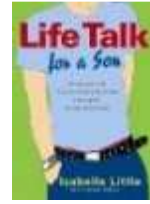


Life Talk™ Forum Parents' News5



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FORUM BACKGROUND

The **PARENTS' FORUM** provides parents with information and the opportunity to discuss issues and challenges that affect teenagers' lives. Author of the *Life Talk* books, Izabella Little, co-ordinates the Forum, the format is primarily electronic and input comes from parents, teens, and the panel of experts listed on the last page.

ISSUES RAISED:

Newsletters 1 – 4 covered: teenage drinking; clubs; drugs; cell phones; porn; pocket money; communication; discipline & boundaries; depression; Grade 8 hiccups; sexual activity; self-mutilation; eating disorders; self-esteem; bullying; sexual abuse; ADHD; subject choices; matric rave week; teen values; and helpful reading. (If you didn't get the newsletter/s, [email us](#) for a copy.)

In this issue, specific questions are answered under Q&A, whilst general topics requested are summarised as follows:

FACEBOOK

Facebook, the contact, photo and communication website that is experiencing phenomenal popularity worldwide, is starting to cause concern for quite a few parents (and some employers too). It (and other sites like it) enables the sharing of photos, creating one's own profile and it's a great way of keeping in touch with friends, but many people are becoming so hooked that they spend hours and days glued to it. Psychologists are now talking of "Facebook addiction".

As with MXit and the Internet, recommendations are that parents stay involved and aware of how much time is being spent on Facebook, to avoid excessive time spent, and distraction from schoolwork, exercise and other important activities. If indications are that the interest is becoming obsessive then some action will no doubt be called for.

In terms of computer use in general, and particularly Internet use, experts' advice includes locating the computer in a more general area in the home, and not in the child's bedroom. As they say "parents paid for the computer and it's their right to ensure that they are happy with its use" and also "as parents we are responsible for our children's well-being and safety, so it is our duty to remain aware of the Internet activity our children take part in."

Excessive use aside, Facebook provides a fun, creative and easy way of connecting with friends. And with its growing popularity, we'll no doubt be seeing a great deal more of it (and similar sites) as time goes by.

PARENTING:

AUTHORITARIAN, PERMISSIVE, OR DEMOCRATIC?

Many parents express uncertainty about which kind of parenting styles are most effective. Liz Dooley from FAMSA summarizes her thoughts as follows:

"We need balance in parenting teenagers. At one end of the scale there is **authoritarian parenting** – the risks here are that the teenager doesn't have space to grow, to make mistakes and to learn from them. It also sets the scene for a power struggle and rebellion, which leads to a no win situation for everyone.

"At the other end is **permissive parenting** where anything goes. We all drink, smoke and club together. This leaves teenagers with no boundaries to kick against. And boundaries help teenagers to feel secure.

"Don't make too many rules – rather have a few non-negotiable ones – eg who is driving, with whom are you going, and then negotiate the rest as they arise. Don't make rules which you can't sustain!

"Discipline with dignity. There have to be consequences to behaviour which is unacceptable. Try to make sure the consequence has something to do with what has happened. Sometimes it's enough to say "I'm really disappointed in your behaviour" and no more. But it obviously depends on the circumstances. However, don't shame or humiliate the teenager. Sometimes it works to ask teenagers what they think the consequence should be.

"Most teenagers are rude or cheeky at some stage and talk to their parents as if they are intellectually slow. I recommend that the parent says "Please don't talk to me or anyone else like that, it is not alright" and then walk away – don't engage! Don't let it develop further by saying things like "how dare you" as it's easy to end up being angry and rude yourself.

"Talk openly at home about the issues the teenager may be confronted with (such as sex; pornography; alcohol and drugs). It can sometimes be helpful to use films, TV programmes, or the Internet to introduce and discuss the topics. Outright banning and avoidance increases interest.

"In my experience most teenagers don't like face to face serious chats with their parents. General discussions are helpful, about how we all have strengths and vulnerabilities and how we need to learn to understand and manage our vulnerabilities. I think it works better to keep the discussion more general and less personal. Drop a pebble into the pond and see where the ripples lead.

"It's valuable for teenagers to know that they are appreciated for who they are. Affirm them for their special qualities, their sense of humour, being kind, their opinions.

