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opening extract from

Raising Confident Girls:
Practical Tips for Bringing out the Best in your Daughter

written by

Ian Grant & Mary Grant

published by

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To all the women in our lives who have contributed to make us the people we are and who have blessed us with their wisdom and feminine insight. To our mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers who were once girls and who became women of character and resourcefulness, leaving us a heritage of fine example, humour and leadership.

And to our three small granddaughters, Ariella, Petra and Ruby, who have won our hearts, and whom we hope will blossom in the stream of womanhood inherited from their mothers and grandmothers.

Ian and Mary Grant

Introduction

Listening to a girl's story will help her retain her own voice

Since the publication of *Growing Great Boys* many parents have asked when we would be writing a similar book on girls. To be perfectly honest, although we conduct 'hot tips' seminars on the subject of raising girls, and regularly read books and papers on girls in order to keep up with current research, we have been slightly hesitant about the idea of a book on the subject. In addition to our two adult sons, and one very lovely adult daughter, we have six young grandsons who have been very much part of our lives for the last seven or eight years. We haven't personally experienced close relationships with little girls in recent years.

At the same time, we were gradually convinced that there might be a place for a book of this genre on girls, and when our children last year presented us with the gift of three little granddaughters we started to become really motivated about the project. However, it is more than just our little granddaughters that has motivated us.

It seems that more than ever before our culture is becoming aggressive towards girls. Parents feel they are fighting a strong tide of commercial interests and media pressure. A cursory search of the internet will convince

you that this is no illusion. It quickly becomes apparent that while those who work with pre-teens, such as teachers and mentors, consider 'tweenagers' to be between 10 and 12 years of age, marketers who target this category of young people consider 'tweenagers' to include seven- to 12-year-olds. The proliferation of pornography and the 'slut' culture pervasive in clothing and music trends, along with an individualistic approach to much of life, all work against a girl's healthy passage into adulthood.

We have spent many hours over the last few years hearing about tragic cases of rebellious girls whose lives have gone way off track. Not all of these situations could have been avoided, but the pain felt by their distressed parents — who by this time have usually been in need of specialist counselling — is palpable. One of our aims is to help parents by providing simple ideas and put in place practices, early in their daughters' lives, that might lead to a reduction in these situations.

On the other hand, it is a pleasure to meet self-assured young women living life with verve and optimism — young adults who, with the continued support of loving parents, are able to stretch their wings knowing they have been given strong roots and are well-equipped with the skills and self-knowledge to build a meaningful life. It has been an honour to watch our own daughter grow into a dignified, graceful adult, and a privilege to be parents to two daughters-in-law who possess great character and resourcefulness. All these women are confident and assured in their leadership and careers, and are great mothers.

We have written this book in the hope that in some way we will contribute to you having the best chance possible to enjoy your daughter, and the pleasure of one day launching a self-reliant, sure and loving young woman into the world. We want you to know why a girl's unique nature needs strong attachments, and to learn practical ways to provide these. And we want you to know that you can give your daughter resilience by mentoring her in a way that will provide her with inner strength and outward grace.

Some young girls in our society are beset by anorexia or bulimia, some are victims of abuse and some experience adolescent depression. All of

this means we must fight for our girls and offer them the loving shelter and protection of our wisdom.

In contrast to these negative trends, this is also a time when there are more opportunities than ever before for girls to succeed. We need to provide for them a healthy and clear path through to adulthood, so they can take advantage of these opportunities. In rushing to treat boys and girls as equal could it be that we have neglected to honour something unique about girls, something that women have always recognised — the special and different nature of girls?

This book is mainly concerned with ways to make life with your daughter more fun, ways to keep communication flowing, and ways to pass on your values to the next generation. It is sad to hear parents talk fearfully about the future, especially the teenage years, as if they are to be dreaded. We hope you can enjoy these years as some of the best of your lives, filled with memories that you can revisit for ever.

Finally, although this book has been a combined project, for the sake of simplicity we have used the first person singular. This means the text is written in Ian's words; however, Mary's editing skills, research and wide knowledge of the subject are woven into every paragraph.

Ian and Mary Grant

Chapter 1

Your daughter's future starts now

> If you have the chance at parenthood, look upon it with a sense of mystery and awe. You are given the joy of watching life afresh, and the chance to help another being take flight into the riches and mystery of life. The very clay of which our world is made is for a brief moment placed in your hands.
>
> — **Kent Nerburn,** Simple Truths

I've just ordered woodworking plans for a small girl's doll's house, complete with miniature furniture and electric lighting. It will be my second woodworking project, following the little red rocking-horse made for a first birthday. The impetus behind this new burst of creative energy is three adorable granddaughters, all born within the last few months.

After years of building trucks and diggers for machine-orientated grandsons I am excited by the idea of these new projects. There is something about a girl that offers parents a different perspective on parenting. Her natural desire for relationships and, almost from birth, her tendency to make eye contact and respond to verbal communications rapidly begins to weave its magic in the hearts of parents and grandparents.

