

# From mother to daughter: How mothers and daughters share information about parenting

crfr

## Authors

This briefing was written by Kelly Shiell-Davis and is based on some of the findings of her PhD which explored kinship and expert advice amongst mothers in Scotland. It was edited by Jennifer Flueckiger and Sarah Cunningham-Burley.

The complete PhD is available at [www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/2832](http://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/2832)

**contact crfr**  
For a full list of Research Briefings  
visit our website [www.crfr.ac.uk](http://www.crfr.ac.uk)

Centre for Research on Families and Relationships  
The University of Edinburgh,  
23 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN  
Tel: 0131 651 1832  
Fax: 0131 651 1833  
E-mail: [crfr@ed.ac.uk](mailto:crfr@ed.ac.uk)

## From mother to daughter: How mothers and daughters share information about parenting

How parents, and mothers in particular, choose to raise their children is influenced by a range of factors. Expert advice as well as social, cultural and political factors all play a part. Personal and family experience also has an impact on parental views and practice. This briefing outlines some of the findings of a PhD project that examined how the relationships between mothers and daughters affect women's experiences and expectations of parenting.

### Key points

- The social and political context in which a mother's childrearing takes place is inseparable from her practices and decisions or from the advice of professionals
- The concept of motherhood has shifted and led to different expectations of motherhood between generations
- Despite differences, women look to their mothers to act as an 'anchor' in a sea of seemingly conflicting and often confusing advice
- Family support and relationships continue to be important. The content and expectations of family interaction and obligations have simply changed
- For most women, their own upbringing was a strong influence on their childrearing practices, especially in relation to their ideas on discipline. The grandmother-mother relationship was crucial. Both a positive or negative view of the support given by the grandmother was important, as was past interactions between the older mother and younger mother (the daughter)

### Background

How we talk about raising children has changed due to a number of societal shifts. These include changes in families and support, women's increased participation in the labour market, an increased professionalisation of parenting, and changing practices and attitudes. Despite changing family forms, an increase in dual-earner households and the addressing of 'parents' in most contemporary childrearing literature, it is still mothers who most often are the primary care-givers for infants and young children in Britain.

Mothering and motherhood are affected not only by personal and familial attitudes and circumstances, but also by social, cultural and political influences. Simultaneously, health and child experts are also affected by such influences on their opinions and methods, and together these elements create a moral context of motherhood which shapes many women's expectations and views on mothering. Often, advice and support from families – particularly from the maternal grandmother – also influence a mother's practices in childrearing, so that examining their interactions illuminates the inter-generational dimensions of childrearing.

### The Study

Sixteen mother-daughter pairs, the latter also being mothers, were recruited from around the greater Edinburgh area for this project. They were individually interviewed about a range of topics, including their daily routines, methods in childcare, experiences with health professionals, sources of information, family practices and support, and changes to their lifestyle and perspective. The women had their children between 1945 and 2004, and their narratives were arranged into 3 groups based on the years in which they gave birth: 1945-1960; 1961-1980; 1990-2004.

The study also investigated the impact of 'expert' advice on the women's experience of motherhood. These themes are fully explored in the full report (To access the complete report, please see link at the end of the briefing).

The women interviewed all lived within a relatively close distance to their mothers/daughters. This, along with the fact that they agreed to participate in the research, undoubtedly impacted on their ideas about the importance and role of family in childrearing.

## Findings

### Childrearing and ‘family’ are interconnected

It is impossible to examine childrearing without thinking seriously about the issue of ‘family’. Family forms differ and the relationships between members are unpredictable. However, even the absence of family reveals some of the underlying complexities of parenting and childrearing. Interviewing mother-daughter pairs highlighted how the grandmother directly participated in her daughter’s decisions about childrearing. It also showed how the younger mother-older mother relationship reflected intergenerational contrasts in the experience of childrearing.

### Changing practices, goals and possibilities

There was a gradual shift to a more child-centred approach to childrearing over the time period of this study and nearly all of the interviewed mothers mentioned it. While the older women talked about being more concerned with obedience and having their children fit into an adult pattern of life, the younger mothers spoke more often about their children’s social development, mental and emotional well-being, and self-esteem. Because of this, difference in forms and methods of childrearing between the generations was often anticipated and experienced.

My mother was convinced she had all four of us potty trained by 3 months, and was appalled that I wasn’t doing anything by about that age. Through my reading, I realised it wasn’t until a certain age, when they had conscious control, that you should begin trying.

Lorna, 52

By the 1990s, a child’s individuality and personality became the deciding factor in how a child was raised. The more child-centred approach and the numerous methods currently discussed as possible in order to personalise childrearing to suit each child could mean a mother had to interpret her child’s personality from a young age, and possibly raise children within the same family differently.

Some of it [the advice] I read, and even by the time, say, Katy was eight weeks old, I thought, ‘Nope, she’s just not the kind of baby that’s going to work with’. Some of them were saying by three months, to just leave her to cry, but I knew Katy would work herself into hysterics, so then I just steered clear of advice that took that tactic.

Eileen, 30

Despite changes to methods and practices, older mothers can still be a ‘voice of reason’ or ‘anchor’ for their daughters. This is because they both represent someone who has already done their childrearing, and because they actually stand as proof that multiple ways and means can be ‘successful’. When 30 year old Julia complained to her mother, 54 year old Fiona, that her son kept falling

asleep during breastfeeding, her mother told her to ‘flick his feet’. When Julia protested that she couldn’t do that, Fiona pointed out that, ‘I did it with you’.

