

WHAT'S MOM STILL GOT TO DO WITH IT?

BY ILANA LEVITT AND ANNIE WONG



Have you ever asked your daughter for her definition of beauty? From the thigh gap and bikini bridge to pictures of photo shopped models, confusing and deceiving messages bombard young girls on a daily basis trying to tell them the definition of true beauty.

When you look at your young daughter, you've probably had moments where you

marvel at all of the possibilities, all of the choices with which she will be presented for her career. It's not out of the ordinary if you worry about whether she'll make the "right" educational or professional choices, and whether these decisions will lead her onto a happy, fulfilling path.

You may wonder if she's going to have the same dreams as you, if she's going

to choose the same career, or make the same choices. You may hope that she'll have more opportunities for success than you currently do. You also hope that when she's grown, she'll carry a part of you with her. I tell women all the time that their stories are (at times, unavoidably) bonded with their moms' life experiences.

The truth is, your daughter will make choices with which you'll agree, that will make you proud, disappointed, worried, angry, happy, and the whole gamut of emotions in between. She'll go through a period where she hangs on to your every word and move; and, almost too quickly, she'll ignore your seemingly practical or simple advice for no apparent reason.

Your relationship with your daughter will define her, just as much as your own relationship with your mother has defined you. In fact, the only certainty that I can give you is that she will carry a part of you with her for the rest of her life. Marianne Walters writes in her book, *The Invisible Web*: "If mother is the cornerstone of family life, the mother-daughter relationship is the brick and the mortar that holds them together."

"BY BECOMING AWARE OF THIS APPROACH TO YOUR DAUGHTERS' CAREER DEVELOPMENT, YOU CAN START MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR HER RIGHT NOW!"

The mother-daughter bond is intense and deep, and has the potential for the deepest connection but also for significant pain. Therefore, a daughter cannot truly understand herself without understanding her mother. While it's fair to say that your daughter's choices and path will be absolutely linked to your life experiences, it's also fair to say that moms don't get all the credit when daughters succeed—nor can we totally blame mothers when daughters fail.

In our upcoming self-help career book of the same title, Annie and I explore the question for adult daughters, *What's Mom Still Got to Do With It?* If you said the answer is "a whole lot," then you're off to a good start.

I've spent 25 years as a clinical career counselor helping women work through their professional dilemmas and challenges. In that time, I started to notice the connection between the pattern of women's career problems and the relationships they had and have with their mothers (Note, however, that these challenges seem to stem from their childhood relationships with their moms rather than current day dynamics - but more on that later).

This work has given rise to our grouping women with particular career challenges into five types of daughters, named: Puppy Dog, Kitty Cat, Butterfly, Copycat and Bootstrap. Some general work issues that one or all of these daughters may encounter include: unfulfilling career paths; an unusual amount of job hopping; dysfunctional work relationships; fear of change; and, the search for more meaningful work.



At this point, you may be wondering why a career counselor for adult women is writing an article in a parenting magazine. Here's why: by becoming aware of this approach to your daughters' career development, you can start making a difference for her right now! Most people start this deep self-reflection during their adulthood years, usually sometime after they've passed age 30. It's usually after going through significant problems at work when they realize the profound effect their mothers had on their lives.

It's over-simplification and unfair to say that women's career issues boil down to her relationship with her mother; after all, workplaces are complicated and most careers do not follow a straight and narrow path. That being said, when women find themselves stuck, sometimes the only way out is exploring the depths of this re-

lationship and all the implicit and explicit messages girls and women are taught in childhood about the world of work. These messages are not only implicit and explicit, but contradictory and confusing!

Examples include:

- "The most important job for a woman is to get married and have children."
- "Never depend on a man for money."
- "You should never be the breadwinner."
- "You should quit your job or find work that's undemanding so that you can better concentrate on raising your children."
- "Don't give up your career for family."

I've left out how other family members affect her life. I'm not minimizing them; I know that the family unit and the relationships within it are layered, interactive and complex. The roles of father and other role models are also instrumental to your daughter's career development. Nonetheless, there's something to be said about the dynamic between a daughter and her mother. It's a special relationship and bond, more powerful than the other relationships in the family, that starts before birth (when our mothers imagine who we may turn out to be) and extends even after our mothers have passed away.

