

Raising 21st Century Teens: Issues & Solutions

*by Dr. Roni Cohen-Sandler
clinical psychologist, author and speaker*

Interested in having Dr. Roni Cohen-Sandler present a program to your school, community organization, religious group, or company?

contact Krista Reiner Carnes 203.333.1573

krista@bookingauthors.com

Fathers and Teen Daughters

This past week, several girls in my practice described very different feelings about their fathers. While Julia spent much of her session complaining about her “annoying” dad, Alex gave her father a hug and kiss, without any prompting, when he dropped her off at her appointment. Lauren, who has always had a tense and tenuous bond with her father, brought him to her session after they had a terribly hurtful exchange over the weekend. It got me wondering, not for the first time, what enables some fathers to maintain close, affectionate relationships with their daughters during the teenage years while other girls seem monosyllabic with their fathers or express their irritation by making sarcastic comments and rolling their eyes if their dads have the audacity to speak.

Over the years, many men who either attend my presentations or consult with me in my office have eagerly asked what they can do to stay close to daughters who are no longer little girls. This is a vitally important question, not only for dads but also for teen girls. It is impossible to overstate how fundamental fathers are to girls developing a strong, positive sense of themselves as young women. In honor of Father’s Day this month, I’m sharing these thoughts and observations on this subject-along with specific advice from teen girls in my practice who were happy to enumerate what dads shouldn’t do.

Adolescent Changes

A pivotal time for dads and daughters is usually when girls hit puberty. As their bodies change, so can their relationships with their fathers. It is not just girls who become self-conscious; fathers do, too. It is often unsettling to men to see their daughters (and their daughters’ friends) developing breasts and curves--that is, blossoming into sexually attractive young women. I have heard more than one father confide, “I don’t know where to look anymore” or “I feel weird hugging her.” To avoid this sort of discomfort, many fathers unwittingly avoid their daughters. Similarly, teen girls, who are already self-conscious, may escape to their rooms to avoid dads who in some way make them even more uneasy.

Fathers who are matter-of-fact about these changes, who see them as part of the normal experience (without becoming anxious or self-critical), can take their daughter’s physical maturation more in stride. If you can take pride in your growing daughters without increasing their discomfort, you can contribute greatly to their esteem. After all, teens are empowered by the knowledge that the men they love find them attractive. The key, however, is to avoid behaviors that are sure to alienate them, such as (a) commenting about specific body parts, (b) criticizing or noting their weight in any way, or (c) remarking on other women’s bodies--objectifying women in general.

Staying Close

Activities are one key way to ride out the storminess of your daughter's adolescence while keeping your relationship intact. Regardless of her mercurial emotions and occasional unwillingness to talk about substantive topics, if you can still do things together, you'll be two steps ahead of the game. Just the other day, a wise friend mentioned going on a bike ride with his 13-year-old daughter and then taking her out to breakfast: "I'm trying to do as much as I can with her while she still lets me," he said.

If you and your daughter have established traditions when she was younger, maintain them. Maybe you've shared a love of going to baseball games, doing jigsaw puzzles, fishing, or watching TV shows only you two enjoy.

If she balks at continuing these rituals, try not to take it personally or be offended. Listen carefully to her reasons why and find a way to address them. Perhaps being flexible will help. For example, avoid making her choose between her peers and you by letting her invite a friend or change the date of your outing if it conflicts with your plans.

If you and your daughter have not a single common interest, you still convey how much you value her company when you ask her to join you on a mundane errand to the post office. Even better, ask for her opinion on something that she knows matters to you.

It's Not a Competition

Although it may be hard not to be insulted, understand that it is common for teenagers to prefer spending time with their friends over their families. Just because she is more than willing to skip a special family occasion that is special to you doesn't mean she "doesn't care." At this age, too, girls may feel more comfortable with their mothers. This doesn't mean they don't love their fathers. Rather, this shift is often temporary, merely requiring adjustments to plans and, especially, expectations.

