

Mothers and Daughters

The First Three Years

Ilene S. Lefcourt

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Mothers and Daughters: The First Three Years offers a new perspective on female development and the origins of mother-daughter relationship pleasures and stresses.

In addition to emotional development and the impact of mothers' childhood memories on mother-daughter interactions, this book explores the enmeshment of personal and cultural themes about being female. Filled with mothers' intimate and surprising insights about the links between their own childhood memories and current interactions with their daughters that lead to solutions to typical mother-daughter conflicts, this book demonstrates the influence a little girl can have on her mother to discover new aspects of herself. In a changing world, where women are gaining more social, economic, and political power, this book illustrates how remnants of the past live on in the present.

Through the lens of female empowerment, mothers' memories are integrated with societal changes to shed new light on supporting the next generation of women.

Ilene S. Lefcourt established the Sackler Lefcourt Center for Child Development in 1982, was the director, led the mother-baby-toddler groups, and taught child psychiatry residents and psychoanalytic parent-infant psychotherapy trainees about her work for over 35 years. She is a faculty member at the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research and is currently in private practice. Ms. Lefcourt is the author of *Parenting and Childhood Memories: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Reverberating Ghosts and Magic* (2021), *Mother-Baby Toddler Group Guide: A Psychodynamic Approach* (2022), and *When Mothers Talk: Magical Moments and Everyday Challenges from Birth to Three Years* (2024), Routledge.

“Ilene Lefcourt draws on over 35 years of a changing culture for women, while running parenting groups for mothers and their infants and toddlers. This is a well-spring of knowledge in the creation of optimal daughter-mother engagements that may help ‘promote a little girl developing a strong, clear voice and becoming a woman who knows her own mind and expects her voice to be heard.’ This book is an antidote to eons of female demure silence, fostered in the name of a ‘femininity’ that is destructive to the ability of women to hold their own in a patriarchal society.

The text is lively and available, with informative, emotionally telling vignettes of pitfalls and successes. It shows how women help each other in the groups, fostered by the author. The growth and responsiveness of these (lucky) children form the cherished centerpiece.

The book should be read by all mental health workers – not only child and family workers, but also therapists with mothers in their practices, and psychoanalysts, who hear sorrowful adult daughters rejecting being ‘like my own mother.’ The more we learn from the observations of fine practitioners like Ms. Lefcourt, the more we can appreciate the psychic complexities and range of mother-daughter bonding and their surrounding networks of internalized family figures. No longer are female-to-female dynamics unworthy of such detailed study, as in the past. Little girls can be helped toward a sturdier psychic future.”

Rosemary H. Balsam, M.D., *Associate Clin. Professor of Psychiatry, Yale Medical School; Training and Supervising Analyst, Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis; author, Women’s Bodies in Psychoanalysis; editor of two volumes on the work of Hans Loewald, 2024; The Sigourney Award for psychoanalytic excellence, 2018.*

“*Mothers and Daughters: The First Three Years* is a treasure trove of wisdom that evokes childhood memories and leads to personal reflections that enrich the valuable information, and a deep attunement to a little girl’s developing mind. This book invites mothers to claim their own minds and voices at a time when a baby’s enormous needs can eclipse their own.

Drawing on 35 years of experience as the director of an early childhood center in New York City, Ilene Lefcourt generously shares her remarkable knowledge and her cogent understanding of the minds of mothers, babies, and toddlers in these crucial and formative early years of life. Ms. Lefcourt has a deep understanding of how intergenerational issues, when not reflected upon, can readily take up residence in the nursery. It is rare to read a book about early development that can have such a profound impact and be equally valuable to mothers and professionals.”

Susan Coates, Ph.D., *Clinical Professor of Clinical Psychology, Columbia University Medical Center; Faculty, Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research. 2016, Can Babies Remember Trauma, Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association. 8: 115–148. 2003, September 11 Trauma and Human Bonds. Routledge, London, New York. 1998, “Having a Mind of One’s Own and Holding the Other in Mind.”*

“Writing in a clear, articulate style, Lefcourt brings a sophisticated psychoanalytic perspective to early development without ever losing the immediacy of her subject – the everyday experience of mothers and daughters and how that experience is woven into the daughter’s emerging sense of herself. Grounded in vivid descriptions drawn from her 35 years leading mother-baby groups, Lefcourt illuminates the role played by the mother’s feelings and ideas about being female in her responses to her little daughter’s behavior. She smoothly balances her accounts of struggles with those of successes, of conflicts with those of resolutions, offering gentle guidance to mothers who read the book. In addition to mothers of daughters, teachers, students of child development, and all of us who are daughters, will learn a great deal from this wonderful book. In addition to the powerful content – my passion these days is to bring psychoanalytic knowledge to front-line caregivers. Lefcourt does this beautifully.”

