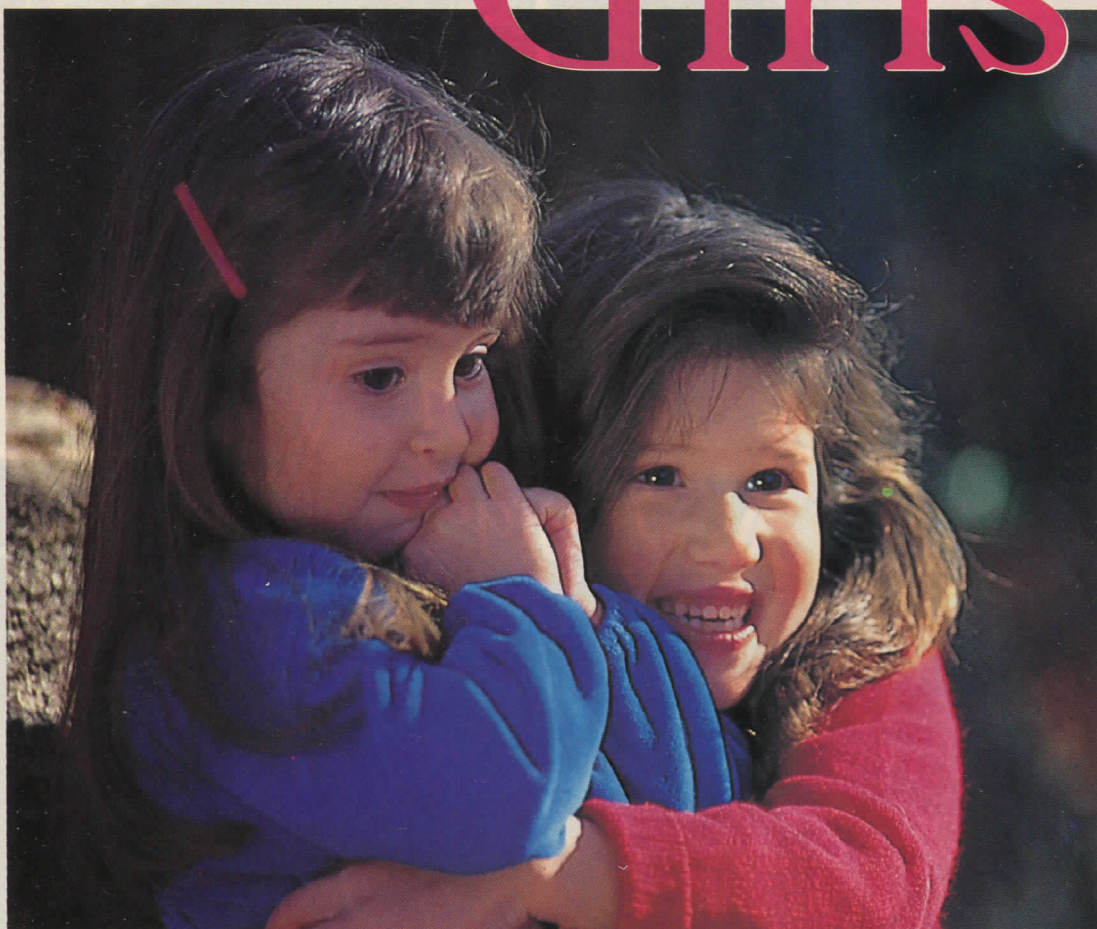


Raising All Girls



What's it like to bring up a houseful of daughters? Here, moms describe the joys and challenges

By Anne Cassidy

As soon as I reached the stairway, I could hear the giggling. There were three little girls playing in the basement, and they were dressed to kill. One wore a pink satin negligee, the second a gold lamé gown and red flowered hat, the third a flouncy white petticoat, long blue beads and a scarf tied flapper-style around her head. Two of these girls were mine, the third was a neighbor's. But I was responsible for all of them this particular afternoon, and my first reaction—after racing for the camera—was to wonder how my life would be different if there were several boys playing in the basement instead.

I've always thought that having two girls—Suzanne, six, and Claire, three—is a double blessing. But I wonder about the big picture. Is it easier to raise strong women when there are no

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brothers to compete for family resources? Or does going through life brotherless mean a girl will never understand the opposite sex (as if those of us with brothers ever do)? Most of all, what is the tone, the atmosphere, the feel of a family of daughters?

Every family is unique, of course, and in the long run, the gender of a child makes less difference than a host of other factors, especially the attitude and expectations of the youngster's parents. But the mothers raising all girls with whom I spoke mentioned that there's something special about the bond they feel with their daughters—whether that bond begins with the love and closeness women feel with their own mothers and sisters or with trying to give their daughters what they thought was lacking in their own girlhood.

