Why your mum IS YOUR WORST CRITIC

With a much-loved mum and three spirited little girls, **Susan Horsburgh** ponders the fraught mother-daughter relationship and the art of the maternal put-down.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **NICK SCOTT**
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WHEN I CALLED to tell Mum I was pregnant with my third child, she replied with the words, "Oh no". A few weeks later, when a scan revealed it was a third girl, the response was slightly more panicked: "You're not going to try again, are you?" I believe she followed up with something delicate like, "You can barely cope with two." All in all, not a huge vote of confidence in my mothering. And this from a woman who tried five times to have a daughter.

Of course, it's not just my mothering that has come in for criticism. Once, when I had a hastily taken photo of myself in this magazine, I called Mum after the issue hit the newsstands to see whether the picture was acceptable.

"Well, it's very close up ... " she said, clearly aiming for subtlety but completely missing the target.* Then again, many of my friends have fared worse. One complained to her mum about the size of her nose, hoping for some consolation – perhaps even some effusive praise about her general loveliness – when her mother replied, "Gee, you're ➤

HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY CARLA SAKRZWESKI. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHED.

Enjoying one of the many blissful moments in the complex mother-daughter relationship, Susan Horsburgh and her three daughters, (from left) Eliza, five, Milla, three, and Harper, seven.



Susan with mum Ellen and her three daughters, all indulging their passion for pink tutus, which has been largely abetted by their “Grandmum”.

worried about your nose? I’d be more concerned about your thin lips.”

Welcome to the art of the maternal put-down. Of course, mums don’t see it that way. They’re just being helpful, supportive or – worst of all – honest, but daughters just want their mother’s approval. Or, better still, unqualified adoration. And that’s tricky to come by.

Ever since the first cavewoman cast a disapproving glance at the way her daughter arranged the nuts and berries, women have bitched about the mother who made them. I canvassed my friends on this issue and was greeted with an avalanche of confidence-shredding comments. Most women I know have some corkers that they rip out over a few drinks with the girls.

I still remember a close friend of mine going through an experimental style phase at uni. When she came home with a pixie hairdo, her mother clapped eyes on her and promptly burst into tears. “Why,” her mum yelped, “do you continue to mutilate yourself?” Not long afterwards, my friend splashed out on a Carla Zampatti dress after saving up her meagre casual waitressing wages. “That,” her mum railed, “is a sin against the poor.”

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’ve known that mum for 30 years and she is lovely – it’s just that women seem to have a diplomatic blind spot when their daughters are involved. It’s as if mothers see their daughters as extensions of them, so they feel free to dish out the kind of uncensored criticism they’d usually reserve for themselves. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes that, to a mother, a daughter is “a double, an alter ego into whom the mother is sometimes tempted to project herself entirely”.

“IT COULD JUST BE THAT DAUGHTERS ARE CRAZY-MAKING.”

Of course, it could just be that daughters are crazy-making. My delightful seven-year-old has refused to wear pants for more than four years – and her two little sisters have followed suit. Try getting through a Melbourne winter with that wardrobe proviso. Yet, despite her commitment to all things pink and bedazzled, mostly supplied by her grandmother (they’re often in cahoots), she still manages to look like she has just been tipped out of a wheelie bin. Sure, my anti-ironing stance probably doesn’t help, but there are invariably food chunks from her last meal wiped down her front.

A friend of mine feels my pain. Kathryn had vowed never to be a passive-aggressive mother, but her 10-year-old – who insists on choosing her own clothes – recently came out in a dubious ensemble for a night at the theatre. “Wow, that’s a really interesting combination,” Kathryn ventured. “You know I don’t mind what you wear, just so long as you’re confident in yourself – and you’re happy going out looking like you’ve been glued and thrown through a charity shop.” ➤

Susan describes her mother as “precious” and “irreplaceable”, but they still occasionally have their differences.

Mother-daughter mud-slinging is a time-honoured tradition, passed down through the generations – which is why I feel grandmothers also deserve a special mention. When my friend Sam had a haircut at age 10, her grandma took one look at her "Shy Di" do and declared she had "cut off all her good looks".

At my brother's wedding, I was still reeling from a break-up only weeks earlier. An ancient 27 at the time, I was collared by Grandma at the reception. "You really can't afford to be too picky, darling," she warned me. "You don't want to end up all alone." I made a hasty exit to weep in a toilet cubicle.