Most people are surprised that the mother-daughter relationship is such an important tool in my career counseling work; in fact, it's the relationship that my clients most want to talk about. The more common approaches to career counseling

(such as career assessment, revamping resumes and learning how to network), although helpful, do not penetrate the core, underlying issues that may be necessary to explore.

This information can get you to start thinking about how to nurture your daughter professionally, whatever age she may be right now! In the process of learning about ways to help your young daughters become independent and mature women with a healthy career identity, you'll learn something about yourself too!

Ask yourself some of these questions about your own career:

- How did you make decisions about your education and profession?





- What are your impressions of your mother's professional hopes and dreams?
- To what extent has your mom been influential in your decisions?

Bear in mind, too, that even if you tried to be her exact opposite, you're still as much under her influence as the woman who heeded her mother's every word. Your mother influenced your decisions, consciously and unconsciously—just like your daughter's decisions will be similarly influenced by you. This happens without a mother ever having to say a word, because a daughter watches her mother's every move.

No relationship is perfect or effortless. It requires constant hard work and open-

ness. Nothing could be more true when it comes to mothers and daughters. As adults, many of us believe we are freed from our childhood experiences, that we have outgrown our past as if they were a pair of baby shoes or an item of clothing. It's simply not true.

From birth, our children watch us closely and through these observations, they learn how to react to many situations in life, relationships and yes, even work and career. Many of these important lessons are imparted on our kids before they reach six years of age -- before people's conscious memory develops! This approach to career counseling taps into the current career dilemmas that women go through, as seen through the lens of the complex mother-daughter relationship.

Don't believe it? Think about the last time your mom disapproved of something you said or did. Maybe she didn't like the way the dress hung on you, maybe she thought you should have taken that job or shouldn't have become close with that person. Why does it cause your shoulders to stiffen? Why does that knot form in your stomach? Why do you become self-defensive and self-doubtful? It shouldn't bother you or me at all -- superficially speaking, we know (or think we know) we're different from our moms, and that means her tastes and preferences aren't necessarily the same as ours.

When we dig deeper into our emotional and psychological state, though, many of us realize that we don't believe this at all. Why? Because many women don't ever fully separate from their mothers. To a certain degree, both mothers and daughters see themselves as extensions of one another. This applies even if a woman's mother has passed away; for example, I still think about how my mother would react about my choices today, even though she died of cancer a decade ago. This unique relationship continues to influence our identities as women and our decision-making process well beyond our adolescent years. Without self-awareness, then, we are vulnerable to unknown sources of pain or conflict that can hold us back or catapult us in the wrong direction.

At some point, I'm sure you've uttered these words about your own career in relation to your mother:

- "I'm exactly where she was at my age."
- "She's so accomplished. I'm so lazy compared to her."
- "I made sure I wouldn't end up in her situation."
- "I won't repeat her mistakes in relationships, career or love!"

Because of the lack of separation in this intense relationship, many women are constantly comparing themselves to their mothers and can end up either wanting to replicate their mothers' choices or do the complete opposite. My career counseling model explores this issue of separation between daughters and mothers and identifies common work traits and challenges.

There are five different types of daughters; and this model has a connection to other theories of development and aging. Many women often fall into more than one type and may change types as time passes.