Whatever the case, raising all girls is different from raising all boys or a combination of boys and girls. Living with a houseful of daughters holds unique pleasures and pains.

First of all, it means you're on familiar ground. When my daughters began playing with toy ponies and begging for a real live horse, I knew how they felt. I can also relate to their fondness for talk, their emotional highs and lows (sometimes a minute apart) and their bad-hair days. Having all girls doesn't mean you always see eye-to-eye. But even when you don't, the fact that you share this one important thing, the same gender, can help you over the rough spots.

On the other hand, sharing the same sex can be a loaded gift; if you identify too closely with your girls, you'll be unable to separate your dreams and interests from theirs.

Still, most mothers of daughters feel that the advantages outweigh the challenges, and they wouldn't even consider trading their all-girl families for any other type. Following are some strengths that shine through.

Connecting with Others

Daughters place great importance on relationships. This means they are especially attentive to the feelings of others. In fact, one study shows that even at age three, girls are better than boys at identifying emotions.

For many mothers, having a family of people who notice the nuances of human emotions is very nice indeed. Karen

Cameron, who is taking time off from her marketing position with a software company near Atlanta, says her girls "notice everything" and are very caring and sensitive. Her oldest daughter, who's eight, recently reminded her to take brownies to a close friend whose father had died. "I don't think most little boys would have mentioned something like that," Cameron says.

"Almost everything a daughter does is motivated by a desire to retain a connection with you," says Jeanne Elum, a parent educator who with her husband Don Elum, a family therapist, gives workshops to parents on raising girls; they are authors of the book *Raising a Daughter* (Celestial Arts).

In good times, a daughter may stay connected to you by talking; in bad times, by complaining. But at least there is likely to be communication.

This need for closeness also shows up among sisters. Donna Paragallo, a nurse and childbirth instructor from Staten Island, New York, says that when she reprimands one of her four daughters (who

range in age from 18 years to five months), they close ranks. They're so solicitous of each other that she has to stop the 18-year-old from giving the 10-year-old too much homework help.

Reared for Success

Another advantage of raising all girls is that more varied and important things are expected of them when there are no sons to siphon away parental attention and dreams. Girls feel important in their families. Parents take their daughters' education and careers seriously.

"I know women from families where there's not enough money for all the children to go to college, so only the sons are sent to school. But in an all-girl family, all the resources are spent on girls," says Maggie Mulqueen, PhD, a psychologist in private practice, an adjunct professor at Lesley College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the author of *On Our Own Terms: Redefining Competence and Femininity* (SUNY Press). Her comments are bolstered by a study conducted in Australia, which shows

Maximize Your Girls' Potential

Here are ways to face the challenges and enhance the strengths of an all-girl family:

- **Avoid emotional exhaustion.** Although mothers I spoke with were glad their daughters confided in them, they also admitted that this constant need for talk can be exhausting. It's wise to mute some of this intensity by setting sensible limits on how long you'll talk about your decisions. "Sometimes you just need to say, 'I'm not discussing this anymore. This is what's going to happen,'" says parent educator Jeanne Elum.

- **Encourage your girls to excel.** An all-girl family can enhance achievement and leadership, but you must be the motivating force. Give your daughters opportunities to thrive in many different areas—athletics as well as academics, woodworking as well as art.

- **Avoid pigeonholing your daughters.** Don't think of this one as "the athletic one," that one as "the brainy one," etc. Though some of this may be inevitable, realize that assigning roles tends to produce limitations. Instead, help your girls to explore all sides of their personalities.

- **Introduce them to boys.** Neighbors, day care buddies and school classmates can all increase your daughters' understanding of males. Psychologist Carol J. Eagle says she'd think twice about sending daughters from an all-girl family to an all-girl school—even though she's generally in favor of same-sex education for adolescent girls—because it doesn't provide them with a link to the opposite sex.

- **Be wary of stereotypical behavior.** Some of the qualities girls exhibit—such as empathy and a concern about relationships—can be twisted into expectations that produce people-pleasing daughters who lack vigor and backbone. So be careful not to train your daughter to be too polite at the expense of honesty. Encourage her to be assertive, express her needs and desires and stand up for her rights.

- **Make sure your day care provider promotes your daughters' independence.** You may have overcome your own protective feelings about girls, but your caregiver may not have. Let her know that you want your girls to enjoy rough-and-tumble play and to have a wide variety of experiences. —A.C.

