

# MOTHERING

Sil Reynolds, RN

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# INTRODUCTION

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## The Mothering & Daughtering Path

*Adolescents transform—they do not abandon their relationships with their parents, particularly with their mother . . . only if they are unable to work within the relationships they so clearly value . . . only then does the adolescent see her task as one of separating from her parents.*

—TERRI APTER

“I REALLY DON’T KNOW HOW I’ll make it through the next few months with my daughter Alexa,” says Susan, “much less the next few years. I’m suddenly like the enemy. I need help. *We* need help. *Fast.*”

Once we’re out of her daughter’s hearing, Susan tells me that the bond between her and her daughter seemed to unravel overnight. Fourteen-year-old Alexa is now challenging almost every decision Susan makes, every boundary she establishes, and every curfew she sets—and with attitude. Hurt, confused, and increasingly unsure of herself, Susan sees her daughter slipping away from her.

Susan had visited our Mothering & Daughtering website and discovered that the next weekend workshop for mothers and their teenage daughters was two months away—if you didn’t count the workshop that had started that very night, that is. So that same afternoon, Susan cajoled her daughter to the car and drove one hundred miles to Rhinebeck, New York, home of the Omega Institute. The pair arrived unannounced at the registration area, looking isolated and worn-out. Susan asked, “Could you squeeze the two of us into the Mothering & Daughtering workshop? *Please?*”

Part of Susan’s confusion was that her friends (along with plenty of experts) had been reassuring her that Alexa’s withdrawal was perfectly

normal—teenage girls need to separate from their moms, they said, and it's usually through some kind of ritualistic, protracted battle of wills. "But don't worry," the well-meaning friends and experts continued. "This battle will strengthen your daughter, and someday she'll forgive you, both for the tough love you tried to assert in between her incoming texts and for being so impossibly embarrassing and weak as she fought her way toward independence." Finally, one day in the distant future—or so goes this piece of CW (that's "conventional wisdom")—she will return as an equal, and her battles will have prepared her to take on her own teen girl when the time comes, just as your battles with your mother, perhaps, prepared you to take on your teen girl.

Does this situation sound familiar? If you are locked into a clash of wills with your preteen or teenage daughter, or if you fear the prospect of getting into one, you are not alone. In fact, you are bunkered alongside hundreds of thousands of other moms in a zeitgeist that seems to accept unnecessary mother-daughter battles as inevitable, while offering no support for genuine closeness. In the Mothering & Daughtering workshops that my daughter, Eliza, and I lead together for preteens, teens, and their moms, we meet countless mothers who are exhausted by their efforts to act as positive role models and to assert healthy limits on their daughters' activities—whether on the Internet, with friends, with dating, at the mall, at parties, or even at school. Just as telling, we find that their daughters are also exhausted by the endless, ongoing negotiations that are going on at home while they seek to form a separate identity and their own way of moving in the world.

It was by monitoring our own ups and downs as we went through Eliza's teen years, as well as by gathering lots of data through our work together over the past five years, that Eliza and I came to believe that this clash of wills works for neither mother nor daughter. Neither really wants to become a hardened survivor of a years-long battle that she will have to hope to someday get beyond. Instead, along the way, Eliza and I discovered that there is another, much easier, and more natural way to travel this potentially tumultuous path through teenage life, one in which having a strong, mutual, and flexible bond with each other can provide the support both mother *and* daughter need for the journey. This built-in mutual support is available to moms and daughters at any time and lies at the ready, right beneath the challenging, turbulent, and often scary surface of everyday

contemporary life. We've found that it exists despite the various histories of divorce, trauma, and everyday poor communication that mother-daughter pairs so often bring to our workshops. And we've seen that moms and their teen girls really do want to help, rather than battle, each other through this challenging phase—a phase that can be supportive, healthy, and generative. So how do we find this different way of being together? How do we work with a more positive model that embraces the profound, lifelong mother-daughter bond *now*? How do we do this throughout all phases of life? And, finally, as Susan and Alexa asked us so desperately: How do we find it *fast*?

