



When daughters become mothers

Parenting books say that having a baby will bring you closer to your own mother. But sadly, it's not always so.

Tess Bailey explains some common causes of tension and conflict and how to resolve your difficulties

Most of us know how it'll be with our mothers when we have our first child. An emotion-filled first meeting; instinctive bonding between them; unwavering support and help for you. You'll feel uniquely close, the books say, and your mother is the only person you want at your side. For many of us, however, this rosy vision of maternal intimacy turns out to be a myth.

If you're lucky enough to have a mother, this is a time when you really need her. Yet there are many reasons why your relationship might strain and buckle at this pivotal point in your lives – especially if it was strained already.

"There may be issues you both hoped would be resolved with the arrival of a child, a new common point of interest," says Christine Northam of Relate. "Yet some tensions between a mother and daughter can't be removed. So there is the added tension of lost hopes – that lost vision of how things

could be." As with a rocky marriage, the arrival of a baby is often the last thing likely to fix it.

Rosjke Hasseldine is a psychotherapist specialising in mother-daughter relationships. "Problems in these relationships are epidemic," she says, "yet there's a myth that you can't say anything bad about your mother, that she's this sacred figure. But normal rules of relationship do apply – even though there's often a feeling that you have to put up with all sorts of appalling behaviour from your mother or daughter, that you can't criticise them. When a baby arrives, any cracks already there are put under the microscope."

Liza and Martin already had their hands full with a teenager and a three-year-old when she gave birth to very premature twin girls. Although Liza's mother lives ten minutes down the road, she has never helped out or been involved with her grandchildren. "Her take is, 'I've had my own kids, five of them, so I've done my bit,'" sighs Liza. "I'd never expect her to become chief babysitter, but a bit of support or emergency help would be so welcome. It makes me not want to see her at all."

The fact is, when a new baby arrives, roles ▶

change. And that can be hard for everyone to adapt to. "It causes everyone to look at their own life," says Rosjke Hasseldine. A new grandmother may feel the title ages her, that it heralds a life-stage she's not ready for. Many are, even subconsciously, jealous of their daughters. You might have a more supportive partner than she had, a better career, more opportunities. As Shakespeare put it, "Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee / Calls back the lovely April of her prime."

Many new mums feel their mothers find it hard to step back – the "I've had three children, I know it all" syndrome. It's fair enough, if you think about it. As Chris, a father of three, points out, your parents have seen you through the various stages of your life, from helpless baby to hopeless teenager: "It's hard for them to get used to the idea that you're capable of looking after yourself, let alone a baby!" So they step in – or stomp in – with opinions, advice and criticism. It's well meant, but not always helpful for tentative new parents.

I found it a big problem. Motherhood feels like this huge, wonderful new job for which you have few qualifications and no experience. If there'd been an interview, I'd have failed it. Then my mother decided to step into the boss's chair. "You have to take charge. He's got you round his little finger," she admonished about my six-week-old son. She'd sweep him off upstairs – "He needs a sleep" – or give him a bottle when I'd just fed him. She thought she was being helpful; I felt overpowered and undermined. I think one of the most important things with a baby is trusting your instinct – no one knows your child like you do. Discipline was just one controversial subject, and every conversation was about how she felt. "You don't need me any more," she'd complain. We've had the lot: emotional blackmail, sulking, tantrums and an awful lot of walking on eggshells – rather like dealing with a toddler, in fact. "I think of it as the river flowing backwards," says Rosjke Hasseldine. "When you're providing the emotional care, and not feeling nurtured by your mum yourself."

There's also 'glory grandparenting', a common syndrome – showing off photos to all and sundry, buying pretty exats, and the expectation of happy days

out, coupled with the complete denial of any kind of reality. To an extent, of course, that's the whole beauty of being a granny. And it's important to remember that grandmothers can feel taken advantage of. As June, a grandmother of three, complains, "They just dump the children on me at any opportunity. Of course I love having them, and I do want to help out, but I'm not a free childminder." Our parents have done their child-rearing, and we need to respect the fact that they now have their own lives – no longer centred around us.

It can be annoying when you feel they're only there for 'fair weather grandparenting' – when the going gets tough, they clear off. But as a generation we're having children later and later, and so our parents are often older. They'd rather play bridge than change a smelly nappy, read the paper than get down on their dodgy knees and play trains. And if you stop communicating, resentment can build up.

Approaches to parenting have changed since our mothers brought us up, several decades ago, and this is another potential

source of anxiety and tension. These days, we are more likely to have careers to balance along with our families; many grandmothers are still working; and there is often more geographical distance between families. Christine Northam also points out that culturally, mothers were very close to their daughters, but now partners are much more likely to be hands-on. This means a grandmother can feel her role is reduced and

she is not as needed as she wants to be.

So we may disagree about everything from breastfeeding to how to put a baby down to sleep and – the big one – discipline. Often, as grandmother Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall comments in *The Good Granny Guide*, our parents feel that we are

too over-protective and not firm enough. She believes that when a parent fails to demand such respect, they are creating problems for themselves. "Parents are frightened of their children, of saying the wrong thing." Her golden rule – and, she says, the hardest one to follow – is "never criticise, even obliquely, the way parents bring up their children; you may

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not agree with it, but it is none of your business. Watch, listen and try to understand."

