

YOU GO GIRL PRINCIPLE 1:

TEACH HER TO SPEAK HER MIND

If you don't go after what you want, you'll never have it. If you don't ask, the answer is always no. If you don't step forward, you're always in the same place.

~~Author Nora Roberts

Teach her to speak her mind

HOW?

How can I teach my daughter to speak her mind?

1. Talk to her through words and touch, eye contact, body language and ultimately with undivided attention.
2. Respect her opinion even if you don't agree with it.
3. Listen.

THINK EMPOWERED

Voice is being heard. It is an expression of self, a measure of the relative health and robustness of a girl's sense of herself.

IT STARTS WITH YOU

How do you talk to your daughter? If we want our daughters to find their voice and to speak their minds, **it starts with how you talk to *them***. *What we say* to our daughters and *how we say it* determines how they see themselves from the earliest days of self-awareness. How a mother “hears” her daughter and tends to her budding voice can bolster her self confidence—or diminish

it—as she navigates the whitewater of adolescence. How we talk to our daughters will empower them to speak their minds or disempower them into silence to protect themselves.

There are two strategies for nourishing and empowering your daughter to own her voice.

1. **Validating Voice:** This means using your power as an adult to authenticate your daughter's experience. It is letting her know that her understanding of the world as she sees it is valid and significant. It includes paying attention to your daughter when she speaks to you about something important—and remember—for young girls, EVERYTHING seems important, with a life-or-death kind of urgency.
2. **Empowering Voice:** This includes embedding powerful images of female possibility in your daughter's psyche. This will show her that she has unlimited potential of what she can accomplish in the world.

More often than not, we respond to certain situations without thinking of what we are saying, how we are saying it and how our body language affects the impact of what we're saying. Our daughters pick up on all nuances of our communication with them—on messages we're sending without realizing we are sending them. Unless we're conscious of these messages, our daughters are going to create beliefs and come to conclusions that may be untrue. We may not realize that we're allowing them to create these beliefs. It's our job to be aware, proactive and act responsibly.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

SCENARIO 1:

You're on the phone. Of course, that is the only time your daughter has approached you that day. But it seems every time you're on the phone, she comes to you. Does this sound familiar? "Mommy, mommy I really need to tell you something." Her eyes are wide, her gestures dramatic, her face is glowing—but her interruption is untimely and she is becoming, well, annoying.

Disempowering Reaction:

This was an important business call and your daughter's interruption made you look less than professional. Or perhaps it was the only time you had been able to talk with your mother, who is ill. Stress underlies these types of phone calls and you may lash out, become agitated or realize you don't have much control. Your first reactions to your daughter's interruptions are emotional agitation. You may say something like:

1. Can't you see I'm busy?
2. Why do you always bug me when I get on the phone?
3. Don't bother me right now.

Daughter's Interpretation:

If we respond to our daughters in this manner on a consistent basis, she'll come to the conclusion that:

1. I'm not important. What I want is not important. What I have to say is not important.
2. Every time she's on the phone, I'm not important enough for her to say "Hold on for a moment."
3. Who's on the other end of the line is more important than I am.

Do not dismiss what your daughter is feeling or what she wants to say as unimportant. If she interrupts you every time you get on the phone, she may be testing you in her need for attention. Dismissing her feelings makes her believe that what she is feeling is not important-- therefore *she* is not important.

And before long, your reactions have silenced her.

Empowering Reaction:

Anticipate the negative belief that they may form as a result of what you tell them in that situation. Ask yourself “How can I get my message across in a way that would result in her constructing a positive belief about herself? A good way to answer this question is to remember yourself at her age. Ask yourself: “What could *my* mother have done in a situation like this that would have helped me build a positive belief in myself?”

Get the message across that they matter.

1. If you need to, ask the person on the line to hold for a moment. Take a breath.
2. Make a date.

Tell her: “What you have to say to me is important but I can’t give you my full attention right now. As soon as I get off the phone/at dinner time / you pick the time—you will have my undivided attention. I’m sorry that I can’t listen to you right now because I know that it’s important to you but I will listen to you at this time.”

