RAISING TEENAGE GIRLS

In the minds of many parents, a daughter’s teenage years loom like a trial by fire. Cracking the code to adolescent girlhood might seem unachievable, but as Donna Reeves discovers, it all starts with facing up to who you are.
them understand that making mistakes is just part of that journey.”

Dannielle’s book The Butterfly Effect – A Positive New Approach to Raising Happy, Confident Teen Girls (Random House, $34.95) has just been published. It is well researched and documents with clarity and gritty honesty the issues facing today’s teenage girls, such as drinking, body issues, friendship and sex.

“Sometimes I think other parenting books make the world in which teenage girls live seem so foreign to our world that as an adult, you feel a little bit out of your element in knowing how to step in and help,” Dannielle says.

“You, the issues really are the same. They might be drinking Breezers while we’re drinking chardies, and they might be watching ‘Gossip Girl’ while we’re watching ‘Desperate Housewives’, but the messages and the reasons why we’re engaging in those things are very similar. If you can start to see the similarities, rather than just the differences, I think it’s a great opportunity to connect with your daughter rather than disconnect from her.”

The Butterfly Effect offers practical advice to parents – in particular mothers – on how to stay connected, or rebuild relationships with their daughters during adolescence. Unlike some other parenting books, where the emphasis is on the child, this book forces parents to examine their own lives and behaviours. It’s an approach Dannielle says she has been using successfully for many years.

“Parents honestly think they’re going to come along to one of my seminars and I am going to sort out their daughter for them, as if she’s the one who needs fixing,” Dannielle says. “Then, within about five minutes of me speaking, I’ll see these little tears rolling down their faces as they realise they need to have a look at what they’re doing in their life. Maybe they’re always on a diet, or lamenting the ageing process, or caught up in a destructive relationship and drinking themselves into a stupor every night. Their daughters see their parents doing in their life. Maybe they need to have a look at what they’re doing in their life.”

Dannielle says what initially struck her when talking to mothers about their daughters was that they were both facing similar issues. “I was quite surprised that in many ways, despite all the rhetoric about there being this huge generation gap, so many issues that impact on our daughters’ lives really impact on us as women too, and we are really more alike than we are different.”

“I noticed in the mothers’ faces that when I was really speaking to them as well: they were caught up in the same vortex when it came to things like body image, beauty and drinking. Even when I would talk about things such as managing healthy friendships, the mothers would say, ‘It sounds like you’re describing my friendships with my girlfriends now.’”

One of Dannielle’s key messages in her book and seminars is that mothers have to set a good example and be a positive role model for their daughters. “Girls can’t be what they can’t see,” she says. “If we’re serious about saying to our daughters, ‘I want you to be really sure of yourself, to be really strong, to know how to set boundaries with people to make healthy choices around alcohol,’ then we have to make those choices and decisions ourselves.”

If there’s one area in recent years that teenage girls have been drastically misunderstood, and perhaps as a result, let down, it’s in the assumption they are more mature than adolescent boys and therefore more independent. Dannielle says that while it is true teen girls do have more maturity than adolescent boys of the same age, they are still emotionally needy. “The latest research is showing that adolescent girls have the emotional needs for affection and for love as they had when they were seven,” she says. “The first time I heard this, my daughter was seven and I thought about the number of times she might be touched, cuddled, told she’s beautiful. Sadly, by the time girls hit adolescence, and because they’re gangly and look a little bit grown up, we almost leave them to fend for themselves. That’s why they hunt in packs and why their peer groups are so important to them. It’s often the only place where they get that love and affection. It explains why you will always see teenage girls touching each other’s hair, tickling each other, laying all over each other. It’s because they yearn to be touched and to be loved.”

Wanting to be loved doesn’t necessarily mean wanting to be best friends. It’s important to set realistic expectations around your relationships. As Dannielle says, you have to understand that for teen girls, pulling away and coming back and then pulling away again is a really important part of them growing into individuals and becoming independent. This seesawing behaviour can’t be taken personally, or else every mother would spend a lot of her teenage daughters’ years feeling offended or hurt.

“In an effort to connect with your daughter, I don’t think it works for mums to say ‘Alright, we’re going to have these big outings every month,’” says Dannielle. “You can’t force it. Sometimes, the best moments can be when you gently brush past each other in the house, or when you write your daughter a note for her lunch box which she doesn’t even bother acknowledging.

“We need to realise these moments we have with them, even if we think they’re not important, can be hugely important. Often we make the mistake of thinking it has to be a big gesture. It is very true that teenage girls don’t want to hang with...FOR TEEN GIRLS, PULLING AWAY AND COMING BACK AND THEN PULLING AWAY AGAIN IS A REALLY IMPORTANT PART OF THEM GROWING INTO INDIVIDUALS...