



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

The scary truth of raising daughters

Having four daughters is a gift, a blessing I wouldn't trade for anything. I love the bond of sisterhood and understanding how my children are wired in ways my husband will never fully comprehend.

On the other hand, it's a lot of pressure. That's how I feel at least. Being the same-sex parent makes me the primary role model, the standard of what a grown woman should be. If I were perfect, I'd be okay with this, but seeing that I have countless flaws, bad habits, and tendencies I'm not proud of...well, suffice it to say I don't want my girls to grow up just like me. I want them to be BETTER than me.

I want my good qualities to stick and my bad qualities to roll off. When they leave my nest at age 18, I want them unscarred by our mother-daughter arguments, so strong in their identity that any negative remarks I make in weak moments won't dig under their skin so deeply they'll need therapy to recover.

Problem is, I can't choose what rubs off. For better or worse my influence is a package deal. Even if my daughters make a conscious effort *not* to be like me, I'm their default setting. I'm the voice they'll carry around in their head for a long, long time.

Right now my daughters are young - age 11 and under - and somewhat under my spell. I could feed them nonsense and they'd buy it because I'm all they know. I'm their normal. Eventually they'll compare notes with friends and understand how differently everyone is raised, but until then they're somewhat captive to what I pass on.

To be honest, this frightens me. I don't want to abuse my power or channel it the wrong way, because the scary truth of raising daughters is that we mothers hold an important key: the key to their emotions. Until they're old enough to take their key back, we can drive them any direction we choose.

We can drive them forward, backward, or toward head-on collisions. We can take joy rides or white-knuckle the wheel with such control they can't wait to boot us from the car.

So what's a mother to do? How do we nurture strong, loving bonds yet parent with parameters? How do we raise our daughters to be healthy, self-sufficient adults who still want us in their lives as a best friend and mentor?

I think the first step is to inventory ourselves. As the saying goes, "Like mother, like daughter." A mother's habits and attitudes are highly contagious, and whatever issues we don't take care of will affect our girls. We influence every relationship our daughters have. From food...to friends...to boys...to money...to fashion...to God and more...they take cues from us. We're their role model. We're their standard of what a grown woman should be.

So when we obsess over appearance, treating outer beauty as the ultimate goal, we teach our daughters to focus on their exterior. While this may satisfy them in their youth, it hinders their ability to cultivate the rich interior life they'll desperately need to find joy as adults.

When we social-engineer our friendships, choosing friends based on who advances our agenda, we teach our daughters to build shallow relationships that won't last. Only real friendships can they bring them the happiness, security, and sense of belonging they crave.

When we're critical of their weight and flaws, we teach them to look in the mirror and notice their imperfections first. This is often the starting point for eating disorders and an unhealthy self-image, because how a mother sees her daughter becomes the lens through which she views herself.

When we manipulate our spouse to get what we want, we teach our daughters boys are meant to be toyed with. This may work in the dating world, but in marriage, where honesty and respect are paramount, it will backfire.

When we set a bar of perfection, we teach them to be ashamed of their mistakes and scared to fail. We also feed their inner critic, already too harsh.

When we shop without impulse control, racking up debt our husband has to figure out, we teach them it's okay to indulge every whim. Since money is a primary issue couples argue over, why not do our future son-in-laws a favor by teaching fiscal responsibility to our daughters early?

When we conform to the ways of the world, seeking approval from friends before God, we teach them to make their friends a god, too.

Mothering daughters isn't easy, but what a privilege. The girls we raise today are to-morrow's leaders, mothers, and impassioned spirits who will move mountains with their smarts and tenderness. Our daughters are strong and resilient, but they're also emotionally vulnerable. They take our words to heart. They reflect on them long and hard.

Let's protect their hearts and respect the key we hold. Let's evaluate our influence. Most important, let's choose love as our overriding emotion. The roads we lead our daughters down today set the stage for roads they'll choose when they take the wheel, and if our driving force is love - genuine, selfless love - we can rest with some assurance that we're headed in the right direction.

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