The 5 Types of Daughters

1. **Puppy Dog Daughter:**

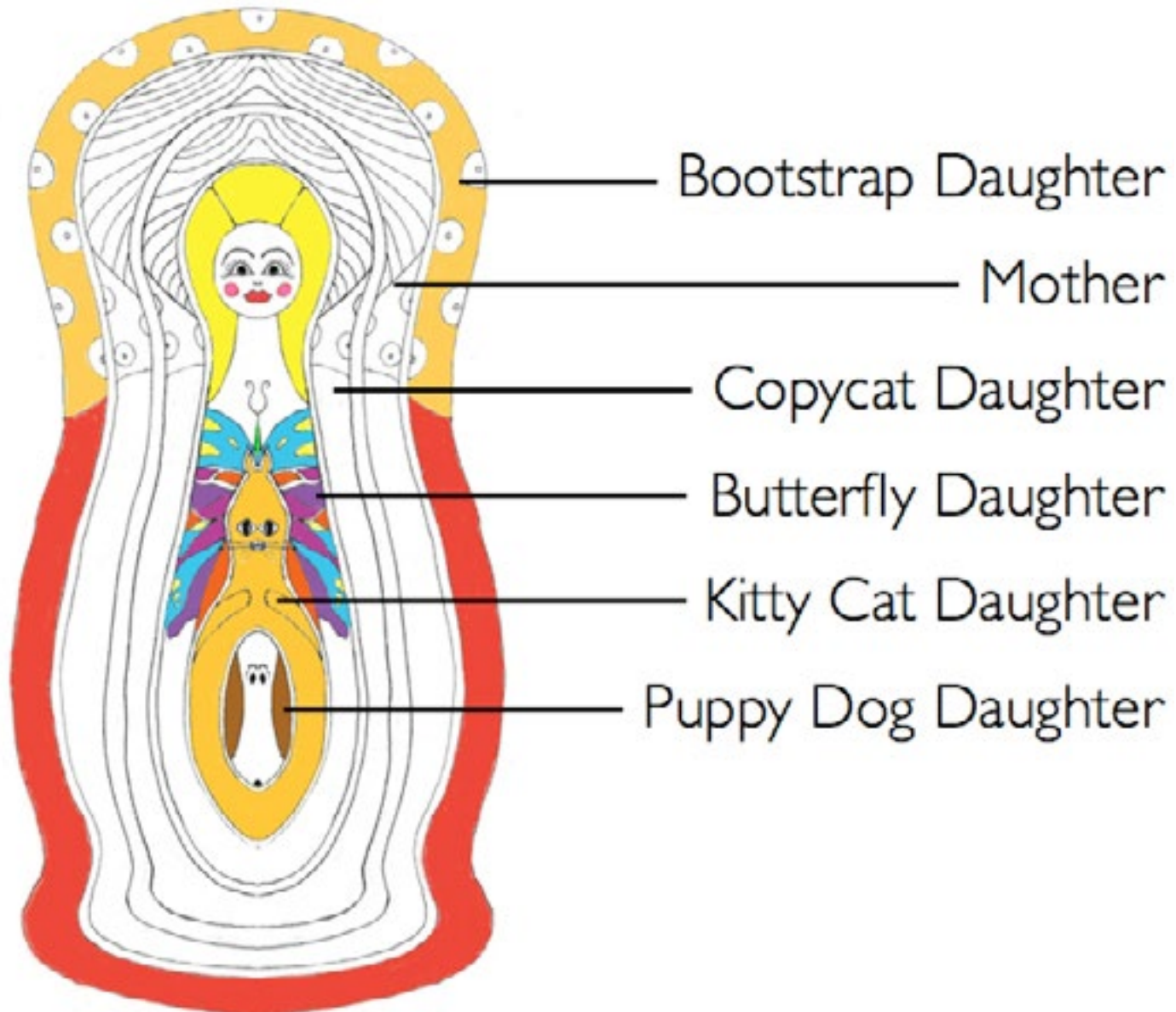
At a young age, she needed more than her mother could or was able to give her.

2. **Kitty Cat Daughter:**

Perhaps her mother held onto her a little too tightly. The Kitty Cat daughter rebels for the sake of rebellion.

3. **Butterfly Daughter:**

Her mother may not have been a role model in terms of 'career' for this daugh-



ter, but was otherwise supportive of her choices and growth.

4. Copycat Daughter:

Her mother had a successful career and was a role model who established a familiar path. This daughter then chose to follow that path closely.

5. Bootstrap Daughter:

The Bootstrap daughter is the parentified daughter who had to take care of things at home.

In upcoming articles, we'll further explore each daughter type by describing her dy-

namic with her mom and the general career challenges she faces. We'll also provide real-life examples, tips and advice. However, you don't have to wait until the next article to help your daughter today. Try these ten practical tips to help support your daughter so that her career has a minimal amount of drama and difficulties.

10 Important Ways To Encourage Her Career Choices

1. Allow your daughter room for error. Let's make no mistake about this first tip: you should definitely step in if she's



going to do something extremely harmful, like stick her hand in a vat of boiling water. Context matters and as a parent your first priority is to keep her safe. There is a lot of material written about natural consequences. If your daughter doesn't do her homework, let her fail! (I know, easier said than done.)

