'I'm Not Your Little Baby!' Calling a Truce in Mother-Daughter Conflict

* By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN

Jessica Setnick was on her way to her mother's house for dinner when she decided that she had something to say that couldn't wait.

She sent her mom a text: "I got my hair cut today and I think it looks fine. So if you don't like it, please don't say anything."

Ms. Setnick, a 39-year-old registered dietitian in Dallas, says she frequently braces herself for her mother's disapproving remarks. Such as, "Now that your husband has been laid off, you will need to stop eating out so much." Or, "The green napkins would look much better on the table." Or, "Why did you buy so many ears of corn?"

Elizabeth Bernstein on Lunch Break looks at mother-daughter relationships, and the emerging specialty of mother-daughter therapy.

Ms. Setnick says she finds these comments condescending and often feels hurt by them. They lead to arguments. "It's as if she feels she knows what's best for me," says Ms. Setnick. "She doesn't see me as my own person."

Ms. Setnick's mother views things differently. "I never see my comments as criticism," says Sandra Zucker, 70, a college librarian. "I see them as a helpful suggestion."

It's common for mother-daughter relations to be stormy in the daughter's teen years. But why do mothers and daughters continue to push each other's buttons well into adulthood?

Some moms never stop nudging. It was their job for many years, after all. Although it is usually well-intentioned, it also is a way for them to get attention from their adult daughters. When daughters won't listen, mothers feel powerless—and then nudge even more.

"More often than not, the criticism is, 'I miss you and want you to call me more,' " says Lisa Brateman, a licensed clinical social worker and family therapist in Manhattan. "But mothers can't say that, because they've had that fight before. So they say, 'Your lipstick looks bad.' " Dr. Brateman offers psychotherapy for mothers and daughters together that is much like couples therapy.

Daughters, meanwhile, tend to be very sensitive to mom's input. They think she is being rude or doesn't respect them as an adult. Underneath, they fear they've failed the one person they have been seeking approval from since before they could speak.

Certainly, mother-son relationships can be intense, too, but typically they aren't as combustible as the mother-daughter combination. Women are more emotional than men. And sometimes mothers and daughters compete, both inside and outside the family, says Mikki Meyer, a marriage and family therapist in Manhattan and Highland, N.Y.

Mothers may place unrealistic and at times conflicting expectations on their daughters. They want their daughters to do things they didn't get to do, but they also want their daughters to be like them. They want their daughters to respect them, and they want them to be a friend.

The conflict usually starts when the daughter hits adolescence and begins to rebel against authority. A natural break should occur between adolescence and adulthood, where the mother allows her daughter to grow up and make her own decisions. Some mothers, however, have trouble letting go.

Ms. Setnick says her problems with her mother began when she was 12 and her father died. She had been very close with her dad, who was doting; she recalls feeling he "left" her with her mother. "I thought I was all grown up and already knew it all, and my mom was trying to boss me around," she says. "I thought, 'I don't need you.' "

For years, the two fought over everything. Were Ms. Setnick's skirts too short? Should she take an umbrella? To this day, Ms. Setnick says she can't stand umbrellas because they remind her of being controlled by her mom. One argument involving screaming and door slamming was about a purse. Ms. Setnick was a bridesmaid in a wedding and didn't think she needed to bring one for the evening. Her mother felt otherwise. "It was like a clash of wills," Ms. Setnick recalls. "Who was going to capitulate?"

Ms. Zucker says she never thought of herself as overbearing, especially compared with her own mother, who is now deceased. Growing up, she wasn't allowed to ride her bike beyond the driveway. She remembers when, as a teenager, she wouldn't eat what her mom made for dinner, and then she would find it on her plate the next morning at breakfast. As an adult, she signed her first apartment lease without telling her mother because she was so fearful of her disapproval. "I really tried to be different than my mother," Ms. Zucker says. "But I guess that control-in-order-to-protect is ingrained in me."

