



# How To Talk To Little Girls

Lisa Bloom

I went to a dinner party at a friend's home last weekend, and met her five-year-old daughter for the first time.

Little Maya was all curly brown hair, doe-like dark eyes, and adorable in her shiny pink nightgown. I wanted to squeal, "Maya, you're so cute! Look at you! Turn around and model that pretty ruffled gown, you gorgeous thing!"

But I didn't. I squelched myself. As I always bite my tongue when I meet little girls, restraining myself from my first impulse, which is to tell them how darn cute/ pretty/ beautiful/ well-dressed/ well-manicured/ well-coiffed they are.

What's wrong with that? It's our culture's standard talking-to-little-girls icebreaker, isn't it? And why not give them a sincere compliment to boost their self-esteem? Because they are so darling I just want to burst when I meet them, honestly.

Hold that thought for just a moment.

This week *ABC News* reported that nearly half of all three- to six-year-old girls worry about being fat. In my book, *Think: Straight Talk for Women to Stay Smart in a Dumbed-Down World*, I reveal that 15 to 18 percent of girls under 12 now wear mascara, eyeliner and lipstick regularly; eating disorders are up and self-esteem is down; and 25 percent of young American women would rather win *America's Next Top Model* than the Nobel Peace Prize. Even bright, successful college women say they'd rather be hot than smart. A Miami mom just died from cosmetic surgery, leaving behind two teenagers. This keeps happening, and it breaks my heart.

Teaching girls that their appearance is the first thing you notice tells them that looks are more important than anything. It sets them up for dieting at age 5 and foundation at age 11 and boob jobs at 17 and Botox at 23. As our cultural imperative for girls to be hot 24/7 has become the new normal, American women have become increasingly unhappy. What's missing? A life of meaning, a life of ideas and reading books and being valued for our thoughts and accomplishments.

That's why I force myself to talk to little girls as follows.

"Maya," I said, crouching down at her level, looking into her eyes, "very nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," she said, in that trained, polite, talking-to-adults good girl voice.

"Hey, what are you reading?" I asked, a twinkle in my eyes. I love books. I'm nuts for them. I let that show.

Her eyes got bigger, and the practiced, polite facial expression gave way to genuine excitement over this topic. She paused, though, a little shy of me, a stranger.

"I LOVE books," I said. "Do you?"

Most kids do.

"YES," she said. "And I can read them all by myself now!"

"Wow, amazing!" I said. And it is, for a five-year-old. You go on with your bad self, Maya.

"What's your favorite book?" I asked.

"I'll go get it! Can I read it to you?"

*Purplicious* was Maya's pick and a new one to me, as Maya snuggled next to me on the sofa and proudly read aloud every word, about our heroine who loves pink but is tormented by a group of girls at school who only wear black. Alas, it was about girls and what they wore, and how their wardrobe choices defined their identities. But after Maya closed the final page, I steered the conversation to the deeper issues in the book: mean girls and peer pressure and not going along with the group. I told her my favorite color in the world is green, because I love nature, and she was down with that.

Not once did we discuss clothes or hair or bodies or who was pretty. It's surprising how hard it is to stay away from those topics with little girls, but I'm stubborn.

I told her that I'd just written a book, and that I hoped she'd write one too one day. She was fairly psyched about that idea. We were both sad when Maya had to go to bed, but I told her next time to choose another book and we'd read it and talk about it. Oops. That got her too amped up to sleep, and she came down from her bedroom a few times, all jazzed up.

So, one tiny bit of opposition to a culture that sends all the wrong messages to our girls. One tiny nudge towards valuing female brains. One brief moment of intentional role modeling. Will my few minutes with Maya change our multibillion dollar beauty industry, reality shows that demean women, our celebrity-maniac culture? No. But I did change Maya's perspective for at least that evening.

Try this the next time you meet a little girl. She may be surprised and unsure at first, because few ask her about her mind, but be patient and stick with it. Ask her what she's reading. What does she like and dislike, and why? There are no wrong answers. You're just generating an intelligent conversation that respects her brain. For older girls, ask her about current events issues: pollution, wars, school budgets slashed. What bothers her out there in the world? How would she fix it if she had a magic wand? You may get some intriguing answers. Tell her about your ideas and accomplishments and your favorite books. Model for her what a thinking woman says and does.

Here's to changing the world, one little girl at a time. Lisa Bloom, Huffington Post