"So a balance in the middle, call it **democratic parenting**, is the style which gives the teenager boundaries, respect, security, allows them to make mistakes and learn from them, and grants them personal dignity. This style includes listening, negotiating, brain-storming ideas, always remaining respectful. It allows parents to say sorry if they have made a mistake and to model that behaviour.

"It's good to know that as parents we can learn a great deal about ourselves and the world around us through our teenagers."

DIVORCE AND THE ADOLESCENT

We receive many emails from parents, asking about divorce, its effects and minimising the impact on children. Tom Burkhalter gives some invaluable insight:

"The crucial fact in thinking about divorce is that the child's post divorce adjustment will be dependent on the extent to which divorced parents can maintain a harmonious co-parenting relationship. Divorcing parents have a huge responsibility, in the midst of their own emotional turmoil, to try to prioritise their child's parental needs.

"Studies have shown that discord is more damaging than divorce separation for the child's adjustment. Within that, conflicts involving the children, either over them or through them, are most damaging.

Three phases of divorce

"Divorce involves three main phases: The initial phase is about an unhappy marriage, usually with conflict, leading to a break-up, and the children are usually caught up in this turmoil.

"The second phase involves parents trying to solve the problems, make new arrangements which often involve moving, new careers, new partners etc, and reconstituting their lives. This is an unstable, insecure and unsettling time of adjustment. Many studies reveal that this can last for two to three years until the third phase where the parent experiences renewed stability.

The process and the challenges

"In this process children are affected as they experience the reduced parenting

capacities of parents consumed by their own issues. Children often respond to the initial period with anger, sadness & distress, expressed in an age-related way, and they often regress. Children often feel resentment, which is often denied, as their lives have been disrupted by the parents' agenda, which forces them to adjust.

"Sometimes children respond with relief as well (divorce is not always negative, especially in conflict-filled marriages). Children often feel guilty, caught in a loyalty bind, as connecting with one parent can feel like a betrayal of the other. All these responses are normal, and should be expected.

"Thereafter, the challenges of being the custodial parent (here I will assume it is the mother, for simplicity) are considerable. Given these stresses to the parent, the child adapts to not only an absent father, but a partially unavailable mother, who is not as physically and emotionally present as she had been. Children then also have to adjust to a relationship with the non-custodial parent that is different and may feel artificial and strained, and often feels fragile given feelings of abandonment. Children often experience that loss as the absence of a protective family unit.

Factors which affect how children adapt:

"In the middle phase of adjustment to a new life, the degree to which children adapt is mitigated by a variety of factors, including the following:

"The prognosis is worse if the parent's functioning or relationship with the child was bad prior to the divorce. As stated earlier, the level of parental conflict is influential. Whether the divorce leads to other big changes ie. moves of home, school, etc (the more adjustments, the more difficult). The child's temperament is important, meaning that difficult children often create difficulties in families that tend to elicit negative reactions, and easygoing children are generally more adaptable and tend to elicit more support.

"The child's ability to remain involved and invested in his own interests and pursuits, as opposed to his parents', will help adaption. The extent to which the child has good relationships with peers and relatives, and has supportive neutral adults in her life is very important. Adolescence and early childhood are developmental periods that leave the child most vulnerable to change. Economic stress makes adaption more difficult.

"In relation to the latter, most mother-custodial families suffer a decrease in financial status. A 1997 study in the USA found that mothers tended to experience a 25-50 percent loss in pre-divorce income as opposed to 10 percent for fathers. One of the effects of divorce noted in long term studies is that children tended to suffer educationally, often dropping out or not going on to study further because of financial constraints. All the studies indicate the importance of education, the involvement of fathers, and the decrease in social stigma as being important.

"One of the difficulties emerging from divorce is the reconstructed family, the new family put together when parents get involved with partners. This introduces the complexities of step-parents and step-children, of having to negotiate step-siblings and later half-siblings. Children often feel displaced by their parent, and have to adjust their image of the parent as an adult with emotional and sexual needs.

"Some of the difficulties experienced by children in maladaptive divorce scenarios are: That children act out their aggression as a defence against loss and hurt. They have often observed problematic models of conflict resolution from their parents, and these two issues lead to difficulties with the child modulating/regulating aggression. Another common difficulty is problems with separating. Developmentally, fathers serve an important separating function, and their absence complicates this, especially if the custodial parent needs to hold onto the child for her own comfort and need.