Many good books offer tools and strategies to help parents like Susan manage conflict with their teenage daughters more easily and effectively. In part, this is what the Mothering side of this book is about. Under the layer of practical strategies, though, is a deeper, less effortful source of help that I want to offer you—one that encourages you to cultivate a capacity within yourself that *already knows* how to parent your adolescent daughter well. This capacity is *intuition*, an innate capacity and a highly attuned sensibility that we all have. Our current culture, which is increasingly juvenile and combative, does not encourage us to develop this valuable sensibility—one that requires us to take pause, “listen” within, and consider our behavior. This Mothering side is designed to help you recognize your intuition, to cultivate it, and to use it as a guide as you mother your daughter. I am encouraging you to become more *conscious* of your intuition as you mother.

Simply put, conscious mothering is mothering with an increasing awareness of our unconscious beliefs and behaviors, especially those beliefs and behaviors that are not useful or effective as we raise our daughters. We must be careful, however, that we don't take on this practice of increasing our awareness as a burden, as one more thing we have to add to our to-do list in the already-overwhelming role of mothering our adolescent daughters. Instead, increasing our awareness of how and when to use our intuition will make this task easier, because it will improve communication and strengthen the mother-daughter bond. Please note: Conscious mothering is not perfect mothering. It is a daily practice that does not consider perfection a desirable or obtainable goal. My own consciousness and confidence grew as I mothered my teenage daughter very imperfectly. Through this process, I landed on four cornerstones of the Mothering & Daughtering approach:

1. **You and your daughter have a bond for life.** It is together, as a team, that you can make this bond positive and enduring. If you are both committed to staying connected through your daughter's teen years, you are more than halfway there. This book aims to give *both* of you the tools that will help you find that commitment and stay connected.
2. **You, her father or your partner are the most important people in your daughter's life.** Her relationship with her father is for another book, but here is what is true about her relationship with you: she longs to rely on you, to share her private matters with you, to learn how to love her feminine body and self, and to have her new and emerging identity as a woman lovingly mirrored back to her.
3. **Your adolescent daughter actually wants and needs you to stay at the center of her life.** It is important that you are conscious of this, even if she isn't. It is by you staying reliably at the center of her life, as a steady and mature presence, that she can find her way to healthy independence as a true adult.
4. **When the mother-daughter bond is strong, the challenges of raising an adolescent daughter tend to invigorate, rather than exhaust, a mother.** A strong mother-daughter bond is the foundation from which good communication happens, trust grows, and limits are honored. Did I mention that it is also much more fun?

I want to pause here and consider number 3 in more depth. It may surprise you that your adolescent daughter wants and needs you to stay at the center of her life. I am sure that you are hearing a lot about the damage that "helicopter" mothers can do, and you have probably been getting a pretty strong message from the conventional wisdom that you should mother from a safe distance. There is no doubt that true helicopter moms are extremely anxious about their child's successes and failures and, as a result, are overinvolved and have a harder time than others in following the moving, tidal shoreline between where they end and their emerging daughter begins. It is not a stretch to guess that a helicopter mother (or father) may not have found enough fulfillment in her own life and that

she is living her “unlived” life through her child. Her hovering can impede her child’s growth.

It has been my experience, however, that helicopter mothers are rare. With just a little coaching, the majority of mothers I have worked with know how to be at the center of their daughter’s life and how to be vividly involved without overstepping the line into the sovereignty of their daughter’s selfhood. And most mothers are able to have regular access to the intuition and wisdom that are needed to know the difference between the two.

Although their mood swings and ambivalent feelings make it challenging for us mothers to remember it, our teenage daughters crave our everyday guidance and loving support in their lives. One leader in this field of hands-on adolescent parenting is Dr. Terri Apter of the United Kingdom, whose research has shown this to be true. I will be discussing Dr. Apter’s work on the relationships of mothers and their adolescent daughters further in chapter 1.