There are so many things to enjoy about your daughter. Her natural desire for connection and her innate ability to nurture, whether it be a doll, a pet or a friendship, mean she longs to be part of a loving family. Within her own self she has these qualities and they are your greatest ally in building strong attachments to see her through what many regard as the difficult teenage years. When you see or play with a small girl you sense the potential in her young life and you hope that she will retain her innocence and sense of self. You hope that she will keep that clear-eyed way she has of looking right into your eyes without shame or fear. Yet we hear so many stories about the ways in which our culture is toxic to girls, and about the many hurdles they will face when growing up in our individualistic and materialistic society, where so often the underlying question is 'Do you measure up?'

Your loving consistency, and the love and interest of her wider family, are vitally important to a girl's self-esteem right through her teen years.

A concept that tends to resonate with men is that of investment banking; the idea that to be successful you have to be in for the long haul; that investing wisely at the outset and hanging in through the highs and the lows will bring about a good result in the end. There are significant parallels with this when parenting girls. The key issues are your involvement with her from the start, a resolute commitment to her no matter what, and a strong vision as to what sort of young woman you, as parents, would like to launch into the world.

In this book we have endeavoured to cover the years from the day of your daughter's birth until her late teens, with the awareness that she will need involved, loving parenting through all these years. Even as a teenager, when she is sophisticated in areas such as operating electronic devices, and appears independent and highly opinionated, because of her innate nature and biology your daughter will need intimacy and connection. Your loving consistency, and the love and interest of her wider family, are vitally important to a girl's self-esteem right through her teen years. It is not

only the frontal lobes of a teenager's brain (which control risk-assessment and future thinking) that are not fully developed. Your daughter's unique female make-up means that her greatest challenge during this time will be learning to understand herself — her emotions and feelings, her physiology, and her sometimes hormonally driven energy levels. As parents we can be great allies in confirming the message in her adolescent heart that she is valuable, worthy and lovable.

This is why each stage in your daughter's life is significant, and each will provide building blocks to help her to embrace the next step healthily. The years preceding adolescence are so important. If she goes into her teenage years with only her good looks, she will be in deep trouble. During the middle years of school you have a window of opportunity to communicate and connect with her and help her develop skills. Your daughter will be keen to know what is right and wrong. She is okay with black and white, with rules, and for a few years she will really enjoy being part of the family and learning about and taking on board its values and principles.

Often during these years girls are full of confidence and willing to try a whole range of new physical challenges. This is your opportunity for family camping holidays, excursions of all sorts, hiking trips, as well as family stories, traditions and discussions around the dinner table. You need to capitalise on this time. It is the equivalent in white-water rafting of the quiet part of the river when you have time to coach 'rookie rafters' in all the skills they will need before you get to the rapids. It is when you would teach them about how to paddle, the best way to handle the tricky bits, and about teamwork. The goal you have in mind is that the rapids will be an enjoyable challenge and a test of character, not a disaster area.

A parent's role

Your role is really to be an encourager, to send your daughter into her teenage years with a 'full emotional tank'; with the affection and approval she needs as well as the skills and interests that will keep her connected in different ways with others. Your messages of approval and wisdom should fill her memory bank, giving her a resilience that comes from knowing

she has been prepared well with the skills she will need. You will need to provide her with boundaries about her behaviour within the family and about how she allows others to treat her. Most of all, if she learns from you that she can play after she has done what she is expected to do as a family member, then she will have the foundation for good EQ — emotional intelligence. No matter how many *Baby Einstein* videos your daughter has watched, if she does not have the basic building blocks of empathy and self-discipline her life will lack a framework and heart. EQ is the greatest gift your good parenting will secure for her.

The future for girls

Girls growing up today have so many options. The doors to just about any career are open to them, and society tends to support both their equality and their autonomy. Educationally, girls have opportunities that no other generation has enjoyed and, according to all reports, they are achieving academic success above that of their male peers. At the same time, however, there are particular challenges that are unique to the technologically saturated age into which this generation of girls has been launched.

In his book *The Wonder of Girls*, Michael Gurian suggests that the individualised, materialistic culture in which we live actually fights against a girl's need for intimacy and connection. Sadly, at the same time, our society takes less care to maintain the boundaries that should protect them.

The age of innocence is dead

Richard Lander, a Hollywood producer and the father of three young girls, a decade or so ago developed the first internet filter system, called max.com. Lander concluded, from what he saw happening in Hollywood, that the 'age of innocence' was dead. Even then, he said, there were a million paedophiles surfing the internet at any one time. More than a third of all traffic on the internet is pornography, and the largest group of accessors of pornography is 12- to 17-year-old boys. This means that girls are growing up in a society where there is a far greater tendency for men

and boys to have a one-dimensional view of women, and where there is a proportion of boys who believe that women actually like the sort of demeaning activity portrayed in pornographic images.

The pervasiveness of pornography has exploded with the internet, and we parents need to adjust our vigilance accordingly.