"This is especially prevalent in adolescence where autonomy strivings are central. One also requires a secure home and sense of security in order to separate effectively. In divorced families, parents try to foster closeness and cohesiveness (which negatively can mean clinginess and control), and this can cause conflict with the adolescent who wants independence.

"Divorce can affect children's trust in the reliability of relationships and damage

trust. Commonly, the children of problematic divorces recapitulate their parents' relationship, ie. seek out and play out the same relationship. Gender identity is often a problem. With an absent father, boys often experience the lack of a positive male role model, and girls feel abandoned and identify with a maternal figure who is not valued and rejected by the male figure.

Suggestions in divorce situations:

- **Tell the children what is happening** when divorce is on the cards, but don't get too adult or convoluted in explaining, and avoid explaining too many of the 'adult' issues.
- **Avoid excessive emotion in explaining.** Avoid blaming the other parent, and monitor your child's level of stress.
- **It is useful to inform others such as:** the school, paediatrician and other support networks, of the situation. The support of other neutral adults is helpful.
- **Try to avoid additional stresses early on in the process,** so delay having to move, change schools, new housekeepers etc.
- As stated earlier, **a good working relationship between parents is crucial.** They need to be on the same page, collaborate, communicate, co-operate and be reasonable.
- **Parents need to be aware of their own feelings and behaviour,** and how that impacts on the child. They need to be aware of the child's feelings and help them negotiate through the divorce. They should normalise the child's responses and contextualise them. It helps to anticipate changes in preparation. Parenting needs to adapt as the child grows and different developmental needs emerge.
- **Access and visitation need to be worked out.** Here the needs may change too, as the child's needs evolve, so be open to those needs and don't rigidly enforce arrangements. To force a child into arrangements they don't want, can compromise relations, especially with the non-custodial parent, in the long run.
- **Studies confirm that where there are high levels of conflict,** frequent contact with the conflictual non-custodial parent heightens maladjustment. Parents should facilitate the child's relationship with the other parent, without overtaxing the child's coping resources.
- **Remember that the quality of the relationship is ultimately more important** than the frequency of contact, although both are ideal."

CELL PHONE CAMERAS – GOOD OR BAD?

A number of schools have asked our Forum to address the use of cell phone cameras by teens. It seems that cameras are increasingly being used to humiliate someone by taking compromising or embarrassing pictures or videos and then mms'ing or emailing them to all and sundry.

Very often this takes place without malicious intent or forethought, but quite often the actions can also be a form of bullying. Whatever the original intention, the results are often heartbreaking. Children feel humiliated, embarrassed or angry, and for many the thought of facing those who have seen the pictures is too daunting. Effects range from short-term discomfort through to (depending on the content) contemplating suicide.

Some schools are contemplating banning cell phones with cameras (with the proliferation of these phones it's easier said than done), and all of them ask that parents discuss this the use, ethics and effects with their children.

Some schools, where photos and mms'ing have become a serious problem, are planning to implement a system where phones would be kept in lockers during the school day, to be retrieved at lunch and home-time. This would also help with the issue of children spending a considerable amount of class-time on MXit.

Parents' objections

Apparently a number of parents are objecting vehemently, saying it's their child's right to have their phone on them at all times. They want to have instant contact with their offspring and dismiss suggestions of having designated times (eg lunch) where children could access and respond to messages.

What are your thoughts? All day access, with the constant distraction of MXit and sms, along with photo issues, vs stricter controls during school-time?

SELF-ESTEEM

In response to requests, Sally Thorp provides some self-esteem indicators:

High Self-Esteem	Low Self-Esteem
✓ Generally face life with an optimistic attitude	✓ Focus on the negative
✓ Express strong feelings constructively	✓ Find it difficult to express feelings – may become withdrawn or have aggressive outbursts
✓ Set realistic goals	✓ Afraid to take risks for fear of ridicule or failure
✓ Will take up a challenge	✓ Poor body image
✓ Confident	✓ Easily influenced by peers and media
✓ Give and receive compliments	✓ When receiving compliments, tend to be suspicious of the motive and have difficulty internalizing the compliment
✓ Give and receive criticism	✓ Take criticism personally – feel a failure if what they have tried fails
✓ Aware and proud of their strengths	✓ Perfectionist
✓ Take responsibility for their actions	✓ Tend to blame others or circumstances
✓ Delay gratification	✓ Easily overwhelmed
✓ Ability to make choices that support sense of self-respect and self-worth	✓ Make impulsive decisions based on wanting it 'now'
✓ Think for themselves	✓ Anxious