Alexandra Harrison, M.D., *Training and Supervising Analyst, Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute; Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School; Founder, Supporting Childcare Givers – Infant-Parent Mental Health Training Nonprofit Throughout the World*

“Mothers and Daughters: The First Three Years is Ilene Lefcourt’s most recent contribution to the literature on the early development of the parent-child relationship. This rich volume completes a quartet of books that draw upon Ms. Lefcourt’s vast experience running a center for parents and their very young children. The book incorporates an enormous amount of literature and knowledge relating to the first three years of life, as well as being written in simple and elegant prose that makes complex ideas lucidly understandable.

Ms. Lefcourt reveals with clinical acuity, how aspects of a mother’s history and her own unconscious representations can affect her relationship with her daughter. As in the best writing, this is always done through the technique of ‘show, don’t tell.’ Ms. Lefcourt illustrates her book with moving vignettes: beautifully written composites which demonstrate how readily the mother-daughter relationship can activate a mother’s unconscious and lead to troublesome repetitions of the past in the present. Given the greater likelihood of identification (or dis-identification) with a child of the same sex, it is no exaggeration to say that Ms. Lefcourt is easily one of the most informed insiders to report back from this domain. It is perhaps not surprising that this latest volume would focus specifically on the development of the mother-daughter relationship.

Ms. Lefcourt is a master at illuminating, in her vivid examples, which are always skillfully interpolated with developmental theory, how the past can become the present if a mother is not given the space to reflect upon the ways her daughter’s very existence can trigger unconscious reverberations of the past. The fortunate mothers in her groups benefited not only from Ms. Lefcourt’s astute observations as the leader of the group, but also from their own identifications with other mothers and daughters, and were able to develop the crucial tool of reflective function. Sensitively spotlighting the personal and cultural prism

of gender to refract aspects of development, Ms. Lefcourt's latest book is actually a handbook that should be required reading for any and all mothers who are raising young daughters. It has depth, practicality, and most of all, it makes riveting reading."

Susan Scheftel, Ph.D., *Assistant Clinical Professor of Medical Psychology in Psychiatry Columbia Psychoanalytic Center for Training and Research; Former Program Chair Association for Psychoanalytic Medicine; Vice President, Margaret Mahler Foundation for Child Development, Author, Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, Papers on Childhood and Creativity*

"As a researcher who has been studying and following families at high risk for depression across generations for 40 years, it is absolutely refreshing to read Ilene Lefcourt's book about mothers and daughters. The detailed clinical stories are fascinating as they provide insights into the mechanisms, that is, how disturbances in mother-daughter relationships can begin. Most importantly, this book provides helpful directions on how relationships can be repaired and how the damage may have happened in the first place. Mothers with daughters of any age will recognize the origins of current interactions with their daughters and will benefit from their insights. In addition to being a useful parenting book, *Mothers and Daughters: The First Three Years* is an important enrichment to research studies."

Myrna M. Weissman, Ph.D., *Diane Goldman Kemper Family Professor of Epidemiology and Psychiatry. Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons. Inventor of Interpersonal Psychotherapy. Weissman M. and Mootz, 2024. Interpersonal Psychotherapy: A Global Reach. Oxford Press*

Mothers and Daughters

The First Three Years

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About the Author

Ilene S. Lefcourt brings her unique experience with mothers and daughters during the earliest years of their relationship to understanding female development. Ms. Lefcourt established the Sackler Lefcourt Center for Child Development in New York City in 1982. She was the director, led the mother-baby-toddler groups, and provided developmental consultation to parents for over 35 years. She taught child psychiatry residents and psychoanalytic parent-infant psychotherapy trainees about her work. Within a changing culture where women have more economic, political, and social power, Ms. Lefcourt explores the intimate, true stories about mothers' childhood memories and their current interactions with their baby and toddler girls.

