

Excerpted with permission:

Deborah Tannen *You're Wearing That? Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation*

Source: www.books.aol.com

The PARENTING TIPS PAGE is provided as a service to the
Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia
To receive Parenting Tips by email: parentingtips@pared.edu.au