"If you recognize any of the above signs of low self-esteem in your teen, you may consider taking some of the following steps to enhance your teen's self-esteem:

- **Always be on the look-out for positive attributes**, character traits and competencies in your teen. Be specific when communicating your praise e.g. instead of using statements like "I'm proud of you!" consider saying "The way you thought through that problem shows great insight and clear thinking!" In this way you are giving them concrete information about their competencies which they can then draw on again.
- **When criticizing, be sure to criticize the behaviour** and NOT the person e.g. instead of "You are so stupid" consider saying "That was a silly thing to do". The influence of parents and teachers can make or break a child's self-esteem – so choose your words wisely.
- **Help your teen to set realistic expectations or goals** - this goes a long way to setting them up to experience success. Try to ensure as far as possible that tasks or expectations match your teen's strengths and ability levels.
- **See the potential for learning from mistakes or errors.** By turning mistakes inside-out and focusing on what can be learned from the mistake, children learn to focus on the positive and not the negative. How the mistake is handled is what is important and makes the difference. Powerful, life-long lessons can be learned from handling mistakes constructively.

It is never too late to enhance the level of your child's self-esteem. Make a commitment to yourself that you will find every opportunity in each day to build self-esteem in your family – it is the greatest gift you can give your teen!"

DRUGS – A CHEMICAL ILLUSION

As drugs are increasingly raising their head in our schools, we include a sobering column written by Melinda Ferguson, the author of "*Smacked – A harrowing true story of addiction and survival*":

"The thing about drugs is that they make you feel so good. In the beginning. At least that's how it was for me. I remember it so clearly. That first joint. I was 16. One Friday after school some doobie came my way and I swear the wallpaper of my mind was never quite the same. It literally blew my way of thinking. With that first intake of sweet smoke, the doors of perception were opened sky wide. For the first time in my young life I got a whiff of the concept of freedom - me a middle class schoolgirl, crushed in an all white apartheid lying school system - nothing could have beaten that emancipation I felt that day.

I had experienced a feeling almost as good, 5 years earlier when at the age of eleven I took my first drink - amber burning brandy stolen from my mother's stash in the liquor cabinet in our family dining room. I still recall the way it burnt my insides and calmed and lulled my childlike, panicked mind. For the first time I felt like I had found home.

So later, when they came, those anti drug campaigners, to our school and stood before 800 pupils and told us how bad the drugs were and how dreadful they would make us feel, I looked at them, silly squares, and knew they were lying, like so many adults around me.

That's the thing: probably more harm is caused by these "don't do drugs" campaigns than any good whatsoever. It is hard to argue with first hand experiences of those initial amazing forays into the seductive world of chemicals...You see there was a time when I absolutely loved the feelings that drugs gave me.

Drugs became my best friend. Soon I was on my way to university with an every day doobie habit. And then it was Acid –otherwise known as LSD. How could I forget the first time I tripped out in a sea green field with the love of my life, JZ, just 20 years old, staring for hours at the silver halos around trees, getting lost in the inside of a flower, the petals velvet thick. Then kissing and melting into each other lips, becoming one, losing shape and sense and all track of time...

They say addiction is progressive and they don't mean it in the political sense. They say that dagga is a gateway drug and most addicts progress from it to harder stuff. I'm afraid to say in my case they were right - 100%.

It's 1998 and the cobra-fanged demon has pounced and like a mad, rabid dog, it's got me by the throat and will not let me go. I'm not quite sure how all those good times have turned so bad. Perhaps it happened after I took that first hit of heroin, perhaps it has always been waiting, since that first stolen sip of brandy, that innocent joint - crouching dragon, waiting for the kill.