It tells them they are important. Your daughter may be annoyed, disappointed or angry but at the same time, she knows that you will give her the attention she needs. But you have set her up. She cannot believe that she is not important if you just took the time to do this.

3. Keep your promise.

If for some reason you can't keep your date, you need to explain. For example: "I just got called into work, so I can't have that discussion right now after all. I'm really sorry. I know what you want to talk to me about is really important. If it can wait, let's meet tomorrow at the same time and place. If it's really, really important tell me right now." And then you better be ready to listen if it's "now."

SCENARIO 2

Sometimes without thinking we use the *fear approach* or *comparison approach* which can backfire. In using any two of these approaches, the repercussions can instill negative traits in our daughters.

Let's say there is the **homework battle**. Simply, we want her to finish her homework and she procrastinates all the time. Once again, she has waited until the last minute and is stressed out.

Disempowering Reaction:

The frustration builds. You want her to be responsible. You want her to take the initiative. You want her to excel and be successful—and she won't be able to do this if she doesn't get her act together. You may say things like:

1. How many times do I have to tell you to do your homework as soon as you get home?
2. What's wrong with you? Don't you care about your schoolwork, don't you care about school, don't you care about good grades? Do your homework now.
3. I never have to tell your brother or sister to do their homework. That's why their grades are so much better than yours.

These continuous comments might instill fear into our young girls or make them do their homework, but this approach will have a short-term effect and is not likely to have an empowering long-term result. It doesn't make them want to do their homework more. It just makes them feel a need to do it out of fear. We want them to "want" to do things, not do them out of fear.

Our comments will lead to a break in our relationship because our daughters feel offended. They feel like we're criticizing them. They feel powerless and may even give up. There are other long term consequences to the fear or comparison approach.

Daughter's Interpretation:

Imagine what their lives will be like as they grow up. Do you think they're going to have empowering beliefs? If we implement fear or comparison comments often enough, our daughters will create the belief that:

1. Learning is not fun.
2. I'm not good enough.
3. There's something wrong with me because I just can't seem to do my homework like mommy wants me to.

Mother's Empowering Reaction:

What works for one child, may not work for another. Perhaps your daughter needs to let off steam after she comes home from school. Perhaps she needs to unload her day. Perhaps she just needs you to look at her as an individual. There are different kinds of learners and your daughter may not work best right after school. Reassess her mood, her temperament and her environment and ask questions like:

1. Why don't you play outside for half an hour and then you have to get to work?

2. What were two great things that happened at school today?
3. What do you have for homework today? Should we start with the easiest subject or the hardest subject? Take a break between each subject.

By giving your daughter options and a way to find what works best for her, you are empowering her to use her tools and strengths to her advantage.

STEP INTO HER SHOES

Try to look at a situation through your daughter's point of view. As long as you communicate with your daughter and make her feel important she will not form a negative belief about herself. Using positive reactions will help her conclude that *she is important*. It may take a few times for her to get the message, but if she believes you will follow through and give her the time she needs, at her core she will become secure in knowing she can trust you to keep your word. Her value is validated.

Your child is more likely to talk to you if you understand what she is feeling. What she is feeling is real. Give her your trust. Allow her to be responsible. Never dismiss what she is feeling as not important.

Make her believe that what she needs is important, that she is a responsible person who is capable and can be trusted. Make her believe that *she* is important.

FLIP IT: PUT A POSITIVE SPIN ON IT

If you think these scenarios are too “over the top” or that your daughter could never begin to acquire low self esteem because you snap at her once in awhile when you are on the phone or compare her to her siblings, think again.

First of all, we may be lashing out like this more times than we think. If a girl hears the rebuff, the frustration and anger in your voice over and over again, that is what seeps into her brain. She will soon begin to believe she is not worthy of your time, she should not bother you, what she has to say is not of value, and her image of herself is not important.