More than likely, it has not escaped your attention that there is a powerful undercurrent pulling your daughter away from you and toward her peers. You have probably heard from others—be they friends, family, or experts—that this pull to her teen peer group as the new central structure in her life (her new family) is a normal and necessary step as she exerts her independence. But I am recommending that you rethink this notion. A peer group is not a parent, and its unreliable herd thinking makes the intimacy and authenticity your daughter needs at this time hard to find. I have observed that some of our daughters are determined to bring themselves up on their own or are looking to their peers for the emotional support and guidance they need through adolescence. Yet, an adolescent peer is simply not developmentally capable of providing the steady and mature counsel that our daughters need from adults, and it will cause our daughters tremendous anxiety if their peer group is their primary source of counsel and support.

Your adolescent daughter is becoming an individual—both separate from and connected to you. Psychological and neurobiological research has demonstrated that she needs you to be *more* present, not less, as she seeks a new identity. I will share about this research, as well as the stories of some of the mothers and daughters in our workshops who had been stuck in battle but who are now reconnecting and thriving. Let’s be clear: A thriving relationship includes tension and disagreements, both of which are grist for



the mill. However, this “grist” does not have to be destructive to the relationship. Instead, you can and should use the tension and disagreements to help the relationship grow, rather than erode. Even if she seems to be saying otherwise, your adolescent daughter needs and wants to be close and connected to you. She needs to depend on you in order to become independent, she needs healthy attachment to you in order to become secure, and she needs to be guided and protected by you as she establishes an authenticity that will give her the confidence she needs in life.

It has been in experiencing this mothering and daughtering path through Eliza’s adolescence and by teaching workshops together that we have come up with our working definitions of *mothering* and *daughtering*. These definitions have guided us on our own path, and we trust you will find them very useful as you travel yours:

*Mothering:* Raising your daughter to become herself

*Daughtering:* Being active in your relationship with your mom so that she knows the real you; balancing your independence with a dependable bond as you grow into your true self

In raising your daughter to become herself—the authentic person she was born to be—your intuition is more important than any advice you receive from friends, family, and experts. Advice can be incredibly helpful, but because each daughter has her own personality and comes with her own unique set of characteristics—such as a strong will, introversion, or emotional sensitivity—your inner guidance system can make all the difference. I believe that nothing works as effectively as your intuition in meeting the challenges that your individual daughter offers you “on the ground” and in the moment.

In chapters 1 and 3, I encourage you to pay attention to this inner guidance system of yours and to learn to recognize your daughter’s natural, though not always obvious, attachment instinct. Your intuition will also help you know how to encourage your daughter to balance her independence with a dependable bond with you as she grows. And the more adept you become at listening to your intuition and reading your daughter’s attachment instinct, the easier your mothering path will be. If you don’t already have the strong

bond with your daughter that you both need, I offer strategies for reestablishing your naturally close relationship. If you do have it, I offer strategies for keeping it that way.

In chapter 2, I encourage you to use your emotional intelligence to explore your relationship with your own mother as a way of becoming more conscious about the way you are mothering your teenage daughter. What have you inherited from your mother (and she from her mother) that you can embody and carry forward? What patterns have you inherited that you may want to heal so that your daughter will not have to carry them into the future? Was your mother able to mirror (really “see”) you and contain (really “hold”) you so that you could grow and thrive? More important, are you able to do this for yourself?

What follows from these inquiries is that some of the issues you have with your mother may be affecting your relationship with your daughter. You don’t have to work out these issues with your mother in person, as she may not be alive or she may not be open to or comfortable with working on your relationship. As you will learn in chapter 2, you can heal many of these issues internally without your mother being present.

I’ve found it very challenging to raise my teenage daughter in a culture that encourages her to look externally—instead of internally—to find her value and self-esteem, and to look to her body, her grades, and her material possessions to find happiness and identity. How can we be true to our daughter’s unique expression and encourage her to fully express her *soul*—I love that word—in a competitive culture that insists on standardized testing and standardized beauty? How can we mothers meet the challenges of raising a preteen or teenage daughter so that her life belongs to *her* and is not a performance for others? *Mirroring* and *containing* your daughter—two key mothering skills that I will describe in depth—will help you find her at any time and guide her safely out of the treacherous territories of comparison, performance, and perfectionism. Learning these skills, which are clearly outlined in chapters 4 and 5, will come naturally to you as you practice them.

