

How our mothers shape us

The influence of our mother is complex, so how do we distinguish the good legacy from the problematic? BY LORNA V

When psychologist and writer Dorothy Rowe, 81, takes a swim every day at Balmoral Beach, Sydney, she can't help observing the young mothers and their children in the changing rooms. 'Mothers are so much better now at talking with their children,' she says. 'My mother's generation just slapped the kids. These wonderful young women have little phrases for getting their children to stand still and get changed. There's a stream of positive reinforcement. This sort of communication can open into a conversation when two people talk to each other, instead of an adult talking down to a child. It's just wonderful.'

This rich relationship with our mother can sustain us throughout the different stages of our lives, just as it can aggravate, inspire, frustrate and motivate us. Whatever you feel about your mother now, it's hard to ignore the history between you and how it's shaped some of your attitudes.

'We're either versions of our mother or a reaction to our mother,' says Rowe, who made her name exploring how who we are today comes from the meaning

we create out of our earliest experiences. Of course, there are myriad other influences on our lives, but there are some areas where what we observe in our mothers can create an enduring legacy.

LEARNED BEHAVIOUR

One such area is our relationships with men. 'We grow up seeing, every day, how our mother is with men, and this has a subtle but pervasive influence,' says psychologist Dr Roni Cohen-Sandler, a specialist in mother-daughter relationships.

'What a girl will observe is this: does my mother need to be in a relationship to feel like a woman, to feel good about herself, to be happy? Is my mother an equal partner? How does she expect to be treated? What's the balance of power? With divorce, a daughter may see her mother feeling empowered by taking care of herself and getting out of a relationship, while another may see her falling apart because she was left on her own.'

We absorb how to deal with men from our mothers. 'You learn relationship patterns and carry them until you are able to recognise these patterns,' says marriage and family therapist Dr Linda Mintle, author of *I Love My Mother, But...* (Harvest House). 'Then you can decide what to keep and what to change.'

'As a child, I saw how my mother would often defer to my father, or, if she disagreed with him, would sulk in her room rather than confront him,' remembers Asha, 28. 'When I entered my first long-term relation- >>>

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Make it better: with your mother

- **Help your mother become more self-aware.** Show her magazine articles such as this one, or discuss a mother–daughter scene from a TV drama or film. ‘You’ll find she’ll start saying, “Oh no, do I do that?”’, says parenting coach Gillian Campbell. ‘It’s a gentle way of getting her to think about her behaviour.’
- **Work on improving the relationship:** ‘The best gift a mother can give her daughter is to work on her relationship with her own mother,’ says family therapist Dr Linda Mintle. ‘When you can take any position with your mother and not be defensive then you know you’re doing OK. That’s the goal. To be separate yet connected.’
- **Develop empathy.** ‘Click on the panoramic view of your mother,’ says Mintle. ‘If you take a picture with a digital camera you get one snapshot. If you take a panoramic shot you get more context. Look at who she is as a woman, her generation, the messages of her day, how women were viewed.’
- **Honour your mother for the job that she did.** ‘We think mothers should be all-knowing and never let us down,’ says Mintle. ‘But this is unrealistic. Most mothers are trying to do a good job.’

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>>> ship, I was my partner’s equal and saw myself as such. But when we moved in together, I found myself downplaying my own needs, and moaning behind his back that he was taking me for granted.

‘It was only after we split up and I reflected on what had gone wrong that I realised I’d been repeating some of what I’d witnessed of my own parents’ relationship. I know now what to avoid next time. But I also know there are things I want to keep, like my mother’s ability to inject fun into their relationship.’

We look to our mothers for their take on womanhood, too. Cohen-Sandler has observed that where mothers try to impose a certain version of womanhood on their daughters there is often a mismatch.

MIRROR IMAGE

‘Sometimes with mothers who are very sexy or provocative, daughters are shy and put off boys and are more conservative in how they dress,’ says Cohen-Sandler. ‘These mothers want their daughters to reflect well on them, and might be pushing their daughters to be sexy. On the other hand, a mother who isn’t comfortable with her body, and perhaps had a traumatic time relating to boys and men will put restrictions on her daughter, which in turn makes her rebel. In both scenarios the daughter gets a negative message: that she is not good enough.’