Ms. Lefcourt is a faculty member at the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research Parent-Infant Program. She is currently in private practice. She is the author of *Parenting and Childhood Memories: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Reverberating Ghosts and Magic* (2021), *Mother-Baby Toddler Group Guide: A Psychodynamic Approach* (2023), and *When Mothers Talk: Magical Moments and Everyday Challenges from Birth to Three Years* (2024). Website: ilenelefcourt.com

Acknowledgments

As the mother-daughter attachment relationship is central to a girl's development, so too are my professional attachment relationships central to my work. Selma Fraiberg's historic paper, "Ghosts in the Nursery," is a landmark for me, and her book *The Magic Years* is an essential perspective on a child's developing mind. *The Reproduction of Mothering* by Nancy Chodorow set the psychoanalytic discussion of motherhood in a sociological context – a major contribution. A special thank you to Rosemary Balsam and Myrna Weissman, whose expertise is not in early development, but each an expert in her field for believing that there is broad value in *Mothers and Daughters: The First Three Years*. Myrna Weissman's years of intergenerational depression research, her astute mind, numerous publications, and comments on multiple drafts, in addition to her everlasting support have been invaluable. I also wish to thank my infant mental health colleagues and friends, who gave generously of their knowledge and wisdom. They not only contributed to my thinking about the ideas at the core of this project, but to me personally. They shared their intimate stories and professional experiences. When uncertain, they reassured me. Their thoughtful comments on manuscript drafts at various points in the writing process were invaluable. Susan Coates' cogent ideas about childhood trauma and gender are integral to this book. Her thoughtful readings of several manuscript drafts helped to sculpt many details. I thank Alexandra Harrison for her indefatigable, international, intercultural work with mothers, babies, and community health-care providers. Her broad perspective and continuing collaborations help to clarify my thinking. Emily Jane Goodman's judicial and women's rights perspective informs my thinking. Her ongoing support and manuscript comments always encourage me. I frequently returned to Alicia Lieberman's classics (2018), "Angels in the Nursery" and *The Emotional Life of a Toddler* for her wisdom and inspiration. I relied heavily on Robert Michels' breadth of knowledge and intellectual acumen. Patricia Nachman's developmental and clinical clarity guided me throughout. Wendy Olesker's observations of early child development and male-female differences were an essential compass. Meriamne Singer's careful consideration of the ideas that I struggled with provided needed coherence and precision. I also wish to thank: Gail Davis, Toby Golick, Edith Gould, Judy Levitan, Robert Horn, Janice Lieberman, and Alanna Levine. Their thoughtful, and always helpful critiques of multiple drafts of *Mothers and Daughters* refined my thinking and honed the final text.

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Introduction

The moment a woman hears “It’s a girl!” her ideas about what being a girl means are set in motion. During the first three years of her daughter’s life, a mother’s own childhood experiences are reawakened and new ideas crystallize. She contemplates some ideas explicitly while others occupy her mind subliminally with the potential to emerge into conscious awareness. A mother’s own activated childhood memories that mingle with current cultural themes contribute to her aspirations for her daughter. Historically, when girls did not have the opportunities that they have today and women could not achieve what they do today, being a “good girl,” which meant obediently complying with prescribed gender roles, was overvalued. Today, in contrast, a girl knowing what she thinks, how she feels and the significance of how she feels, and believing that she is able to attain what she wants are clearly valued. A girl’s first relationships create the foundation for achieving these goals. Early mother-daughter interactions can create enduring bedrock.

This book is about the earliest mother-daughter relationship. It is about the ways in which a mother’s feelings and ideas about being female – both her reawakened little girl feelings and her adult woman feelings – are deliberately and inadvertently communicated to her daughter during the first three years of life. The clashes between mothers’ goals for their daughters and the ubiquitous aspects of early child development that create conflict in mother-baby and mother-toddler interactions are discussed. Although universal aspects of early child development create the same typical parent-child conflicts with both girls and boys, with mothers and fathers (Lefcourt, I. 2021), the conflicts may have different meanings and outcomes. This book focuses on mothers and daughters. The child development theories presented offer an approach to the typical conflicts that emerge between mothers and daughters. The goal is to promote a little girl developing a strong, clear voice, and growing into a woman who knows her own mind and expects her voice to be heard. The inevitable mother-daughter conflicts that arise and the ways in which they can be resolved are described in an effort to promote sturdy development leading to success in the world and happiness in relationships.