Indeed, weddings are the scenes of many a motherly misdemeanour. Exhibit A: my friend Megan's mum seriously asking the groom the night before whether he would definitely turn up – then, as the wedding car pulled into the church driveway the next day with the bride and her mum in the back seat, the older woman letting out an audible sigh of relief and saying, "Oh good, he's here". This is the same mum who prayed for a husband for her daughter at a parish "miracle mass".

Another friend called to say she was engaged and her mother burst into tears. Of delight, Janelle thought – until her mum said, "We thought it would never happen." And I know of another woman whose mum looked at her before she walked up the aisle and said, "Darling, you almost look thin!"

Then there's the mum who said her scrawny baby grandson looked like a "skinned rabbit" and yet another who wouldn't let her chunky seven-year-old take ballet lessons because she "wasn't built to be a dancer". The hot-button issues include hair, clothing and weight – and, later, how we raise our children.

To be fair, daughters get their own back. Just watch the average 14-year-old girl walking three steps ahead of her mother at Sportsgirl, embarrassed to be with the middle-aged woman who seems so out of touch (and shape).

My daily uniform of jeans, T-shirt and sneakers is a constant source of disappointment to my girls. And my eldest likes to spend inordinate periods of time on the toilet while I'm having a shower – all the better to appraise my ageing body from the comfort of the family loo. She is particularly fond of critiquing my tummy, unaware that she and her sisters are responsible for its wobbliness.

With four older brothers of my own and my husband one of four sons, I thought we'd make boys, but the girls kept coming. (As my eldest daughter observed when she was five: "Daddy only plants lady seeds in you.") It would have been nice to have a boy, not only to share their obsessions with dinosaurs and earth-moving equipment, but also because – from what I've observed – mothers of boys seem to get all of the love and much less of the judgment.

The mother-daughter relationship "brings us face-to-face with reflections of ourselves and forces us to confront fundamental questions about who we are, who we want to be, and how we relate to others," according to Deborah Tannen, author of *You're Wearing That? Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation*.

"OUR MOTHER'S OPINION NEVER STOPS MATTERING."

"Each tends to overestimate the other's power while underestimating her own," writes Ms Tannen. "And each yearns to be seen and accepted for who she is while seeing the other as who she wants her to be – or as someone falling short of who she should be."

And yet daughters can melt you, too. The other day in the bathroom, as I was trying fruitlessly to conceal the black eye I scored when my three-year-old accidentally head-butted me, my youngest looked up from a sea of bath toys in the tub and told me solemnly, "You are so beautiful" – a compliment all the more appreciated because it was patently untrue. And on the odd occasion I do wear a swishy bright dress and heels, my girls go into paroxysms of glee.

I recently interviewed an American IVF doctor who specialises in gender selection and he said 85 per cent of his Western patients come to him for a daughter. I'm not surprised. I was elated when my first child was born – and so relieved that I'd got my girl. There is no other woman on the planet I love more than my mum and I was so grateful that I'd share that bond with someone else. Yet with that closeness comes complexity – and words carry enormous weight.

Ms Tannen adds, "The smallest remark can bring into focus the biggest questions that hover over conversations between mothers and daughters: Do you see me for who I am? And is who I am okay?"

We want our mothers to be proud of us – and, if we don't get that approval, the hurt can turn to anger. For most of us, our mother's opinion never stops mattering, even when she's gone – and that's when we wish we still had someone who cared enough to verbally pick apart our outfits. Yes, mothers can drive you batty, but no one is more on your side, either.

No one loves my girls more fiercely than me – and yet I can't honestly guarantee they'll always have my unconditional support. As teenagers, for example, if they come home with multiple facial piercings, go out wearing a miniskirt the width of a seatbelt, or suggest a same-bed sleepover with a surly mute boyfriend called Spyda, I know my silent – if not out-loud – response will be (at the very least), "Oh no". Not unlike the precious, irreplaceable (and occasionally exasperating) mum who came before me. ■

✻ I warned Mum that I planned to reveal her comments in this article and she remains unrepentant.



Susan with her beloved daughters, who are already questioning their mother over her body shape and clothes choices.