But when dads feel rejected and/or angry, they can retaliate in ways that cause bigger problems--without even realizing they are doing it. For example, girls have described fathers becoming cold, criticizing their friends, or forbidding them from going to certain social events--which strikes them as "confusing," arbitrary, or "unfair."

Avoid Being "Annoying"

It is remarkable that in the 35 years I've been seeing teen girls in my practice, their complaints about their fathers have changed little. As you read this list of taboos, you may think, "But those are a father's responsibilities!" Although your reasoning may be valid and your efforts well-meant, be aware that these behaviors will greatly increase your risk of alienating your daughter:

Criticizing her athletic performance. Says Zoe, "My father used to scream at me from the stands, so I banned him from my soccer games. He had to earn my trust again before he was invited back." Instead, support her effort, applaud her sportsmanship, cheer for her team, encourage her participation, and let her coach be the coach.

Giving unsolicited advice. As Terry describes, "Every time I tell my dad about a situation, he immediately goes into 'Find-A-Solution Mode.' He thinks he has to fix everything. But I just want him to listen. If I want his advice, I'll ask for it." Teens seem far more receptive to suggestions when parents remember to ask, "Would you like to hear my thoughts about this?"

Making (negative) assumptions. For Carly, “a big reason my dad and I keep having blow-ups is that he thinks when I don’t talk a lot there’s something bad I’m not telling him. But I’m probably just tired or not in the mood to talk.” Again, don’t take it personally or assume the worst.

Asking excessive questions. “When my dad gets home from work and my mom tells him I had a huge fight with my best friend,” says Dani, “he starts asking me a million questions. But I’ve already talked about it for an hour with my mom, so I’m sick of it. Why can’t he just ask her?” If you sense your daughter is clamming up, take the hint or ask, “Would you rather not talk about it right now?” If she says yes, you can just express that you’re sorry to hear it and ask if there is anything you can do.

Being Overly Protective. Thinking of their exploits during their own teenage years, many fathers are convinced their daughters doing similar things-sometimes without any cause. Imagining the worst tells your daughter you don’t trust her. As Mel says, “It makes me so mad when my dad thinks I’m doing all this stuff that I’m not even doing. It’s so unfair.” Unless she gives you genuine cause for concern, give your daughter the benefit of the doubt. Acknowledge her responsible behavior with more freedom and privileges.

Embarrassing Her. In any way. While many dads love to joke around, beware of inadvertently “humiliating” your daughter, especially in front of others, by calling her by a now-loathed childhood nickname or recalling stories she would rather forget. For right now, better to be the cautious and sensitive, not the cool or hilarious, dad.

Having said that, fathers can often offer their daughters a unique perspective, especially when they have problems. You can be attentive, empathic, and supportive, yet also lighthearted. Your daughter will not only be grateful you didn’t “flip out,” but also she will realize that situations are hardly as dire as she may have thought. Most important, she’ll trust you even more in the future to be someone to whom she can turn without fear of judgment. Although she still may not tell you as much as you’d like, you can feel good about earning her confidence when it really counts.

Meanwhile, enjoy whatever time you do get to spend with your daughter during these teenage years. Although she may not show it now, you might be surprised later to find out how much these seemingly insignificant moments meant to her.

About Roni Cohen-Sandler

Dr. Roni Cohen-Sandler is a clinical psychologist specializing in parenting; the issues of women and adolescent girls, mother-daughter relationships; and neuropsychological assessments (e.g., for learning difficulties, attention disorders, etc.). Described as an energizing, humorous, and inspiring speaker, she presents lectures and workshops to public and private schools, community organizations, hospitals, corporations, and universities. She is the author of three books, including the national best-seller *I’m Not Mad, I Just Hate You!*, *Trust Me, Mom--Everyone Else is Going!* and her most recent, *Stressed-Out Girls: Helping Them Thrive in the Age of Pressure*.

Dr. Cohen-Sandler is a frequent expert for national media, appearing on *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *NPR*, and *Oprah*. She has been quoted in publications such as *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, *Marie Claire*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Seventeen*, *Parenting*, *Teen People*, *Family Circle*, *Teen Vogue*, *Redbook*, *Working Mother*, and *Glamour*.