For over 35 years at a neighborhood program in New York City, I led discussion groups for mothers with their babies and toddlers (Lefcourt, I. 2023). About 500 of the children were girls. The women were well-educated; some had jobs, some were on maternity leave, and others were uncertain about their future careers. Women

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joined the groups with their first-born and later born babies and toddlers to learn more about child development, to meet other mothers, and for their children to be in a playgroup. Groups met once or twice weekly for an hour, for one to three years. Discussions focused on the underlying meanings of both the children's and the mothers' behavior and on the impact of the mothers' own childhood memories on interactions with their babies and toddlers. The mothers' childhood memories that emerged illustrated the ways in which the mothers' experiences as little girls were reactivated in interactions with their daughters. Mothers' memories and insights revealed solutions to everyday difficulties with their daughters. The mothers' reflections illustrated the impact little girls have on their mothers to see the world through their daughters' eyes.

In order to maintain confidentiality, all examples are disguised, fictionalized composites of the participating mothers and daughters in my groups. While each mother and her daughter are unique and their histories and current life circumstances are specific, the examples presented illustrate universals about mothering and being a little girl. In addition, scenes from movies and books are used to provide a framework to discuss how personal and cultural themes are enmeshed. Furthermore, while it is evident that the father-daughter relationship has a profound influence on a little girl's development, and in every family where there are two parents each relationship influences the others, and when there are siblings, grandparents, and other caregivers they also influence early development, this book focuses on the mother-daughter relationship.

Between 1982 and 2020, the years in which I led mothers' discussion groups, the voice of feminism grew louder. Legal and political battles about equal rights for women were fought; many were won and others continue. Women's Studies programs at universities expanded. The idea of date-rape was introduced and legally recognized. The "Me Too" movement enabled women to report sexual harassment and rape that had often gone unacknowledged and unpunished. Guidelines about sexual consent were debated; some were established. Women gained more political, legal, and economic power. These changes influenced mother-daughter interactions; little girls had more potential, and this was communicated to them.

As I began to write about my work with mothers and their little girls, the 1958 movie *Gigi* came to mind. When I was a young girl, the opening scene in 1900 Paris painted a vivid picture of a girl's value. At the time I had been enchanted, (as were the women who participated in an informal survey), but now realize that the surface pretty picture concealed a disturbing subtext. While girls frolicked with abandon, the song "Thank Heaven for Little Girls" seemed adoring, as might be imagined from the title. In sharp contrast, the next words of the song are devaluing but went unnoticed: "Thank heaven for little girls ... so helpless and appealing ... without them what would little boys do." Today, what jumps out about these words is the idea that little girls appearing helpless are appealing, and that their purpose and value is the pleasure that they provide for boys. For many girls without awareness, the diminishing words were absorbed as a prescription. For some women, the unacknowledged words were part of their belittled identity that they wanted to shed. Yet, *Gigi* won nine Oscars and in 1991 was selected by the Library of

Congress to be preserved in the United States National Film Registry. Many of the ideas about being a girl that are dramatized in the movie have also been preserved in our cultural unconscious and passed from one generation to the next. As illustrated throughout this book, even ideas that mothers reject intellectually can remain emotionally active and be communicated to their daughters.

During interactions with their daughters, without awareness, rejected ideas that are embedded in a mother's personal history and the current culture can emerge. Feelings connected to rejected ideas can erupt. Today when watching *Gigi*, Maurice Chevalier singing "Thank Heaven for Little Girls" may evoke disturbing feelings. He may be seen as a predator: a dapper wolf preying on little girls and women. In fact he brags about his romantic conquests and sneers with contempt at unmarried women. In the past his swagger may have been appealing and imply protection of the girls in the background excitedly giggling while they play. His contempt for unmarried women may have been shared by the viewing public so it went unnoticed. When Gigi skips past him and drops her books at his feet, he rescues them. She pauses cautiously, but compliantly. Her story unravels. Gigi is being raised to be the kept mistress of a wealthy man. She is surrounded by lovers, but denies any desire of her own. At first she defiantly rejects the mistress arrangement proposed by an eligible man and he walks away. Gigi then accepts the role which moves him to surrender and offer marriage to her. Marriage is portrayed in the film as a path to dignity. Although Gigi wins marriage and respect, she sacrifices her own vitality; she assumes a stiff, haughty posture.

Decades later, a variation of these themes was depicted in the 1990 film *Pretty Woman*. The heroine is a street prostitute in present-day California who finds true love with her wealthy, confirmed bachelor client who dresses her elegantly, introduces her to opera, polo, and fancy French restaurants, and offers her financial security. When she ultimately rejects his offer to be his mistress, he proposes marriage and dramatizes rescuing her. She declares, "I will rescue you right back." In both movies, produced more than thirty years apart, in settings almost a hundred years apart, marriage is portrayed as a measure of a women's self-worth and is cloaked in fantasies of happily-ever-after.

