

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My sixteen-year-old daughter, Laura, has very low self-esteem. Two years ago, her father and I divorced because he was verbally abusive to both of us, though he never hit us. I know that his treatment of her has contributed to her bad feelings about herself, but we've been free of him for a while now. He moved to another state and except for an occasional phone call, he has nothing to do with her. Recently, she told me that she doesn't want to go to school because she doesn't feel like people like her. She says that she would rather be home-schooled, although frankly, I work all day and don't think I have the time or skills to do this. What can I do to help her feel better about herself?

-- Worried Mom

Dear Worried Mom,

You've already done a great deal to help Laura by removing her from an abusive situation with her father. Two years is not a long time to heal when you consider that your daughter had fourteen years of put-downs and bullying. You've taken the important first step, but there is more work to be done.

Begin by talking with Laura and share your concerns with her. Ask her what she thinks might help her to feel more confident and strong among her peers. You may not agree with her ideas, but you will have opened the discussion, and expressed your concern, and your interest in helping her. Ask her to tell you about what goes on inside her head. How does she talk to herself? People who have been verbally abused quite often adopt those same kinds of statements when they are thinking about themselves. These negative self-statements take the form of pessimism ("I could never do that right.") and self-bullying ("You're so stupid, you will never get this."). When a child has heard this kind of commentary from a parent, they internalize it and no longer need an outside source for self-recrimination. Laura will begin to heal when she can replace her negative self-talk with more positive, realistic alternatives. Encourage her to replace such internal comments as "I'll never get this right," with "This may be hard, but I'll work at it until I get it." Let her know that you also have to work at reinforcing your own positive self-image, and that you do so because the first step to beneficial change is believing in yourself.

In spite of Laura's turbulent relationship with her father, she may still feel rejected and abandoned by the fact that he has little to do with her. Help her to realize that her father has problems, and the fact that he doesn't contact her regularly has nothing to do with her. He is a troubled person.

Never give criticism that contains ridicule or shame. This doesn't mean that you cannot ever be angry with Laura, or give her feedback. It's appropriate that parents do this. But there are healthy ways to let a teenager (or anyone, for that matter) know what they've done wrong, or that they need to improve in certain ways. It is important that these messages be delivered respectfully, with love and compassion. Use "I" statements. For example, "I would really appreciate it if you would clean up your room" conveys a very different message than "You are a lazy slob."

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Be generous and honest with descriptive praise. Catch Laura doing lots of things right. “Wow! What a great job you did in cleaning your room” or “I’m so proud of you for these terrific grades.”

Help Laura explore new activities so she can discover things she is good at and then give her lots of support. If she finds she is a natural athlete, make time to go to her games. If she is interested in learning to cook, spend some time in the kitchen with her showing her your favorite recipes.

Even if you had all the time in the world, and a Ph.D. in Education, I would caution about home-schooling in your particular situation. This request, it seems to me, is an attempt on Laura’s part to avoid connecting with her peers. Help Laura understand that no problem is ever solved by avoidance. It is likely that she is projecting her own negative self-image on others, and assuming that they will not like her. Support her as she strives to make new friends by allowing sleep-overs, or giving Laura the opportunity to invite a friend for dinner.

Given the long-standing nature of her father’s verbal abuse, I would seriously consider professional help for Laura. A good therapist will be an important ally in Laura’s path to healing.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.