And so the cycle goes on. Ms. Zucker once called her daughter almost every day for three weeks straight to see if she'd scheduled a mammogram, Ms. Setnick says. Ms. Zucker acknowledges that she nudged her daughter, because it was important, but she prefers not to call it "controlling." "Let's say I am directive," she says. 

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Ms. Setnick calls it annoying. She has been known to storm out of the house after the two argue. (She takes a walk around the block to cool off and returns.) "This kind of conflict drains me completely," she says. "I am a grown person. I want to do it my way. Why are we fighting over this?"

Mothers and adult daughters get on each other's nerves because they are close—some experts might say too close. Mothers may see daughters as an extension of themselves or be afraid to let go. Daughters are often reluctant to set boundaries.

"They can be very successful adults in their careers but still have this power struggle," says Ms. Brateman. In the mother-daughter therapy, she has a meeting with the pair, then with each separately and then with the two together once a week. Typically, the daughter has asked the mom to go to therapy with her.

Unlike reluctant husbands, mothers are often willing to go. They don't view therapy has having a stigma, the way men often do. "And even though they may not have a good relationship with their daughter, they want to," Ms. Brateman says.

Mother-daughter therapy has its own special challenges. There is a big difference in power between the two parties, unlike with most marriages. Mom is the first authority figure and always remains so. Both mother and daughter tend to feel guilt about how they have treated the other.

A few years ago, Ms. Setnick asked her mother to go to a therapy session with her and attend a three-hour seminar called "Healing the Mother Wound." Ms. Zucker says she didn't think there was a "wound," but she agreed to go because it seemed important to her daughter. At the seminar and in therapy, Ms. Setnick talked about her issues with her mother; Ms. Zucker talked about problems with her own mother. "It was great," Ms. Setnick says.

Phil Marden

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Going to a mother-daughter therapy session and working individually, Ms. Setnick says she learned to stand up to her mom—calmly. She explained she would no longer load her mother's dishwasher because she was tired of being told she did it wrong. If she finds herself having an upsetting phone conversation with her mother, she says she needs to hang up but will call back later. "I recognize my power not to engage," Ms. Setnick says. "And I choose to see her not as a person who thinks I am incompetent, but as someone who wants my life to be better and thinks she can help."

Ms. Zucker says she was surprised—but not offended—by the changes in her daughter. "Once she was able to express her anger in a way I could hear it, I understood," she says. "And since I could never, ever say anything to my mother, I saw it as a good thing that my kid could say something to me."

Keeping the Peace

Here are some ideas for how mothers and daughters can improve their relationship.

• Daughters, when you speak to your mother, speak as an adult. Remind yourself that you are not 10 years old and always in trouble, and remind your mother, too. ('It's interesting you always think I am late. I haven't been late since 1974.') Hear what your mother is saying at face value, not through the filter of the past.

• Tell your mom how you do things. Explain that you will ask for her advice if you need it.

• Don't lie to your mom. It puts distance between you. And she always finds out: She has eyes in the back of her head— remember?

• Mothers, ask your daughter, 'What do you need help with?' Don't assume you know. 'Asking is the most important thing that the mom can do, because it gives credibility to the daughter as an adult,' says Mikki Meyer, a marriage and family therapist.

• Tell your daughter what your mother was like. Share how she treated you and how it made you feel. 'This is very interesting for the daughter to hear,' Dr. Meyer says.

• Ask, 'What are we are really fighting about?' Does your daughter feel disrespected? Is Mom mad that you never call? Discuss what is really wrong.

• Examine your contribution to the problem. Are you passive-aggressive? Overreacting? Passing blame? Accept responsibility.

• Explain your anger; don't show it. Better yet, leave it at the door. 'You can pick it up on the way out,' says Lisa Brateman, a licensed clinical social worker and family therapist.

• Be willing to be vulnerable. Say, 'The tension is upsetting me. I miss you.'

• Find something fun and mutually satisfying to do together instead of the negative pattern. Art? Hiking? Antiquing? Couples who try new activities together are happier. It can be true of moms and daughters, too.

• Imagine a satisfying relationship. 'You can only have it if you can picture it in some way,' Ms. Brateman says.