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that in large families, later-born daughters receive fewer educational opportunities than later-born sons.

Another trait of all-girl families is that the children are less likely to choose careers along gender lines. "In a family with kids of both sexes, the boy may be pegged as the scientist and the girl as an artist," says Rose Olver, PhD, a professor of psychology at Amherst College who has studied the effects of sex roles and birth order. "But if there are two girls these roles are open to either."

Vivian Clark, MD, an obstetrician/gynecologist in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is the mother of two girls. Clark was raised with three sisters, and she says they were always encouraged to excel in traditionally male-dominated fields. Each earned a graduate degree from an Ivy League university, and they are now pursuing careers in medicine, law, business and geophysics. "The message we got was not to *marry* a professional but to *be* a professional."

In families without boys, girls are often exposed to more so-called male activities than they would be otherwise. Our daughters love to help their father and are learning to wield screwdrivers and fix tricycles. In other all-girl families, watching sports events with Dad is a prized activity. "My husband is very sports-oriented, and if we'd had boys he'd have gone off with them to a game and left the girls with me," says Donna Paragallo. "But since he doesn't have a son, he takes his daughters." This broadening of skills and interests helps girls feel competent and powerful.

The Competition Factor

In all-girl families, competition usually plays itself out in two ways. The first is subtle and intensifies as girls strive to distinguish themselves from one another. "If there are boys and girls in the family, the difference is already there," says Mulqueen. "But children of the same gender must find other ways to be different. One may stress her studies; the other, her athletic abilities."

The second way in which competition manifests itself is more obvious. Your daughters may jostle each other to gain your attention—or your husband's. "Our three-year-old is really Daddy's girl right now," says Kim McManimie, a configurations manager for an aircraft company in Mesa, Arizona. "Our five-year-old acts

as though she doesn't care, but she really wants Daddy's attention, too. They vie for his approval and it causes a little conflict, even though they're really good friends. Of course, our one-year-old still thinks I'm special."

Our daughters don't exhibit much rivalry—for now, at least. But I wonder if that will change as they grow older. "The story's not clear," says Judy Dunn, a developmental psychologist at Cambridge University in Great Britain and author of numerous studies on siblings as well as the book *Sisters and Brothers* (Harvard University Press). "In the early years, same-sex pairs seem to get along better, and different-sex pairs quarrel more. That's certainly what we found, and so did a couple of other studies. But research on siblings in mid-childhood and adolescence doesn't seem to bear that out so clearly. There may be more rivalry between teenage girls."

In any case, competition (if it's not too intense) can be valuable. After all, it's part of life, and experiencing it first within the family is a good preparation for what's to come. And as long as you keep competition healthy (see "Maximize Your Girls' Potential"), it can motivate your daughters to do their very best.

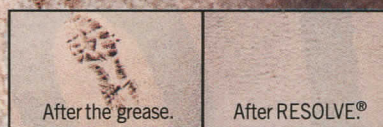
Challenges in All-Girl Families

All-daughter families get high marks in many ways, but they do carry special concerns and challenges.

Boys are strangers. "I think sisters and brothers can learn a lot from each other about how to relate to the opposite sex in an easy, natural way," says Carol J. Eagle, PhD, head of child and adolescent psychology at Montefiore Medical Center/Einstein College of Medicine and coauthor of *All That She Can Be: Helping Your Daughter Maintain Her Self-Esteem* (Fireside). Although attending coeducational day care or school helps girls better understand the opposite sex, it doesn't quite compensate for the close, warts-and-all view of boys they get in a family.

Karen Cameron of Atlanta compensates by enrolling her daughters in coed activities. "Our eight-year-old is playing softball in a mixed league, and our girls meet boys at church, too," she says. She thinks it's important for her daughters to know boys growing up so they'll be comfortable with them now and with men in the workplace later on. She credits her ease in the primarily male world of electronics and computers to the fact that she has a brother and also that as a

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youngster she played in a neighborhood filled with boys.

Fathers can also make a big difference by taking a special interest in their daughters' activities, roughhousing with them when they are young, and by teaching them to play the sports that dads typically teach their sons. (For more suggestions on a dad's role in an all-girl family, see "The Father's Mission.")

Girls will be girls. Parents with children of one gender may fall more easily into the trap of sexual stereotyping. Studies conducted in the 1960s show that in two-child families, girls with a sister chose more "feminine" toys and interests (dolls and playing house) and boys with a brother more "masculine" ones (baseball and playing soldier).