In 2020 the song "One Margarita" was released. More than half a century after *Gigi* it is in many ways a new version of Gigi's song "The Night They Invented Champagne." As Gigi enjoys her first sips of champagne, her sexual passion is awakened and revealed in a naïve, childlike manner. Although the sexually explicit lines that quickly went viral "Gimme one margarita, I'ma open my legs; gimme two margaritas, I'ma give you some head..." are more sexually graphic, than those that Gigi sings, both songs depict alcohol dissolving barriers for girls to pursue sex. The changes in popular culture, including more explicit sexual content in songs, films, and books, the clothes of young girls that expose bare shoulders, midriffs, and legs, and sexually evocative teen videos on Tik Tok, may conceal the fact that while many things have changed some old ideas about what it means to be female remain.

In 2023, the film *Barbie* captured the imagination of four generations of daughters: grandmothers, mothers, teenagers, and little girls. The millions of viewers,

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billions of dollars generated, and popular and scholarly commentary were staggering. Why did a movie about a doll for girls get so much attention? One answer is that the little girl in a woman lives on in her memories and continues to influence her.

The courtships dramatized in the movies *Gigi* and *Pretty Woman* may be caricatures of dating rituals and gender roles from the past that persist transformed superficially. Similarly, remnants of the past are intertwined in mother-daughter interactions. Awareness of the seemingly paradoxical aspect of memories, an interweaving of past and present, can promote self-understanding and a greater understanding of a little girl and early mother-daughter interactions.

This book discusses the ways in which ideas about being female – those that are embraced, those that are rejected, and those that are embedded in childhood memories – are handed down from mother to daughter, often without awareness, during the first three years of life. It explores the process by which a baby girl begins to self-identify as female. This book is also about the ways in which having a baby girl influences a woman's evolving ideas about herself and what it means to be female.

Contemporary picture books for babies and toddlers tell the women's liberation story and praise its leaders. Scholarly and inspirational books about women's achievements include the social and cultural changes that have occurred. Filled with mothers' insights about the links between their own childhood memories and current interactions with their daughters, this book illuminates the influence that little girls can have on their mothers to see the world and themselves differently and lead to solutions to typical mother-daughter conflicts that empower their daughters.

1 Mother-Daughter Relationship Themes

Novels, memoirs, and films about mothers and daughters that enchant and inspire, or terrify and horrify, capture our imagination because they portray something real about mother-daughter relationships. *Mommie Dearest*, a memoir written by the renowned actress Joan Crawford's daughter, Christine Crawford, is a good example: few mothers actually try to strangle their young daughters, but many daughters feel emotionally strangled by their mothers (Crawford, C. 1978). Many films and books about mothers and their daughters embody the ongoing complexities of the mother-daughter relationship.

There are four entwined themes that can help us to understand mother-daughter interactions: (1) Being the Same and Being Different, (2) Attachment Needs and Autonomy Strivings, (3) Identifying with and Individuating from, and (4) Pleasing Oneself and Pleasing Others. These themes also help to understand the multiple meanings of mothers' childhood memories that get activated and influence mother-baby and mother-toddler interactions. Although the themes are conceptualized in terms of opposites, and the interpersonal and intrapsychic dynamics that they describe have variable concrete and abstract components, they co-exist and simultaneously influence the behavior of both the mother and the child. The themes help to understand the typical mother-daughter conflicts that arise during the first three years and ways to resolve them that promote sturdy emotional development and fulfilling motherhood.

Being The Same and Being Different

Being identified as female is the first documented designation of a baby being the same as her mother. A mother's reactions to having a baby girl are influenced by what being female means to her and by what being female means in her family and in the larger world. Furthermore, a mother's reactions to having a daughter may be influenced by what it means to the mother that her baby is the same sex as she is. With and without the mother's awareness, being the same sex can have a profound impact on their interactions. For the mother, the sex of her baby may be the fulfillment of a wish, a disappointment, or may elicit feelings that neutralize a prior preference. In other words, in response to her actual baby, a mother's wished-for baby can fade as her actual baby becomes claimed by her as "my baby."

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Being the same as someone else is often valued; it can be validating. Adolescent girls play being the same; for example, dressing alike or speaking a secret language to create an exclusive private universe of two. Often friendships and romances are kindled by shared interests, preferences, and philosophies. Similarities can be attractive, but they can also intensify rivalry. Kaitlin explained during a mothers' group:

"I always thought I had beautiful hair. It is still my best feature. Fiona is only two and a half, but already she has beautiful, long, thick hair just like mine. People are always admiring her hair. No one even notices my hair anymore. I can't believe I feel competitive with my own daughter. I remember when I was a teenager my mother always complained, "Men used to look at me, but when we are together they only look at you." I guess I feel the same way my mother did."