In chapter 6, I focus on the everyday reality of what it takes to find the energy, determination, and support we mothers need in order to hold on to our daughters while we are maximally challenged by our overscheduled lives. *What’s a mother to do?* is the operative question as I discuss sex, discipline, money, and how to prevent a technological takeover in your home by providing regularly scheduled family time and a “village” that helps you raise your daughter.

Because mothering and daughtering is a joint activity, Eliza joins me in a shared chapter (chapter 7) between mother and daughter. It is the same chapter she carefully guides your daughter toward from the very first page of her Daughtering side. In this shared chapter, we help you put your heads and hearts together so you can design your own plan to continue to deepen and strengthen your bond. If this bond is hard for you to find and needs to be recovered, Eliza and I will show both of you the way back to a working relationship. Thus, we have designed this book to work from wherever you are—whether you are already thriving in your relationship or merely surviving and feeling hopeless and disconnected from your bond. In the shared chapter, Eliza and I will “chat” with each other as we guide you through conversations and exercises (don’t worry, you can interrupt us), until you and your daughter are both satisfied that there is a path forward together. In fact, you might want to think of this whole book as a private communication workshop, with you, your daughter, Eliza, and me all working together toward a common end. If your daughter wants no part of this “workshop,” and you are the sole reader, you absolutely can improve your communication and strengthen your bond even without her reading the Daughtering side or the shared chapter.

Before you proceed into our shared chapter 7, however, it is essential that you read Eliza’s Daughtering side of our book as an accompaniment to my Mothering side. There is much we can learn from our daughters if we listen well, and I think you will find Eliza’s daughtering perspective a worthy and refreshing companion to my mothering perspective. And what a valuable entryway into your daughter’s world! I must confess that with all my talk about the value of a daughter’s voice, I wasn’t fully prepared for how much I would learn from Eliza as we wrote—how substantial, necessary, and insightful her daughtering work *really* is. I ended up editing out quite a few things I’d written for you on my side because Eliza has a livelier and fresher perspective—and there were many times I found that her perspective offered a viewpoint that is much more effective at helping readers embody this work. This process was both thrilling and humbling, just like the mothering process.

In particular, Eliza provides both daughters and mothers with some excellent guidance for honing our intuition, growing our emotional intelligence, and learning to accept and love our bodies. You’ll also find a number of places in the Mothering chapters that refer you to specific material in

the Daughtering chapters for insight into how our girls tend to think differently from us about a given topic. The Daughtering chapters will engage your daughter in the intense issues of the day—and of *her* day—which no doubt include (consciously or not and either by obsession or omission) her issues with you, her mother ground.

Your girl is probably taking you for granted much of the time. More than likely, she is way more focused on her social life and her updates on Facebook than she is on you. Or maybe she is consumed by a book series or a sport she feels passionate about. Undoubtedly, she is concerned with homework and how she can manage her own overscheduled life. She is probably worrying to some degree about fitting in with her peers, about how she looks, about friends who are engaging in risky behavior (or about her own risky behavior), and about her latest crush or intimate relationship.

Because Eliza is just coming out of her teenage years, she knows what is occupying your daughter's inner and outer life. As a mentor to your girl, Eliza will encourage your daughter to express herself authentically—something that is hard to do in her current conformist peer culture. Eliza also wants your daughter to know that you will, and can, be her best guide as she navigates this culture in search of a new identity, and that growing into her own identity does not mean she needs to reject you. On the contrary, Eliza shares her own experience of staying connected to me—even as she resisted me and disagreed with me—and how our strong bond felt essential to her, and even “cool” (after some very “uncool” moments), during her adolescent years. She makes it clear that your daughter yearns for and needs your support. Eliza is also committed to helping your daughter recognize her longing to be close to you—even if her longing has been usurped by peer relationships. It was by my staying steadily involved in Eliza's life, in spite of her very natural resistance, that Eliza became clear that she needed my support. By working hard at not taking her resistance personally and hanging in with her no matter what, I helped her learn that my support was essential. She learned that she needed me as a reliable, emotionally mature adult. And yet I had to remember, again and again, that emotional maturity does not mean that we do not make mistakes in our relationships. It does mean, however, that we must take responsibility for those mistakes and repair them. Eliza and I emphasize in each side of our book how important it is to repair after a “rupture,” whether that repair comes in the form of a heartfelt apology or getting to the bottom of a misunderstanding and clarifying each other's points of view—or both!

