

# girls and everything in between\*

By Rose Stanley \*

12 years is a short enough time to enjoy a childhood, so let's not make it any shorter by treating our vulnerable tween girls as young adults. Instead, nurture them and help them enjoy these last few years of freedom - they're only children once.



## What is a 'tween'?

A 'tween' is a young person who is not yet a teenager; a person between the ages of 8 and 12; a pre-adolescent; in the age group of preteenagers.

## What can I expect of my tween girl?

Physically, a girl's body is changing - she can become very self-conscious, compare herself to others, and be anxious about whether she is 'normal' and 'okay'. She can also experience rapid mood swings, become very emotional, have crushes, and be increasingly dependent on her peers.

## Points of interest about tweens

Puberty occurs earlier than ever before - around age 10, according to the World Health Organisation.

"Tweens are the fastest growing online demographic...and brands are asking 'how can we tap into their purchasing power?'" Quote from Hillary DeCesare, CEO of Everloop (new tweens Facebook site)

A mother I know really well, who lived in a small rural community at the time, was staggered one day whilst at the hairdressers when a man came in with his tween daughter, announcing that he was having a 'Dad/Daughter' date. His plan being to get his daughter's hair cut and styled, then off to buy some new clothes and finally drop her off at the local school disco to dance the night away. Wow! Not only would the Dad rack up a fairly hefty bill by the end of the day, but you have to wonder what the little girl would have to look forward to by the time she participated in her first School Ball. Old hat, yawn, yawn!

I realise that a lot of parents out there might not see much, if any, of a problem with this scenario. It may be deemed by some as a bit on the indulgent side, but nothing too worrying. However, it would be a sad fact if our tween girls were so jaded by the time they hit adulthood, so oversaturated by the media and already so used to doing adult things that there was nothing left for them to look forward to.

Ask any person who is involved with working with children and they will tell you that tween girls are a reasonably sophisticated crowd these days. They rely heavily on their peer group, many own cellphones and already participate in social networking. They tend to be up with the latest fashions, and follow celebrities vigorously. Just like teenagers, you say? Ah yes, that seems to be the problem.

We know that kids in general are growing up faster, becoming more demanding and their tastes and interests are getting much more sophisticated. No surprises there. But how do we stem the tide so that our tween girls can gently enter puberty at their own pace, and remain secure and confident individuals at the same time? Or should we just let them act like little adults, making decisions about their wardrobes, their dietary status and their environmental standing? Laugh you may, but the research out there suggests that our girls definitely need some strong input and direction.

Unfortunately, many parents are feeling powerless regarding the onslaught of their daughter's demands. This does not need to be so, in fact, on the contrary - parents need to continue their role not only as their daughter's strongest supporter and trusted confidant, but also her most consistent rule-setter. Here are some suggestions on how to enjoy your tween girl and at the same time avoid the pitfall of handing her adulthood to her on a platter way too soon:

- Encourage your daughter to be who she is, and do what she enjoys doing. She needs permission to still play with dolls and other toys if she wants to, without embarrassment, at home, which should be her haven away from the demands of the world in which she is growing up. You don't need to worry - it is unlikely that she will still be playing with her Barbie doll at age 17! Note: there are still plenty of tween girls out there who aren't particularly interested in growing up fast, so that is to be celebrated and supported. (If you happen to be Mum or Dad to one of them, try not to be too smug!)
- You need to be 'up to speed' enough in her life to know who she is currently friends with, what she likes doing, her favourite movie, her food likes/dislikes etc. If you can't easily answer these questions, you may need to set aside more time to take notice of who she is becoming.
- Meet her friends. Encourage her to invite friends home so that you can get a feel for the attitudes that are influencing her. Not only will it help you understand the world she is living in, you will probably have more compassion regarding the pressures that she currently faces.
- Help her to create balance in her life. If she is veering towards becoming a cellphone and Facebook queen (and don't forget that legally, your children should be over 14-years-old to be on Facebook), then make sure you establish some guidelines so that she knows there are constraints around technology (e.g., no answering the phone at meal times; only half an hour on the computer after homework is done; no chores, no Facebook, etc). Take time to just sit and talk about her day and go for walks together - make sure that the only quality time you have with your daughter is not just going shopping at the mall.
- Privileges for tweens need to be different than those for teenagers. Let her have something to work for and look forward to - because even though she will moan and whinge, she will appreciate the privilege at the appropriate time so much more having had to wait for it. Her teenager siblings will also thank you for it, because they don't necessarily want a little pipsqueak hanging around, doing the same 'stuff' as them, when they were made to wait. You can reassure her that she will be able to go to the movies on her own with her friends when she turns 14 also. Let her know that although she is getting older, she is still not old enough to simply expect that she should enjoy certain benefits.
- Help your daughter to find something that she is good at and also something she enjoys doing to relax. She may be really great at hockey or netball, but whether she likes being competitive or not, she still needs to discover how to just feed her soul - this could be anything from baking

cupcakes to jumping on the trampoline. Whatever makes her happy and 'chilled' will hit the mark.

Girls these days are just as much fun as they have ever been, so remember to keep things light when you can. Make her laugh, and listen to her awkward jokes - they get funnier!

**Recommended for further reading:**  
**Girls on the Edge** by Leonard Sax, M.D., PhD  
**The Princess Bitchface Syndrome** by Michael Carr-Gregg  
**Where has my little girl gone?** by Tanith Carey

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