



TEENAGE GIRLS

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The only thing worse than being a 13-year-old girl
is, so we're told, being the mother of a 13-year-old girl.

This is the kind of comment that provokes a knowing smile from most women, whichever end of the age scale they lie. Every woman who's at all honest remembers just how unbearable she sometimes was as a teenager, just how moody and spotty and unsupportable – at one moment like a newly elected MP, the next moment a churlish toddler.

What *Teenage Girls Don't Tell Their Parents* is a gripping read, in a fingernail-biting sort of way. Teenagers will read it and nod their heads, there being no surprise in it for them. But for anyone over the age of about thirty it may come, as it was for me, as a bit of a shock. Michelle Mitchell, a counsellor of teenage girls, is refreshingly straightforward in her advice to parents (and particularly to mothers who tend to be on the receiving end of the trickiest aspects of teenage girls' behaviour).

In these turbulent waters Michelle Mitchell has a deft hand and gently confident tone, both in her handling of sensitive topics on the page and, it seems, in her dealings with teenagers. For the first 45 minutes of a session with a teenage girl, Michelle tells us, she'll hear about how fine everything is, about how badly her parents misunderstand her, about how much more independence she deserves, and about how fickle her school friendships are. Then just as time is beginning to run out, at the 45-minute mark, something nearly always shifts – a wall comes down, a door opens and out tumbles the real story, which is what Michelle calls the inside story.

Every teenage girl has, she suggests, a cover story and an inside story. The cover story is the image she wants to present to the world – confident, savvy, attractive and worldly. Then there is the inside story, a less developed, eternally hopeful, a bit messy and slightly anxious. Of course we all have these two sides of ourselves, to a greater or lesser degree, however a young teenage girl is encountering them for the first time – childhood having shielded her from them previously. And it's her attempts to reconcile them, described so poignantly in this book, that will preoccupy her for the next six or so years.

For some teenage girls the entrance into adolescence is no more than a blip. They register the shift, find sufficient support to project their emerging adulthood on to it in satisfying ways, and manage not to get too hung up on their appearance, their emerging sexuality, and other people. But then there are other teenagers, Michelle points out, who hit adolescence like a speed-bump which sends them airborne, with their parents hanging on behind, their teeth gritted.

This book is a guide for all parents, but it's an especial resource for those parents whose daughters find themselves airborne during these exciting and troubling years. So what exactly is it that teenage girls don't tell their parents – and particularly their mothers? Mostly it's not about sleeping with boys, drinking alcohol or experimenting with who knows what and where. Mostly it's about something far more embarrassing and sensitive. Mostly what teenage girls find themselves unable to express is how much, despite colourful evidence to the contrary, they still love their parents, and how much they rely on their parents at a deep level to protect them from the vagaries of the world and, more acutely, from themselves. They may have put a metaphorical 'Do Not Disturb' sign on their bedroom door, and they may display a genuine desire for distance and independence, often including foot stamping and shouting matches, but despite all this what they really want is to feel emotionally held and implicitly understood by their parents – even when, especially when, they don't understand themselves.

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You can't tell a book by its cover, and this book is no exception. The cover of *What Teenage Girls Don't Tell Their Parents* is, to be completely direct, a bit tacky. A surly teenage girl in an aqua camisole stands turned away from the camera, her crossed arms sporting no less than eight wristbands. In my mind it's the kind of cover that suggests an academic press going all out to look like a popular press. Nonetheless personally I'm glad that I wasn't put off Michelle Mitchell's book by its cover because, as a mother of a daughter on the edge of adolescence, it's taught me a lot about what to expect in the coming years - whether or not my daughter and I are made airborne by the experience.

Like every parenting book ever published Michelle Mitchell's primary aim is to empower parents. 'Stop trying to be your teenager's best friend', she urges, 'they're not mini-adults'. They may look more self-possessed than they have a knack of making us feel, however their brain is far from fully developed - which, research now shows, doesn't occur until the early 20s. This explains why until this point teenagers are always slightly at risk and so are reliant on their parents maintaining clear rules and firm boundaries.

They're not at risk in a falling out of the window sort of way - although the potential for parental paranoia will always run high during these years. No, the real risk that you face as a parent is that you fall for the front cover of your teenager. You'll find yourself so offended by her acute verbal attacks and defensive behaviour, you'll be so busy fighting back, that you'll overlook the real story, the inside story, that lies behind all her noise and fury.

Michelle Mitchell isn't the first psychologist to point out that it's when teenage girls are most angry on the outside that they're hurting the most, despairing the most, on the inside. Why this despair? A teenage girl's despair is based on the growing recognition that she no longer belongs in childhood, on her sense that the old and trusted moorings no longer hold her. These are the moments that she puts up her biggest fights. Ironically it's when she unconsciously fears the loss of her parent's love most keenly that she seems bent on giving them every reason to withdraw it. And yet this is precisely the point at which she needs her parent's unconditional love most of all - which is just when her parents, understandably, find it hardest to give.

Although I read this book in one late-night sitting, appalled and fascinated by the tales Michelle tells, its message is ultimately a comforting one. Although teenage culture has changed hugely in the last thirty years the need that teenage girls feel for their parents' love hasn't changed. Being there for a teenage daughter who picks on your every fault is not the most rewarding aspect of parenting, and especially mothering, however it may well be one of the most important.