Maya added to the discussion:

"Yvette is 3 years old and has beautiful long blond, wavy hair with natural highlights like her dad. I wish I had her hair. I have short, mousy, brown straggly hair, but it doesn't matter to Yvette. Yesterday she told me that she does not like her hair and wants her hair to look like mine. Maybe she knows how envious I am. I hope she will enjoy her beautiful hair when she is older, but I can't help that I wish I had her hair."

For Kaitlin, her daughter having hair that is admired diminishes the positive feelings that she has about her own hair, fuels her rivalry with her daughter, and reminds her of her mother's similar feelings about losing the attention of men. Maya's daughter's hair is "beautiful," but her daughter wants the same kind of hair that her mother has, "short, brown, straggly hair." She wants to be the same as Mommy. Maya feels guilty that she envies her daughter and worries that her envy is contributing to Yvette wanting the same kind of hair that she has, "straggly hair." Maya wants to do what she can to help Yvette enjoy something beautiful about herself.

Though a mother and daughter are alike in that they are both female, they have different traits. The ways in which the differences are assimilated into the mother-daughter relationship can be a complex process. A mother can feel enhanced by her daughter having a desirable trait that she does not have. The appealing trait that her daughter has can contribute to the mother's expanding positive sense of self. However, a coveted trait that her daughter has can also evoke painful feelings of inadequacy and envy. The attention that a mother craves and that her cute baby gets from the world can be vicariously enjoyed by the mother, but can also trigger life-long feelings of not being seen. Mothers and daughters both being female is a significant sameness in the context of multiple differences.

Being the same sex can intensify reactions to differences and make it difficult for a mother to imagine her daughter's different perspective. Dawn had long, slim legs; she had a dancer's body. When she was a little girl, she was always chosen to

be in the front line during ballet performances. Her three-year-old daughter's body type was different: it was like her father's – short and stocky. Dawn described her reaction:

“Lyra likes to twirl around in her pink tutu, but it just makes her look fat. I feel so guilty. I don't criticize her, but I do have a strong negative reaction. I cringe every time she eats a cookie. My husband thinks she looks adorable and says, ‘she may not be a ballerina, but why is that so painful for you? She's having so much fun. She may never have a beautiful figure like you have and her life may be very different from yours. Maybe she will be the CEO of a major corporation.’ In my world, a girl having a beautiful figure is essential; if I had a son, maybe I would feel differently. If he was not tall and thin, I wouldn't care. I'm glad my husband sees the world and Lyra differently than I do. Maybe she won't go nuts like I do every time she gains a pound.”

The body differences between Dawn and her daughter activated Dawn's painful feelings about her own body “imperfections.” In addition, Dawn was struggling to imagine Lyra's life being satisfying while being so different from her own life.

Mother and daughter, both being female, can intensify reactions to differences and sometimes create feelings of emotional distance. However, mother-daughter differences can also become part of a mother's expanding positive sense of self and contribute to seeing herself and the world differently.

During a lively mothers' group discussion about the words for genitals that mothers choose to teach their daughters, Marina described related childhood memories:

“Arial is only 11 months. I know many mothers from the beginning teach their daughters the word vagina. My mother only said the words, ‘down there’ and ‘private parts.’ It was a long time ago and things were different for women. Maybe if my mother used other words I would feel differently about many things. She never even talked to me about getting my period. I never wanted to learn all the specific words for ‘down there’ until Arial was born. Now I've learned all the words, but I still don't know what words to teach her. I think it's important that we can talk about her body more specifically than ‘down there’ or ‘private parts.’ What she is touching is her vulva. It's a part of her body that she has noticed and likes to touch, but I don't feel comfortable saying that word. Vulva seems too sexy. Labia is too medical. Vagina is incorrect. No word feels right. I want Arial to feel comfortable with all the parts of her body. I don't want her to have the same problems that I have. I'm amazed that I am talking about this at all. I don't usually talk about things like this.”

This example highlights aspects of the mother's expanding sense of self that include: a change in her wanting to learn words for female genitals that she had never wanted to learn before her daughter was born, talking about things that she had never wanted to talk about before, new reflections about interactions that she