Now all that seemed like blissful Icarus gliding, turned into cold curdly porridge, infested by maggots, fattening on my spleen juice that burst forth, bile bitter every time I smoked that brown shit. Arms embracing the toilet in some danky Yeoville commune - the retching and puking, wiping my mouth, like I'm trying to wipe my mind, making space for denial to set in as I reach for another hit.

Then the crack, loading rocks on glass pipes, the lies, the need for cash, the hole grows bigger with each rock that sizzles and each line of heroin that runs down my lungs. On hands and knees praying to the god of crack, scouring and scraping paranoid pipes as dealers line their pockets with my dirty money. Like some sick jelly trifle, denial set in and my addiction grows like a fat, pregnant maggot.

Being a slave in the 16,17,1800s couldn't have been much fun. Stacked sardines in human sweaty faeces. Being a slave in the 1990's was like lumpy vomit for dessert. First thing in the morning needing a hit so bad, sweaty skins, aching bones, body screaming from the sick torture rack of withdrawal and craving, you'll do just about anything to get it.

...The thing with drugs, they stopped making me feel good. At the end it was hell. It always is."

Q & A: QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY PANEL MEMBERS

(Questions are submitted on the understanding that all advice given is given in good faith and the advisors/panel members take no responsibility for any consequent actions arising therefrom.)

1. Q: My children spend every spare moment on MXit. What are the risks?

A: IZABELLA: The use of MXit on cell phones continues to cause major concern to parents of children who are hooked on it. There is an excellent, well researched guide for parents, compiled by Ramon Thomas, available for downloading from the Internet free on <http://www.netucation.co.za/downloads/ParentsGuide2MXit.pdf> (Make sure you type the address and capitals and spelling **EXACTLY** as listed).

2. Q: My daughter is 15 and I sometimes feel like I'm dealing with a monster. How do I cope and how do I best make her aware of her behaviour?

A: LIZ NORMAN: Give the monster a cute name! Jokes' aside, it is sometimes very useful to "externalise" your daughter's unacceptable behaviour and make it quite clear that this is not her "usual self". 15 year olds around the entire planet go through stages of being "monsters", aliens, strangers etc. The reality is they are growing through one of the most rapid hormonal growth spurts and often have almost no control over how these hormones make them feel.

If you think it is hard living with her, imagine how she feels. Many teenagers are frightened by the changes and confusion they feel and have no way of expressing themselves other than to show their "monstrous" side. Explain growth and growing to your child, explain what hormones are and what they do. By naming the monster, your child will be able to tell you she is having a bad day (or you will be able to tell her) without her thinking this means she is a bad person.

It's about separating the persona of "your child" from the realities of "her behaviour". You can still love her in her entirety, because she is your child, but you do not have to accept her "monster" behaviour. It is also important for the adults in the house to remain as emotionally (and hormonally) calm as possible and to have very definite, clear boundaries and limits. With so much else changing in the life of an adolescent, the routine and security of boundaries helps calm and ease their anxiety. Do not take her comments or selfish behaviour personally, try and see it as a growth step, not a statement aimed at you.

The hormonal issue is very real here. A great number of 15 year olds have parents who are in their 40s. If you happen to fall into the 40-50 year parenting group, keep in mind your own hormonal changes and fluctuations. This is significant for both men and women (it's not only mum who goes through menopause, dads go through hormone changes too!) You could even explain this to your child - you could then develop an understanding that everyone in your house is growing and changing, everyone will make mistakes and be monstrous (not only her), but that you will all survive!

In 5 years time you will all look back and (hopefully) laugh at some of the things you went through together - this is what makes you a family!

3. Q: What is it that makes our teenagers so sexually active nowadays?

A: TOM BURKHALTER: Teenagers have reached physical and reproductive maturity. Puberty is not a long way behind them and they have hormones related to their sexuality coursing through their bodies. These physical developments put sexuality on the agenda, biologically. We don't have to go far back in history, and in some cultures this is still common, for teenagers to be sexually active and having children as a social norm.

We now live longer and can extend our reproductive lives, and society has also changed in its demands and expectations, and therefore in most first world contexts teen pregnancy is not seen as ideal.

Teenagers are also not emotionally mature, and so they are not always best able to manage these strong biological imperatives. This is part of the justification for convent schools and single sex education, keep the girls occupied and away from temptation, and away from the intentions of boys.

