

Communication is key in mother-daughter relationships

Yvette:

I am a single parent. My daughter and I have had an awesome relationship. She turned 13 six months ago. Since then I've seen a complete change in her attitude and behavior. This is a surprise for me as I've always had what I believed to be the "perfect daughter." I'm concerned that I'm going to overreact to a given situation and place a strain on our relationship. Any advice on how the two of us can survive what's going to be a long journey?

Sheri-Lynn

Sheri-Lynn:

As the mother of two daughters, I can tell you she will return to you eventually. The teenage years are all about asserting independence and testing boundaries. The most important thing to do during this period is to keep the lines of communication open. Look for opportunities for casual conversation such as in the car, at the mall or sitting in front of the TV. If you listen, are not quick to judge, and talk to her and not at her, she'll talk with you. This is easier said than done sometimes, but use the opportunities you have to engage her in teachable moments. Discuss options with her, share your views and opinions and try to gently guide her to the appropriate decision. Believe it or not, research shows that the most important influence on a child is her parent.

Having said all that, there will be unpleasant moments. There will be times when she is upset with you and you don't like her very much. But you'll survive as long as you remember that your role in her life is a parent, not a friend. Because she doesn't have the ability to understand all of life's hazards, you have to set boundaries. When she tests the limits, you have to hold her accountable for her decisions. If you don't want her talking back and being disrespectful for the next 10 years, you need to establish what is acceptable in your relationship now. Be flexible when you can, firm when you need to be, clear in expectations and consistent in consequences. Remind her that trust is hard to earn and easy to lose.

Yvette

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My 12-year-old daughter and I recently moved to the Columbus area with my boyfriend for his career. For the last 11 years, she's been an angel. She never talked back, was always polite, and did great in school, sports and band. My problem is that her style has turned "gothic." It's where the kids dress in "tripp pants" and dark clothing.

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I just found out that she was "cutting." I put her into counseling and tried to make the transition of the move easy. Recently, her moods are really gloomy. She is always down and has gotten into trouble with other kids and in school. She returned to the state where we lived previously to visit family and friends for the summer. She doesn't want to come home. She says some of the most horrible things to me, and I do not know what to do anymore. How can I make the transition easier and try to get the relationship — or at least some of it — back? How do I make her understand that I need her here with me, not 1,000 miles away?

Jennifer

Jennifer:

It sounds like the move may have been too drastic for your daughter. You don't mention if her father is back in your home state and the relationships she had there with him or other family members and friends. Her change to dark clothing and cutting are certainly calls for help and may be signs of depression or other mental issues.

At this point, your focus has to be on her. Perhaps you should consider what's best for her. She's at a critical age. She needs to know she's your priority. Talk to her and listen to her needs. It can't be about what you need — that's far too heavy a burden for a child to carry. It has to be about what is best for her.

This may mean you have to be selfless and really step back from what's best for your boyfriend's career and consider where your daughter will be happy. Please talk to her now, and consult a mental-health professional in her community to address the cutting and help her understand her feelings and emotions.

Yvette



Yvette McGee Brown is a former Domestic Relations/Juvenile Court Judge. She is currently the president of the Center for Child and Family Advocacy at Columbus Children's Hospital.