Though now considered dated, that research does emphasize that without the counterpoint of boys in the home, you may come to expect girls to be more stereotypically feminine, to be calmer, less messy and more compliant. It's almost as if you develop an emotional blind spot. For instance, I don't constantly dress our girls in frilly look-alike

resses. But I am tough on them, maybe tougher than I'd be on boys, when they get mud on their clothes.

Another instance of subtle typecasting is how we allow insignificant incidents to escalate into high drama. At our house, a shoe that's hard to buckle, a playmate who isn't home, can quickly become Big Deals. At these times, I briefly long for what I imagine are the calmer waters of

an all-boy family, where the play may be rougher but skins are thicker and there's less whining and shrieking.

"Is that a fair assessment or just grass-is-greener thinking?" I asked Carol Eagle. "It's true that many families will accept more emotional expression from girls than from boys," she said. "They'll try to inhibit boys from crying, for example." Parents of girls, on the other

The Father's Mission

Fathers have a special role in a family of daughters because they provide their girls with their first close knowledge of the opposite sex. "Through their relationship with their father—and his relationship to their mother—girls learn how to relate to men," says psychologist Carol J. Eagle.

A daughter tests her femininity on her dad, and it's important for him to compliment her on a new dress as well as a high grade. "If a father is evenhanded in his approach and is careful to praise both beauty and accomplishment, a girl will feel em-

powered to succeed in all aspects of life," Eagle says.

Fathers are particularly important at adolescence, a time when many dads pull away from their daughters, uncomfortable with their budding sexuality. This can be devastating to a girl, so the father should be especially aware of his daughter's need for closeness at this time.

The best way for him to help her is to "be quiet and listen. Fathers don't have to offer solutions; they just need to offer empathy," says parent educator Jeanne Elum. —A.C.

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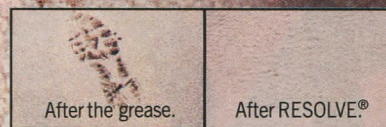
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hand, are more apt to let daughters dwell on every little hurt when it would often be useful to help them learn to put small slights into perspective.

Overprotectiveness can cripple. "We often have a built-in fear for our daughters, which can limit their self-confidence and ability to be powerful in the world," says parent educator Jeanne Ellum. This fear, which surfaces as overprotectiveness, begins when our daughters are very young, and that's the time to work against it. "When we rush too fast to help our daughters, we miss giving them an important lesson in how to take care of themselves," Ellum says. She recounts an incident her husband witnessed: A two-year-old girl upended her tricycle, with her father a few steps away. She wasn't hurt, and she worked hard to right the trike. Her father resisted the impulse to rush to her side. When she finally got back on her tricycle, she rode over to him and said excitedly, "Daddy, I did it!"

Overprotectiveness often peaks when girls hit adolescence. "We expect boys this age to take care of themselves and to go about freely, but we make our girls cope with increasing restrictions," Eagle notes. The result, she says, is that girls

are deprived of freedom just when they are competent enough to deserve it. This gives them the message that they need help to make their way in the world.

Separation is more difficult. My daughters Suzanne and Claire are nowhere near puberty, but as they enter kindergarten and preschool, I feel the mixed emotions many mothers share—pride and happiness tinged with loss. Is it harder to watch girls grow up and away from you? "Mothers and daughters often stay closer throughout life, so it may be harder to separate," Eagle says.

Psychologist Rose Olver and her colleagues found it was harder for girls, especially firstborn girls, to develop a separate sense of self from their mothers.

Adolescence is the time to be particularly conscious of this. While it's important to empathize with and relate to your daughters, it's equally crucial that you let them make their own way. "I want each of my daughters to be the person she was meant to be, not the person I wish I was," says ob/gyn Vivian Clark.

But untangling your wishes from those of your daughters is often complicated. Nurse Donna Paragallo says she urged her 18-year-old daughter to go

away to college because she wanted her to have an experience she hadn't had. "She did go away—for a week. But it wasn't what she wanted, so she came back and attended a local college."

Daughters Are Forever

Mothers who raise all girls love their special situation. They take particular pleasure in the belief that their bonds will last a lifetime. And, in fact, research does show that daughters keep the family together in later life. "In adulthood, relationships with sisters are stronger than those with brothers. Sisters play a major role in providing emotional support to their siblings," says Victor Cicirelli, PhD, a gerontologist at Purdue University.

"What I appreciate is knowing my girls will always come home," says Corky Thomas, a dollmaker from Herndon, Virginia, whose daughters are 15, 13 and six. "You know the saying, 'A son's a son till he takes a wife. A daughter's a daughter the rest of her life.'"

Freelance Anne Cassidy gave birth to her third daughter, Cecilia, as we went to press.

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