Eliza and I have made our way through the trials and tribulations of her adolescence (approximately ages eleven to twenty-one) to find ourselves in a relationship that we both feel good about—one that is intimate, strong, and satisfying. I am grateful that our challenges were not exacerbated by divorce, trauma, or serious financial stress, as these days it is hard enough to raise an adolescent daughter well under the luckiest of situations. Those who manage with these challenges are doing the hardest work of all, and my admiration for them is vast.

My own becoming a student of this “mothering work” through my mentorship with the Jungian author and analyst Marion Woodman was essential to our good outcome. But I must tell you that I did some very “heavy lifting,” especially when Eliza was fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen. She had an older boyfriend (two years older—an eternity at that age!) and was hanging out with older friends who were driving. There were many limits and boundaries that needed to be negotiated, and Eliza was frankly a burden to be around for many a day. Her moodiness had me walking on eggshells, and each day brought new emotional upheavals and challenges. But the more I made a practice of imagining that those eggshells were, in fact, solid ground, tread on by many a fine mother before me, the more I got into my stride. Trusting my gut—my intuition—was a crucial part of finding this kind of confidence in my body and “on the ground.”

Now Eliza has her feet firmly planted on the ground of young adulthood; she is self-reliant, whole, and happy in herself. “Whole” does not mean she doesn’t struggle—it means that she has a healthy sense of herself and that she has the tools to communicate well and negotiate the challenges that come her way. We both know that she is going to be fine, and more than fine: she will thrive. Part of her strength comes from our bond. Human beings are wired for deep connection, and when the bond between parent and child is strong, we are stronger as individuals. Part of her strength also comes from her bond with her father. In some ways, it feels incomplete to write this book and not discuss Eliza’s relationship with her father and write exuberantly about the syncopated coparenting he provided. His relationship with Eliza during her teen years was close and abiding, and their bond is wholly different in nature and rhythm and value from my relationship with her. She is in many ways “a father’s daughter,” which itself is a fascinating topic! But in this book, we are about mothers and daughters and

the many psychological and cultural issues that swirl about the challenges for both. So here we simply give a shout out to her father and to all great fathers—I trust they will understand, and as many men would, not mind at all that we are leaving it at that.

I also trust that you mothers with more than one child will understand that as a mother of one daughter, I cannot share an experience of keeping the bond strong with more than one child. Although you and I don't share the joys and challenges of sibling relationships, I believe we have much in common, no matter how many daughters (and sons) we have and love. And I believe you will find that our Mothering & Daughtering approach is consummately useful, no matter how many children you have.

These days, Eliza and I deeply enjoy each other's company, and we talk often about all manner of things. We agree and disagree, and we hear each other out; we respect each other, and we laugh a lot. I am still in a mother role, of course—I always will be. But it's a role that continues to evolve. What I notice now is that Eliza "mothers" herself well. Her dependence on me during her adolescence created a healthy independence, just as her attachment to me created a genuine inner security. She has learned that her love of dance and books and authentic friendships feeds her soul, even though she does not use the word *soul* very often. ("That is your word, Mom.") And she feels passionately about sharing her journey with your daughter.

It is Eliza's and my hope that this book will help you and your teenage daughter leave—or better yet, never even enter—a battlefield that serves no purpose. We know that you and your daughter will be challenged as she grows, but we are certain that these challenges can be the constructive building blocks of a strong mother-daughter bond. We hope you will find inspiration and a shared language from the Mothering & Daughtering approach, where the very process of working through your conflicts together will help you build the foundation necessary for a deep and enduring relationship, a relationship that can be a source of support, joy, and love throughout your lives. Starting right *now*.