2. **Let her explore her interests.** Studies have shown that people with careers that are aligned with their interests are happier. This is because they work around like-minded people and tend

to share more than just the physical office space. Even if it doesn't appeal to you, let your daughter take up the hobby of her choosing. If she has a choice of math or art for a summer program, start a two-way dialogue with her about what she'd like to learn.

3. **Don't impose your values on her.** I am not speaking about core religious or ethical values. Your daughter is not an extension of yourself. That means she will likely find some things that are important to you are not as important to

her. For example, if you work in a bank and value financial security, your daughter might end up being a writer, a career that has less stability. That's OK -- because no matter how different she may be from you, she'll still love you and need your support.

4. **Don't pressure her to settle down before she is ready!** Between the ages of 18 - 26 is a critical time for women's career development. During this period, young women are exploring their professional interests, testing out their theories and identifying their strengths and where they attain true satisfaction. Today, women don't have to get married right out of school; there is plenty of time to meet a partner and/or have children at a later age.
5. **Let her be a child to the extent that she can.** *"Susie's so dependable, she's like a miniature grown-up!"* If your daughter is helping you run the household or taking care of family members, does she have time to play? Or to make believe and be just plain silly? If the answer is no, not really, then find ways to free up her time and responsibilities. She'll have plenty of years ahead of her to be a grown up; give her the opportunity now to be carefree and exploratory. Otherwise, she may grow up unaware of her true self-interests, which could affect her satisfaction and her career choices.
6. **Don't expect her to fulfill your unfulfilled dreams.** Perhaps you gave up on

becoming a musician because you had to go into the family business; perhaps you didn't have time to focus on your work because you focused on your family life. Whatever your unfulfilled dreams are and the reasons behind them, your daughter shouldn't be expected to live them out on your behalf. She is entitled to tune into her own desires and might not notice them if yours are stuck in her head.

7. **Remember that her separation is not a rejection!** There will come a time when your daughter rejects your advice and branches out of your comfort zone. This generally happens during her adolescent period and although her withdrawal may be painful, it is a natural and normal progression into healthy adulthood. The more you try to make her feel like this is unnatural and abnormal, the more unhealthy the separation will become. Although separation is normal, it's a big issue for the both of you. Be mindful of it and correct yourself if you find yourself holding on to your daughters too tight. If you're not sure you're doing this, here's an example I often hear from parents: "We have to work on this essay and fill out these college applications before the deadline!" No, we don't, *she* does!
8. **Be her mirror; show her strengths.** Sometimes the teachers and grading standards in our educational system

don't allow our daughters to shine or see their best selves. Your daughter might be a creative thinker who may be boxed in by a rigid teacher. For example, when children are scolded in class for drawing a purple cow. Therefore, it's your job to make them aware of what their strengths are!

9. Create opportunities. Your daughter may be free to make her own choices but that doesn't mean you shouldn't offer your advice. Be her advocate - make sure that she understands the pros and cons of her decisions. Point out opportunities whenever they arise. Trust me, in the long run she'll appreciate it and thank you for being there. You might even have to drive her to that extracurricular activity or help pay for a special program.

10. Get your own life and career together! The greatest gift you can give your daughter is by being her role model. Show her that it's never too late to get a degree, to switch jobs or careers. Whether or not it seems noticeable, she is watching you closely. Her chances to succeed in life are significantly higher when she's seen you do it.

The key to career satisfaction is working to identify your interests, skills, values and personality without the noise of the complicated past, present job or future fantasies. Once we are in sync with our true selves, we are doing work that energizes us, where we feel like we are not writing with our non-preferred hand and where we get recognized for our true talents.

Of course, there's no perfect solution and there'll probably be some compromises along the way. But if we understand who we are, what makes us tick, where we excel, and, what's important to us, we can begin to make decisions based on who WE are and what we want to pursue.

While our mothers will always play a critical role in our lives, my goal for all of us is to be able to accept and incorporate the good aspects of the mother-daughter dynamic, reject what doesn't work, and truly discover our separate selves from her. When you've achieved this goal, you will not only find a better path in life, but you may be able to connect or empathize more deeply with your mother in ways you never thought possible.

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