If you are guilty of this kind of knee-jerk response, join the club. If you have reacted without thinking of the consequences to your daughter's psyche and emotional well-being, practicing an *empowering reaction* will build her up. You can heal her hurt.

We have all done this, been guilty of this. It is never too late to change your approach and strengthen your communication skills to empower your daughter.

Here is where you take control. Take time—all it takes is a few minutes—to communicate with her and make her feel important. She will not form a negative belief of herself if you recognize her need for attention, give her a platform to speak, and respect her differences.

She will relate to what you're saying if you listen and validate her efforts and her worth. *She* will be more likely to listen to you if you understand what she's saying. It is time to recreate new beliefs about yourself and your way of communicating to your daughter.

INSTILL THE EMPOWERED MINDSET

The goal: to build your daughter's self-esteem by giving her a voice. You want your daughter to speak her mind and to believe in the power of her voice. If you encourage both a validating voice and an empowering voice as your daughter passes through developmental stages between early childhood and adolescence, you will set the foundation of an empowering mindset. At each

stage, however, adjust your approach to make it age appropriate. What works for a five year old, will not work for a 15-year-old.

Stages:

- Girls: 3-5 years
- Pre-adolescents: 6-10 years
- Adolescents: 11-16 years

Validating Her Voice:

Girls:

Validating your daughter's voice at a young age will give her the message that even at her age, her voice and experience matter. They are significant and real.

1. Make the act of listening to her a conscious, significant act.
2. Realize that how you listen and pay attention to her will help shape her own sense of her significance.
3. Use your authority and skill to persuade her that her feelings and understandings of life are valid and significant.
4. Be present. Children know when you are present and when you are simply giving them partial attention while cooking dinner or working on a project. Give her your full attention. Put down the newspaper. Stop washing the dishes. Turn off the television. Make full eye contact.
5. When you cannot give her your full attention and she needs it, tell her so. Give her options. Be honest: "I can't give you my full attention right now because I have work

to finish. But if you would like, I will sit with you after dinner, from six to seven, in the living room.”

Pre-Adolescents:

The act of listening becomes more than a conscious act. It becomes simultaneously more complex, yet subtle. As your daughter matures, you will hear her expressing a wider range of feelings, interests, ideas and opinions.

1. *Try to listen without judgment.*
2. *Be alert to the possibility that she is beginning to feel conflicted about her place in the world as a girl.* She may even feel a need to give up her authentic voice in order to keep her friends and fit in. Peer pressure begins to influence her. You must be consistent in your influence by being there.
3. *Don't rush in to fix things for her.* Don't intervene prematurely when she is voicing a problem, describing a dispute with a friend, or trying to convey sensitive information to you. Your desire to ease her discomfort or pain by reassuring her that what she is feeling is not so bad, may short-circuit her full resolution of her feelings. Girls have a fairly accurate sense of when they have spoken their minds. Wait for her signal to step in, or prompt her: “Anything else?”
4. *Allow for silences.* Let her find the right words. Let her know by your willingness to wait that you value her considered opinion.
5. *Watch your verbal responses.* Guide your daughter in exploring how she feels, rather than making pronouncements like: “You'll understand when you're older.” This may cut off her inquiry. To validate a girl's reality means to acknowledge that, in fact, she sees something in the world that is real and important.

Adolescents:

This is the time of disconnection. They begin to silence themselves in order to gain approval and to attract boys, for example. Regardless of how bright a teenager is, or how ambitious, she may feel confused and torn. Her needs may drive her powerfully, shaping her attitudes and behavior. Pressures pile up. She needs to achieve in school to live up to her parents' and teachers' standards and to prepare herself to get into college. These compete with the insistent need to be popular, to belong to a group, to attract boys—and NOT to stand out—especially in middle school.