It is not just the internet: all branches of the media expose even young girls to a wide range of adult concepts. Long before they are ready, girls (and their parents) face challenges and decisions about drugs, alcohol and sex. Our culture has pushed the fast-forward button for girls, and some suffer terribly from being prematurely accelerated into a risky and unprotected adolescence.

Since society is doing less for girls' welfare, parents need to do more. We need to be *more* vigilant and take a *more* proactive role in creating a childhood for our girls in which they will thrive.

Fortunately, the best response to all these new challenges is the time-proven formula of parental love and coaching. The basics of parenting girls are still the same as they have always been. Parents need to be both advisors and cheerleaders. We need to make sure that from their earliest days we give our daughters quality time, physical closeness and warm, loving eye-contact.

We need to be *more* vigilant and take a *more* proactive role in creating a childhood for our girls in which they will thrive.

The great thing about raising our daughters is that we don't have to do it all on our own. Though Mums and Dads will always be the major influences in their lives, many adult women point to the powerful influence of other role models as they were growing up. Grandparents, uncles and aunts, coaches, Girl Guide leaders and teachers can all influence girls and inspire them to go for it and to take on hurdles rather than avoid them.

When we visited our nine-week-old granddaughter in London recently I was amazed at her concentration as she sat on my lap and I read to her. I had to compete with Grandma, who is an amazing baby whisperer, and I was delighted to discover once again the truth of the natural tendency of

little girls to respond to verbal connections. She seemed to enjoy the tones and rhythm of my voice (as well as the puzzling pictures!) as I read one of my favourite books — Lynley Dodd's *Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy* — and it became our little ritual. Even at that age she tuned in.

From the start, plenty of conversation, emotional availability and fun will provide a backdrop for your daughter to explore the world and build confidence in her own perceptions.

Give your daughter security

> The kind of people that a baby grows up amongst will greatly affect the shape and the wiring of its mental faculties. Is the family environment relaxed or aggressive, quiet or lively, funny or deadly serious? The baby's brain responds and grows accordingly. Early in its life the adrenaline thermostat — the amount of adrenaline it is accustomed to — is set to handle what is a normal level of stress for that family.
>
> **— Steve Biddulph,** Raising Babies

Be the big person who communicates confidence and creates structure and warmth in your home. One of the key conclusions in a 10-year study led by Dr Burton White of Harvard University was that the greatest influence in building good minds in young children was parents who excelled at three key functions. They were superb organisers and designers of their child's environment; they permitted short, focused interruptions so they could comfort, convey information and answer questions; and they were firm in discipline while simultaneously showing great affection.

Never undervalue the significant role you have as a parent. Whether society recognises it or not, your contribution is indispensable in growing capable, loving adults.

The foundations are simple

A tiny baby's survival depends on her symbiotic relationship with her mother. A child who is badly nurtured will suffer from a fear that

the relationship will fail. She will fear that she will not survive if she is not 'plugged into' this person. That insecurity carries over into adult life, and unhealthy, dependent relationships from this type of neurotic fear and often become generational.

Fortunately you do not need a million pounds or a PhD in child psychology to meet all your daughter's needs. You just need time and your natural love and willingness to be a parent.

We recently watched a documentary in which a childhood expert was called in to help parents whose daughter of 18 months was a chronic non-sleeper. Several experts had already been consulted, and the parents had concluded that the child was so intelligent she was always on the alert, and so did not sleep. After observing the family dynamics for several days the experienced, motherly psychologist who had been called in concluded that, 'Yes, this child is very bright, and she is on alert because she is anxious. She knows that her parents are not confident in being the big people — they don't seem to know what to do — and so she is not convinced that everything is safe if she goes to sleep.'

The counsellor's advice was simple. Create a regular routine in which there is predictability and order, thereby reassuring your little one that everything is as it should be. The simple routines of dinner, playtime, bath, story and bedtime were the key to this child feeling secure and sleeping peacefully. Within a few weeks everything was different, and Mum and Dad had begun to grow in stature as they accepted their role as the big people.

hot tip ✪

- ✪ Have a dream about the sort of young woman you would like to launch into the world. 'See' her in her late teens as a self-assured, optimistic, adventurous, generous, honest and loving adult.
- ✪ Remember your home is not a democracy. Eating vegetables is not open to an equal vote, neither is going to school, or what your children do on the computer.

✪ As your daughter heads into her teenage years there will be more negotiated decisions as you capitalise on the trust you have built up and offer her the respect she craves. But you will still protect her by allowing only age-appropriate decisions – by not offering her more freedom than her maturity can handle. To see her fly solo and coach her towards self-reliance is your ultimate goal.

in summary

WHAT GIRLS NEED TO CREATE A GREAT FUTURE

Girls need:

- To be brought up by someone who is crazy about them.
- To be part of a loving family.
- Parents with a strong vision of what sort of young woman they want to launch into the world.
- Lots of warmth and fun, but also routine and predictability.
- A parent who will be the big person from the start.
- A parent who will be there for the long haul.