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Six Ways to Keep the "Little" in Your Girl: Guiding Your Daughter from Her Tweens to Her Teens

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Six Ways to Keep the "Little" in Your Girl: Guiding Your Daughter from Her Tweens to Her Teens

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CHAPTER ONE

A Mom's Greatest Compliment



It was midnight.

I was at Denny's.

Having just attended my first performance of a little known musical—"Le Petit Rats"—I was invited to hang with the cast after the performance. (Translation: My then-14-year-old daughter, Lexi, acquiesced to my suggestion that I chaperone her late-night party.) She and I sat across the table from two high school girls. Both were 15. Both were vibrant, outgoing, articulate, confident thespians. One a Perky Brunette. The other a Petite Blonde.

I ordered a tall stack and sausage. The rest ordered cheesecakes and milkshakes. Then the girl gab began, and before we knew it, we were on the ultimate girls-only topic. Cramps.

"My best friend used to have like terrible cramps," piped up Perky. "But her parents were freaking because she's been, like, dating her boyfriend for nine months. They totally put her on the Pill and her cramps are gone. Isn't that cool?"

Petite Blonde got really quiet.

I didn't.

"And what precautions have her parents taken to help her avoid sexually transmitted diseases?" I asked.

"You don't even know!" exclaimed Lexi in explanation to Perky and Petite. "My mom totally writes sex books. She's not afraid to talk about anything. Aaaa-nee-thing!"

Petite looked ready to slump under the table.

Perky was unfazed. "Don't know," she said, answering my question as if I'd just asked her where my fork had gotten to.

Our food came.

We talked about the show, our political views, nail polish—and Perky texted some guy a few times.

"It's my boyfriend," she finally said.

I had to ask—

"Are you and your boyfriend having sex?"

"Nah," said Perky, still completely comfortable with the conversation she was having with the mother of her friend.

I noticed that Petite was trying not to choke on her shake. She was slumping down into the booth trying to stay clear of the conversation.

"His parents don't want us to have sex and they've told us so. We, like, can't be alone in their house. My dad doesn't say anything when we're at his house," explained Perky. "But my mom is cool about things. When me and my boyfriend sleep over at her house, we're totally allowed to blow up the inflatable queen bed and sleep together." Her eyes grow wide. "Can you believe that?"

She was obviously incredulous that her mom was this "cool."

That's when I noticed it.

A simple silver ring.

On Petite's left ring finger.

girlhood

[gurl-hood] *n.*
the state or time
of being a girl;
from birth
to adulthood.

I had a hunch I knew what it was.

"Hey, what's that ring on your finger?" I asked.

The question was like smelling salts to her fainting spirit.

"It's a purity ring," she beamed.

Silence.

"I have one too," said Lexi. "I left it at home, but I usually wear it."

"Honestly?" asked Perky, completely aghast and totally, 100 percent offended.

Silence.

"So, Lexi," smirked Perky, making a recovery from her shock, "since you don't have it on tonight, does that mean you can do it, or what?"

(Yes, in front of me, this girl said *that!*)

Lexi straightened up and looked her right in the eye: "I'm proud of it." Her head made a kind of Z-snappish wiggle!

"You seem a little surprised that your mom lets you sleep with this guy." I dared to say what I sensed.

"Yeah, well..." It was the first time Perky was at a loss for words.

"Would you let your daughter do that?" I asked.

"Nope," she said. And then she whispered, "Never."

Let me be the first to say that though I've spent the last ten years talking to teens about sex, this conversation threw me for a loop. This Perky little lady was infiltrating the mind of my "little" girl with her sex talk and profanity, and she was doing it right in front of me!

Be sure of this—*any* Christian girl is at risk these days. You cannot entirely shield your daughter from this world. I've listened to the sad story of a mom who raised an immaculately perfect home-schooled girl, only to find her sneaking out of the house to meet guys for sex at two in the morning when she was a teen. I was also the one a stunned mom turned to when she realized that her Christian daughter wasn't visiting a girlfriend's house as she'd said, but was going out to buy and smoke weed. Another mom came to me desperate to solve her daughter's eating disorder and self-loathing when it got so bad that the girl

stuck a rusty nail into her arm. I know the risks for my daughters—and yours—are high.

But let me give you a picture of how it *can* be. That night I sat in Denny's at midnight as a seemingly stable freshman in high school cussed her way through a conversation with my daughter about sexual freedom.

And I watched Lexi Gresh handle it with confidence and grace.

Lexi and "Will-say-aaaan-eee-thing-mom": 1.

Perky and "Inflatable-queen-bed-mom": 0.

I felt sad for their loss.

"Mom, I Tell You Everything!"