1. *Be patient. Listen for the sounds of silencing.* Include her, ask her opinion, watch for any changes in her attitude or physically. Some changes may indicate peer influence in a negative way. Continue to confirm her observations about her experience. She needs to know that to express her feelings fully is not a sign of shame or weakness. If she senses that sharing her feelings will affect her connection with you or your opinion of her, she may bury her feelings.

Say things like, “Yes, what you say is true. It is difficult being a girl, and it’s sometimes unfair. I wish I could do more about it, but I’m glad that you tell me exactly how you feel. We’ll figure it out.”

2. *Allow her to experience conflict with you.* You don’t have to agree on everything.

Conflict need not be disruptive in a mother-daughter relationship. If you truly want your daughter to express her deepest feelings, then you will have to expect conflict. She’s not likely to agree with your interpretations of things, won’t share all your tastes, won’t even agree on how you should act as a mother. But she will learn that her opinion matters and that she can feel safe in knowing she can voice her opinion here without judgment. Then

if it is a troubling, persistent experience, you can take action, make recommendations or figure out fair parameters.

3. *Let her know that she does not risk losing your support when she disagrees with you.* She is growing and wants her independence. Foster that in a healthy way. Honor her differences of feeling and opinion. Congratulate her on her strength of mind and having confidence in her own opinions and experiences—even when you don't agree with them. From your reaction and involvement, she will learn the invaluable lesson that disagreement does not have to threaten a relationship. This will carry over to other relationships as she grows and eventually heads out on her own.
4. *Do not fear disagreement with your daughter.* Often it is our own fears of alienation that prompt us to “smooth things over” at the slightest ripple of disagreement with our children. This practice can lead to leaving genuine differences and tensions unresolved.
5. *Share stories about yourself.* When a mother can share things from her past, her experiences, both good and bad while growing up, she becomes real. Your daughter may be able to identify with you better. This can encourage her to speak honestly to you. A rule of thumb: ask yourself what kind of openness would you have wanted from your mother when you were a teenager. Adjust that longing in yourself to share what can be invaluable to your daughter.

THE FINE LINE

Finding and using voice in a positive and assertive manner can get out of control. Your daughter will test you and push the envelope. If your daughter becomes aggressive and overbearing, she

may be a bully. There is a fine line between being assertive versus being abusive or disrespectful.

Assertiveness means speaking your mind with “I” statements such as “I feel you don’t care” compared to “you” statements such “You don’t care” which are accusatory. There is a difference between your daughter feeling empowered to express to you what she is feeling as opposed to accusing you of causing those feelings.

For example, my three-year-old niece, Isabella was playing dolls with Davina, who was eight at the time. Isabella grabbed Divina’s doll and said, “This is my doll.”

Divina came to me and said, “Mommy, Isabella won’t give me my doll.”

I told her, “Divina, honey, you’re eight years old. She’s only three. She’s little. Let her play with your doll.”

She said, “Mommy, I understand she’s only three and I’m eight, but I have feelings, too.”

She was absolutely right. I was dismissing Divina’s feelings as not being “as” important as Isabella’s because she was older. Divina did not disrespect me in the way she worded her statement.

Her approach was one of an empowered self stating that her feelings were important. From the mouths of babes—of our girls—comes infinite, innate wisdom if we only listen.

RISKY BUSINESS

No doubt, speaking your mind means taking a risk. To teach your daughter to speak her mind, she needs to understand that there are times she will fail—and that is okay. However, she needs to know that her opinion, viewpoint, perspective and experience are valuable and that you value

her for who she is, with her differences and unique personality. She will come to believe that her voice is power, she is validated and she is valuable.

If you encourage her to take risks, build perseverance and to look at mistakes as learning experiences, you have empowered her to move forward as a contributing adult, a woman who believes in her own strength, experience and voice. When she has her voice she will have power and can positively affect the world around her.

YOU GO GIRL! TIP FOR THE DAY

Be present. Take a good look at your daughter, at the beauty she radiates and the way she looks back at you. Look at her today and truly see who she is, truly listen to what she is saying.