Similarly, we pick up on our mother’s body image because our mother’s body and self-image are invariably the closest ones we might know. If our mother felt good about her body there’s a high likelihood that we will, too. But a mother who finds ageing difficult to deal with can find herself resenting her daughter’s emerging sexuality, either competing with her daughter or trying to stifle her. ‘Mothers can be very threatened if they haven’t been able to accept the ageing process,’ says Cohen-Sandler. The effect on daughters can be poor body image or even an eating disorder.

LIFE LESSONS

Perhaps one of the areas where we feel our mother’s influence most profoundly is when we become mothers ourselves. Gillian Campbell, parenting coach and author of *Love You Mum* (Barnes Holland), says that mothers consciously and subconsciously pass on what they themselves have learned.

‘Having been a daughter, we build up views and judgements about what behaviour from our mother was right and wrong,’ says Campbell. She believes that when you ask mothers about their values and expectations they are a random combination of what they liked and didn’t like about their mothers.

‘It’s when daughters start becoming mothers

themselves that they have more appreciation for their own mothers, as they realise how difficult the role is,’ says Mintle.

This rings true for Liz, 33. ‘When I was small, my mother and I were very close,’ she says. ‘But in my twenties we drifted apart and became very distant. I scorned her for not working and not seeming to have a life of her own, while she couldn’t understand my dedication to my work. It was only when I had a child of my own that I realised how much my image of a happy childhood was shaped by my own memories – playing dressing-up in the garden, squidding Play-Doh, picking wild blackberries – always with my mother somewhere nearby. It hasn’t made me question my commitment to my work, but I have realised how much I want to recreate some of what she did for me for my own children.’

GENERATION GAME

Campbell works with women to help them understand how their mother’s programming has affected them and to learn how to become aware of what they’re passing on to their own young daughters.

‘I tell mothers to ask their daughters to write down the phrases they keep hearing day to day,’ says Campbell. ‘For example, “Grow up and don’t be a baby” is heard as “I don’t approve of you when you’re childish”, which the child absorbs as “I can’t be approved of when I act like a child, but I am a child so I’m not approved of”. Equally, saying, “Be a big girl” to a girl who isn’t yet big can give a very negative message.’

If, as a mother, you’re concerned about what effect you might have on your own daughter, here is some reassurance: even for the experts it’s a challenge. Asked if she has the perfect relationship with her 28-year-old daughter, given her expertise in adolescent issues and mothers and daughters, Cohen-Sandler laughs loudly. The title of her book, *I’m Not Mad*

Make it better: with your daughter

- **Take a hard look at how you speak to your daughter.** ‘Mothers often don’t realise that they are far ruder than their daughters, while demanding good manners from a child or teenager,’ says parenting coach Gillian Campbell. ‘Don’t speak to me like that’ said in harsh, rude tone is derogatory and disrespectful.
- **Ban the word ‘should’ when your daughter is an adult.** ‘The way you talk to your adult daughter is very different from the way you talk to a teenager,’ says psychologist Dr Roni Cohen-Sandler. Even if you think she should leave her abusive boyfriend, Cohen-Sandler recommends saying: ‘I’m very concerned about you. This is what I’m observing. I think that you’re hurting. Do you want to talk?’
- **Be your daughter’s mentor.** ‘As your daughter becomes an adult, let her struggle, let her make mistakes, and be there for her when she needs you,’ says family therapist Dr Linda Mintle.
- **Give her a positive view of ageing.** ‘The most tragic, damaging thing a woman can do to herself is to believe that her total value resides in attractiveness,’ says psychologist Dorothy Rowe. ‘To many women every day is a terrible event, as every day they are getting older. Why buy into this idea?’ Indeed. And why pass it on?

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I Just Hate You (Penguin), was what she heard from her daughter between the ages of 14 and 18.

‘But we became close when she went to college,’ says Cohen-Sandler. She finally felt that she wasn’t living under the lens of my observation. That’s when she could breathe and make the choice to be close to me. When she went to college I let her regulate the amount we talked, so I never called her. Honestly, she called me every day.’