Lexi is 16 now. Recently, she and I were recounting this astonishing conversation to someone for the umpteenth time. (Two years later, we're both still a little bit in shock from it.) Afterward, I turned to her and told her how thankful I was that she was comfortable letting me into this world of hers. She gave me the highest compliment she ever has or ever will. It's what every mom hopes for, dreams of, and spends a lot of time wearing out her knees to hear. Lexi looked at me and said, "Mom, I tell you *everything!* Why wouldn't I let you into my world?"

It's been my goal to create that kind of relationship for her and me to share as a mother and teen daughter. Fortunately, my life work led me to learn that a mom has to start opening up her 16-year-old's heart...when she's 7! Social science offers us statistical footprints for how a little girl will turn out based on what she is exposed to and when.

For example, after two years of study by an American Psychological Association (APA) task force on the sexualization of little girls, we have clear evidence that a mother's "hunch" she shouldn't let her nine-

"Raising a daughter to reflect your value system as a teen is—in part—a matter of introducing those values to her in an age-appropriate manner when she is a *tween*."

—Dannah Gresh

year-old run around in a miniskirt with belted bling blaring the Pussycat Dolls' "Dontcha wish your girlfriend was hot like me" is more than a hunch. The APA task force's report states that music lyrics, internet content, video games, and clothing are now being marketed to younger and younger girls. The sexual content of the marketing and the products themselves—while creating no apparent immediate effect—is clearly linked to eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression when these girls become teenagers.¹

On the upside, my past 12 years of studying at-risk teen behavior has over and over again led me to good news. My research indicates that tweens who are exposed to a basic, age-appropriate, Bible-based value system between the ages of 8 and 12 tend to be less likely to engage in early sexual activity, substance abuse, and violence. They are also more likely to have healthy friendships, excel academically, and become positive social contributors in their communities.

It's not rocket science. It is social science paired with a whole lot of prayer and Bible study. By applying the factual information I gleaned from my research with an unequivocal confidence in God's directives for raising my girl (and an immeasurable dose of prayer), I got a teenager who "tells me everything." (Don't ask me yet how to raise a teenage girl. I'm still learning and making a lot of mistakes. But I do think I have a good view of the tween challenge you have in your hands.)

As we move along through this book, we're going to apply some of the same methods I used when Lexi was a tween—and others I've seen work well for other committed moms—to your relationship with your daughter. Our goal: to create a mother-daughter connection so tight that no cussing, queen-sized-inflatable thespian, no text-messaging boyfriend, no bong-bearing brainless friend, no miniskirt, no vampire-love-story craze, and no Black Eyed Peas lyrics will come between the two of you in the delicate teen years just ahead. While that is our obvious goal, what you might not be able to see yet is that you'll be building a strong value system *for life* into your little girl.

Getting Started

To get started, back away from the laundry and grocery lists. Head out to your favorite coffee shop for some relaxation. I'd like to hear that this book feels like two moms chatting over a chai latte and a tall caramel macchiato, and that it was fun to read. But besides that, we really do have a God-sized goal in our hearts and to accomplish it, we'll have two very distinct roles.

Consider me your "research assistant." I sit surrounded by piles and piles of research within a library of every authoritative book on teens, tweens, parenting, and at-risk behaviors I could get my hands on. In an instant, I can put my eyes upon a report called "Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds" by the Kaiser Family Foundation. To my left is a copy of the book entitled *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*. On my laptop computer is a copy of the American Psychological Association's Report on the sexualization of girls. I can do the heavy lifting, okay?

Your role is to be a mom focused on connecting to her little girl. This works best if you can just let loose and have a little fun when I encourage you to "back away from the book" and go try something fun with your daughter. But before we get started with the fun, mind if I let you see just how high the stakes are? Turn to chapter 2.

BACK AWAY FROM THE BOOK:

Breakfast for dinner!

In honor of my night at Denny's with Lexi, I assign you to have breakfast for dinner one night this week. The best part? You'll let your tween daughter in on the fun. She can mix the pancakes while you fry the bacon. Here are two wickedly wonderful Gresh family variations on pancakes.

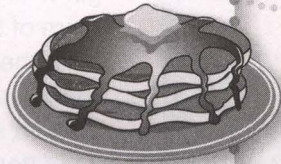


Peppermint-bark pancakes

Great for the winter months!

Chop peppermint bark into an almost powderlike consistency, with a few good chunks.

Mix about a quarter of a cup into a standard batch of pancake batter before you cook the cakes! Top each warm cake with a dollop of whipped topping and a sprinkle of the remaining peppermint bark.



Banana pancakes

These are our summer treat! Make your cakes as usual, but top them with freshly sliced bananas and whipped topping!