The idea of sex as recreation has also advanced, given the development of contraception, and this is supported by media images that sell sexuality. So biology, peer pressure, social aspiration and the fact that it is possible to do so, combine powerfully with an emotionally unsteady and somewhat immature teenager to lead to sex.

Alcohol would also help lower inhibitions and distort perceptions. Teenagers also often turn to sex to deal with feelings of alienation and low self esteem, and to gratify needs for attention or to compensate for emotional neglect.

4. Q: Please give me some tips about communicating with my teenagers.

A: **JENNY SHAIN:** Here are some thoughts:

- Listen, listen, listen, be curious about your child, and try to understand what he/she is trying to communicate. If you're not sure ask questions to clarify eg "what did you mean by..." or "I'm not sure I understand..." - questions to understand, not to intrude or interrogate.
- Be positive and encouraging, eg "that sounds like an interesting idea", even if you're not so sure. He needs to try and, if necessary, learn from his mistakes.
- Don't give your opinion too directly or dogmatically, rather frame it in more general terms, eg: Not "I think you should..." rather "sometimes it helps to..." or "If you do your homework today you won't have to worry about it on Sunday". Then give him the choice. Don't nag until it's done your way.
- Be sensitive to his mood. If he is tired and irritable (which may be most of the time), don't bombard him with questions.
- Don't criticize, this is extremely damaging to the relationship. Rather look for something good and build on this, eg "Thanks for putting your clothes away" rather than "Your room is ALWAYS such a mess."
- Give your child SPACE. Teenagers often don't often feel like talking and also have the right to privacy, so we need to come to the painful reality that we cannot know everything – and can control even less!
- Remind and ask, don't just ask - eg "Please remember to clean the yard".
- Put clear consequences in place, eg "If you don't come home by 12, you will not be allowed to go out next weekend".
- Focus on building the relationship rather than giving advice.
- Try to be available when you are needed, even if it's the last thing you feel like (eg 11.00 at night).
- Your greatest tool is your connection. Invest time, energy and love, blood sweat and tears. The rewards will be worth it!

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If you would like to be involved in the Forum and help in any way, all input is relevant and appreciated.

PANEL MEMBERS

Our panel of contributors includes:

Thomas Burkhalter. A leading psychologist, Thomas has two practices, focuses on: children, adolescents, parents, adult psychotherapy and couples therapy, and is case conference consultant at the Parent And Child Counselling Centre(NGO).

Liz Norman. Clinical social worker with 22 years experience in the field of child and family welfare, specialising in group dynamics and adolescent mental health.

Izabella Little (Gates). Author of *Life Talk for a Daughter* and *Life Talk for a Son* (with P. Wilson) and the translated *Lewenspraatjies met 'n Dogter*. Each book covers 60 topics and is a tool-kit of tips, guidelines and values for teenagers and young adults. She runs the Forum, gives talks and continues to write.

Jenny Shain. Social worker and Deputy Director of JPCCC (Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre, 011-484-1734/5/6)

Liz Dooley. Director and Counsellor at FAMSA (Family Life Centre) - 28 years experience as a social worker/counsellor specializing in family and marital relationships and parenting skills, youth and individual counselling.

Prof Zak Nel. Registered counselling psychologist, he does skills/aptitude profiling, subject choices (Gr 10-12), and university course selection.

Margaret Logan. Many years of running a remedial school, her expertise includes: emotional & learning problems, addictions, and various disorders.

Sally Thorp. Works with parents and children in the area of building healthy self-esteem and equipping them with tools to face life with optimism & self-reliance.

Melinda Ferguson. Author of ***Smacked*** - a harrowing story of addiction and survival. From her own traumatic experience she offers insight & advice on drugs.
Esha Brijmohan. A journalist, Esha raises awareness among her readers and community regarding important parenting/teen issues.
Phillip Lowe. Business consultant and father of teenagers, coordinates involvement from schools, interested organisations & media, as well as Life Talk parent & teen workshops/talks.

To utilise any of the panel member's services, email forum@lifetalk.co.za

PLEASE FORWARD TO ANYONE WHO MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN THIS NEWSLETTER

The FORUM email address is: forum@lifetalk.co.za

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They're a great gift and are available at leading bookstores and on www.kalahari.net

Talk for a Daughter now also in the UK and on www.amazon.co.uk

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