We all need to have boundaries. One weekend, my parents had my nearly four-year-old son for the night. When we collected him, my mother admitted they'd had "a bit of a fall-out" and she'd smacked his bottom. To me and my husband, discipline is not about shouting and smacking and rigorous control. And just because we do it differently doesn't mean he's heading for an early ASBO. As a female character in Edward St Aubyn's novel *Mother's Milk* says, "your will is what gets you through life. Why would you want to break your child's will? That's what our mothers wanted to do. That's what it meant to be 'good' - being broken."

In this case, Christine Northam advised talking to my mum, explaining that smacking is not something we do, and that it's not on. "Mothering has moved on and grannies need to get with it. You have to be firm and say, 'We're the parents and this is how we're going to do it. We hope you will support us and understand that this is how we want to do things.' Be loving about it - emphasise that you are glad they are involved, but that it is your child, and parenting is different now."

So what can help a mother-daughter relationship? One thing is being aware of what a new mum needs. In the early months, that means moral support, practical help, plenty of encouragement and, if possible, the odd hour off to catch up with some sleep or go for a swim. I have a brilliant mother-in-law who, from the start, reassured me to trust my instincts. She also insists we have a night out as a couple when we visit, saying that this way she gets quality time with our son, too. There's no guilt trip, no "oh, he was up all night and we're exhausted" afterwards, either.

Of course, the whole thing works well for many people. Mother-of-two Laura has a

fantastically sensible mother, a retired doctor. "She knows it would be too much for her and Dad to have the children to stay for days but she supports me in other ways and always asks how she can help."

Likewise, Jane and Chris moved home last year after four years in Australia, where their two children were born, to be nearer both sets of parents. "We really wanted them to be involved with their grandchildren," says Jane, who has just had twins, so the help of both sets of parents has proved invaluable. They live within 20 minutes, and Jane's mum has been dropping off the older ones and helping with everyday tasks. "Mum's been fantastic. It's great for us to have the help, and

GRAND ADVICE

Tips for new grandmothers when things aren't going well...

- Keep communication lines open.
- Ask: How can I help? How can I be useful? What do you need?
- Remember - yes, you've done it all yourself, but that was a long time ago, and things have changed.
- Keep your opinions to yourself. Don't judge or criticise your children, their partners or your grandchildren. Instead, try to encourage, reassure and give credit where and when you can.
- Be as positive as you can be.
- Be sensitive - try to remember how unsure a new mum feels, and how it's important for her to gain confidence.
- Think back - who supported you, what helped you out?
- Try to empathise.
- Lower your expectations. If you feel pushed out, look at yourself first: what are you expecting of your daughter? How do you see her? Ask her, what do you need from me?
- Respect the fact that you are not the child's mother, and don't step over that boundary. You're not in charge, so you need to defer and stand back.

for the children to see so much of their grandmother."

The bottom line, if your relationship with your mother is under pressure, is: try not to be too disappointed, and lower your expectations. As Rosjke Hasseldine says, "You need to let go of the idea of the kind of mum you need - and deal with the mum you have."

Also, unless you plan to do it all yourself, accept that no one else will parent exactly as you want them to. So if your children stay up until 10pm at their grandparents' house every now and then, and consume their body weight in chocolate, it won't kill them. Bear in mind that being involved yet not interfering is an incredibly tough line to tread; think of the times you see another mother doing something you think is completely mad yet can't say anything, because it's simply not your place.

When communication breaks down, Rosjke Hasseldine advises: "Find other points of support, ways to look after yourself. Decide how you want to relate to your mum. Decide on your rules and boundaries and how to reinforce them." If things get really bad, she suggests trying therapy: "Run it past someone else. To break patterns, you often need a full understanding of your mum and her history, to learn why she reacts as she does so you can handle it. This is such a valuable relationship - so get some help with it." ●

RESOURCES

● **Relate** offers family counselling; this includes mothers and daughters. Call 0845 456 1310 to find your nearest Relate counsellor, or Relate Direct (0845 130 4016) to make an appointment for counselling by phone, or see www.relate.org.uk
 ● **ParentlinePlus** (0808 800 2222 www.parentlineplus.org.uk) offers parenting support.
 ● **The Institute of Family Therapy** (020 7391 9150/www.ift.org.uk) offers family mediation. This is a conflict resolution service, an alternative to therapy or counselling. "Family members cannot be objective," says Lorraine Schaffer,

Director of Centre for Mediation and Conflict Resolution, "and if you're wary of therapy, this is a confidential way to discuss things with a neutral third party."
 ● Rosjke Hasseldine is a psychotherapist and mother-daughter relationship specialist. Her new book is *The Silent Female Scream* (Women's Bookshelf Publishing, £8.99). See www.thesilentfemalescream.com or call 0115 981 4535.

FURTHER READING

● *When You And Your Mother Can't Be Friends* by Victoria Secunda (Bantam, £8)

● *Perfect Women: Daughters Who Love Their Mothers But Don't Love Themselves* by Colette Dowling (Pocket Books, £3.50)

● *Mother-Daughter Wisdom: Creating A Legacy Of Physical And Emotional Health* by Christiane Northrup (Platkus Books, £18.99)

● *How To Manage Your Mother* by Alyce Faye Cleese (Metro Books, £7.99)

● *The Good Granny Guide* by Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall (Short Books, £8.99)

Also see www.goodgranny.com

● All books available from www.amazon.co.uk