

# Lifting the veil on mothers and daughters

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*Mother's Day is an extravaganza of flowers and cards. But Rosjke Hasseldine asks why no one is paying attention to real mother-daughter relationships*

**Rosjke Hasseldine, 14 March 2007**

Pick up a women's magazine or flick through a newspaper and look for an article on the mother-daughter relationship. You won't find it.

Click onto any website aimed at women and look for anything on the mother-daughter relationship. Again, you will be lucky to find anything.

Take a trip to your local bookstore and look for mother-daughter titles in the women's section. If, after some searching, you are lucky enough to find the women's section hidden away in some dusty, out-of-the-way corner, you will again be disappointed. The few mother-daughter books that are published in the UK will be in the parenting section, and will cover young girls and problem adolescents.

It is concerning, even damaging, how the mother-daughter relationship has been marginalised by the media and publishing world into near invisibility. If mothers and daughters are mentioned they are often reduced to a problem relationship with out-of-control adolescent daughters, controlling mothers, or problem, high-maintenance, elderly mothers.

Even good mother-daughter relationships are turned into a problem – read Rachel Johnson's column, 4 March 2007, *The Sunday Times* and observe how she turned the friendship between Charlotte Church and her mother, and the Duchess of York's friendship with her daughters into a problem.

Watch television and you will see these themes repeated over and over again in programmes like *Brat Camp* and made-for-television dramas.

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An editor from a very popular women's magazine recently said to me that they have covered mothers and daughters twice in the last eighteen months, which she hastened to add was a lot for a magazine.

I responded that every time you publish an article about self-esteem, assertiveness, dealing with difficult relationships, or any kind of relationship, you are talking about what women have learnt to believe about themselves from their mothers. Judging from her lack of response to my attempts to broaden her understanding of the defining power and influence of the mother-daughter relationship, it was clear that this editor did not understand what I was saying. In her mind they had covered the topic and wouldn't be doing so again for a while.

And in this editor's defence, her ignorance about the importance and influence of the mother-daughter relationship is far from unique. Another side of this myopic view of mothers and daughters is the complete whitewashing of this relationship, as if it is all hearts and roses. A journalist contacted me about giving an interview for an article about the changes and pressures between mothers and daughters when the daughter has her own child and becomes a mother herself.



She was frustrated because all the books and experts she had so far consulted had painted this wonderful connecting image of the mother and daughter coming together to care for the baby regardless of what their relationship had been like previously. No one would admit that this event can be difficult. She was delighted that I outlined for her the very important and necessary flashpoints that a new grandchild will ignite.

Flashpoints that include the daughter reviewing her mother's parenting skills. The grandmother reliving what becoming a mother had been like for her. The key issue is that any cracks that have been present and ignored between a mother and daughter before the birth of a grandchild will rear up in all their depth and colour.

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Issues like how heard and supported the daughter feels by her mother. Issues of boundaries, control, emotional support, and expectations will need to be negotiated anew and sometimes for the first time. When these key issues are wiped away as if they do not exist, conflict is inevitable and then very hard to understand and resolve. Which I guess brings us full circle as to why mothers and daughters are given the reputation of being full of conflict and too complicated to understand.

So where do we go to understand the dynamics between mothers and daughters? I contacted a number of well-known training organisations for counsellors, offering to facilitate mother-daughter training for their trainees and staff. One showed some interest. The rest dismissed the idea as something that was an optional extra. One training organisation even said that this wasn't something that they saw as being part of their curriculum.



A profession that trains mostly women, who will then counsel mostly women, does not regard understanding the dynamics and power of the mother-daughter relationship as something worth covering. But then again this reaction is no different to the reaction I get from fellow therapists and women and men generally. One colleague recently summed up the usual response: "Wow, if you wanted to find the most complicated area to work in, you have certainly done that."

This leaves the important question, why are mothers and daughters carved up into problem areas by the media? Why do so many women and men treat mothers and daughters as being too complicated to understand? Why is there no mother-daughter space on websites or training organisations? Why isn't the mother-daughter relationship treated as a vital relationship that deserves discussion and help? The partial answer to this puzzle is ignorance. But that doesn't answer why ignorance doesn't then turn into interest. To find the answer we have to look at the purpose it serves to spin a veil of myths around mothers and daughters being too conflicted and complicated to understand. What is being hidden behind this veil of confusion?

"I remember being angry with my mother during my adolescence because I saw an educated, bored woman who did not believe that she could fulfill her needs because she was a mother and wife"

When we come to understand that how mothers and daughters get on is at its base influenced by how women are treated within the family and our culture, we are on our way to understanding what purpose is served by

marginalising the mother-daughter relationship into unrecognisable pieces or invisibility.

Understanding the dynamics between mothers and daughters will also bring us to understanding how girls and women are affected by gender inequality, sexism, violence, emotional silence and the attitude that females are there to serve. I have found that in families where females have a voice, are fully visible and are treated as equals, mother-daughter conflict is far less prevalent.

In these families, daughters grow up learning a language of entitlement that females in families in which girls and women experience violence, inequality and sexism do not. When a mother is disempowered herself and cannot teach her daughter how to claim her own voice and truth, the daughter ends up being angry at her mother for showing her a disempowered picture of femininity.

A daughter looks to her mother to find what it means to be female. If a mother shows her daughter a picture of femininity that requires silence and a crumbling up of wishes and dreams, her relationship with her daughter will be harmed. Her daughter will turn away from her mother in the hope of finding a more heart-satisfying picture.

I remember being angry with my mother during my adolescence because I didn't like the picture she showed me. I watched her walk to the shops everyday to get our bread and provisions, looking bored and very unhappy. What I saw was an educated, but bored woman who did not believe that she could fulfill her own needs because she was a mother and wife. I felt angry and let down by her. I needed her to show me how to be a mother, a wife and be fulfilled. I needed her to teach me the language that spoke of listening to my own needs and learning to feel entitled to create a life that nurtured me as well as my family.



When my daughter was born I knew that I had to change the tide of unhappy mothers in my family. I knew that this pattern had to stop with me so that I did not pass on to my daughter the messages of duty, sacrifice and service that had worn down the women in my family and created a battleground out of the mother-daughter relationship. A battleground that is easily understood and healed if only mothers and daughters are given the visibility to learn about each other's lives and needs.

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