### Looking to their own upbringing

Decisions made regarding ‘socialising discipline’ were almost always made within the context of the mothers’ (and father/partners’) own upbringing. ‘Socialising discipline’ refers to how parents teach their children about behaviour inside and outside the home, their interactions with family, friends and strangers, and what values and attitudes they want to pass on. For many of the interviewees, finding some kind of continuity with their own ‘background’ was important for making decisions and creating a connection to the wider family. As long as the women agreed with the way they were raised (in a generalised sense), drawing on the past provided a means of linking the generations.

By looking to their own upbringing, a parent located their disciplinary practices within the familial network. In this way, practices and values of older generations could endure and assist in shaping not only their children’s practices and values, but those of their grandchildren as well. This does not mean that no changes were made, but that some sense of continuity was important.

On the whole, I just did things that had been done with me when I was growing up. The one thing I did differently than my mother was I played with my children more and spent more time just talking. I think discipline-wise, I was freer than my mother, but I think there are still a lot of similarities between how I was raised and how my children have been raised.

Ellen, 63

In British culture children are usually viewed as ‘belonging’ to both of its parents (biological and/or social). Most women’s narratives referred to a merging of their own and the father’s ideas about childrearing. This required negotiations between the parents in order to find an acceptable approach to socialising discipline so that the values and practices most important to both were incorporated into the childrearing:

Discipline is one area where my husband and I differ, but we try and support each other. We had different upbringings. My husband wasn’t disciplined so much ... there was more structure in mine, so, we have to figure it out day-by-day.

Sally, 32

### Making mothers and grandmothers

There is public and political concern that family relationships have lost importance in modern life. For the women in this research, familial support and relationships have not become less important; the content and expectations of family interactions and obligations have simply changed.

A woman’s familial interactions do impact upon her process of becoming a mother, and the feelings and memories produced by family involvement were incorporated into a young mother’s care-giving.

It became useful in this research to distinguish between ‘practical help and advice’, and ‘emotional support’. When the women talked about familial interactions, often the need and desire for emotional support overshadowed the importance of practical advice. The need to find a balance between closeness – both emotionally and geographically – and distance between the grandmother and younger mother required constant negotiation of boundaries. Finding satisfactory levels of help/support and detachment/separation could be difficult, and there were frequent descriptions of the older mother-younger mother exchanges in terms of their relationship and individual personalities and circumstances.

I haven’t really had as much support from my mum as I had hoped for, because my mum just isn’t that type. She’s old, and she’s busy. She’s just not that type of grandmother ... but she’s not worse than a grandmother that’s in your face.

Sarah, 34

How the grandmother-mother relationship was experienced certainly depended on the needs and wants of each woman. However, another significant factor in the negotiation process was the way in which past interactions between the mother and grandmother were remembered and interpreted. Each woman’s perspective on past interactions, conflicts or emotional situations often partially shaped the way they talked about the intergenerational relationship.

### 63 year old Catherine and her daughter, Laura, 34, who is mother of Leah, 9 months

Both women described a relationship that was agreeable and satisfactory. Catherine’s overwhelming concern not to be intrusive in her daughter’s mothering was voiced repeatedly. It emerged that her preoccupation with not over-stepping boundaries stemmed from her remembered experience with her own mother.

... I mean, everything I did was just not the right thing, and ‘that wasn’t the way it was done’. Yes, my mother was never very good at zipping her lip, so she would just say things ... and I felt she was interfering. I just sort of kept a distance because it wasn’t what I wanted.

Catherine’s concern for not being interfering was described as directly related to her own experiences as a young mother, with the past impacting on the present. When Laura was talking about their relationship, she too referred to her mother’s determination not to interfere, and attributed to both Catherine’s past experience with her own mother, and to past interactions between Catherine and Laura.

While I was pregnant my aunt told me that the main reason she [Catherine] didn’t want to get too involved was because her mum interfered quite heavily when I was born. So, I think that’s influenced her quite a lot in the way she reacts towards me and Leah, and that’s good. I thank granny for that one ... I also think she’s possibly been told on a number of occasions in the past, ‘stop interfering with my life’, so, this is another very important issue that she’s obviously listened to the past.

While not all mother-daughter pairs came to an agreement of involvement so readily, Catherine and Laura’s choice to have distinct roles for grandmother and mother illustrate the how past knowledge, interpretation and memory impacted on a woman’s childrearing and the intergenerational relationship.



### Policy/Research Implications

- While the majority of mothers agreed with the advice that advocated increased attention paid to children’s perspectives and individuality, health professionals need to acknowledge and discuss the implications of this kind of discipline; there are stressful effects due to mothers’ sense of responsibility for choosing the ‘right’ method and practices for each child, as well as the sometimes great contrast with how the grandmothers raised their children
- With more mothers of younger children participating in the labour market and an increase in lone mothers, childcare is a critical issue for many families. Grandparents are an important source of child care and support, and policies informed by better understandings of the complexities of familial relationships in childrearing will be better at recognising and supporting grandparents’ and parent’s needs
- The importance of emotional support in many of the women’s stories has implications for practitioners as well. Health professionals may sometimes wonder why certain practices or methods are not being taken up by mothers – for example, breastfeeding – and attention paid to the grandmother-mother relationship, and wider family interactions, may shed light on a mother’s childrearing decisions