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## Why your daughter needs you to be her mother, not her best friend

*Femail today*

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Every time I hear the fatal lines "I'm my daughter's best friend," I think: Oh, grow up, you silly woman. The fashionable phenomenon of the mother-as best friend, identified as an increasing menace by U.S. family psychologist **Dr Stephan Poulter** in his book **The Mother Factor**, is startlingly common.

You're out shopping and you see two blondes from behind, long hair swinging, both in high heels, toting enormous WAG-bags, then they turn. One is 18, the other in her 40s. Another mother-and-daughter pair who yearn to be taken for sisters - at least the mother does. The daughter, if she has any sense, ought to be dying inside with embarrassment.

**Best friends: Fergie with daughters Beatrice (left) and Eugene (right)**



Now don't get me wrong. I can understand the heady attraction from the mother's point of view.

Not long ago, admittedly in a very darkened car park, the attendant thought I was my daughter's sister. I was over the moon. Until I caught sight of my daughter's face.

Much as she loves me I could see the look of horror mixed with pity that I *wanted* to be taken for my 19-year-old's sister. Did I need that kind of pathetic reassurance?

It made me remember how one of my friends at primary school had a glam mother who dressed incredibly well and flirted with all the fathers. The rest of us were consumed with jealousy.

Except that when you looked closely, it was clearly awful for my friend to have a mother who cared more about being desirable than for her daughter's happiness.

In fact, I remember feeling deeply grateful that my own mother *looked* like a mum, slightly overweight, rather dowdily dressed in clothes she'd had run up by a dressmaker to save money for our school fees, and who was obviously a mum.

And yet, no way did my mother lack authority. She had bags of it.

And, being trained as a doctor, she knew that it was important for the psyche that parents lay boundaries that must be respected by the child.

And this is the rub, as Dr Poulter points out. Best friends don't lay down limits.

They join in with you, egg you on, even. And yet of all the parent's jobs, laying down limits is the most vital.

Parents have to teach their children nasty, uncomfortable truths - such as you can't always have what you want, that you have to think of others occasionally and that life can be annoying and dull at times.

A friend who tried to tell you that would be dumped at once.

But any psychologist will tell you that getting stuck into extreme and self-destructive behaviour, such as drinking, promiscuity or even drug addiction, is often due to children never having learned to say "No" to themselves with the help and advice of a loving parent.

But what if the parent wants to come along and share those experiences?

The supreme irony is that while most of us would never hit or abuse our children, we are still doing them an immense wrong by trying to just be their friend.

We are soft as candy floss with our children, because we want them to like us.

Our parents may have been tough and it was uncomfortable, so - confusing authority with authoritarianism - we tell ourselves we want to practise a different way of parenting.

Unfortunately, it often turns out to be no parenting at all.

According to Dr Poulter: "When mothers become best friends, it leaves their children motherless."

The upshot is that girls can sometimes have to push themselves to dangerous levels of aberrant behaviour until someone intervenes and says enough's enough.

But being a strong parent can be uncomfortable. One friend said she hated getting cross with her children when she got home from work because that was their only time together and she didn't want to spoil it by telling them off.

On another occasion I invited a famous cookery writer to my home and he explained how he'd meant to punish his daughter's bad behaviour by saying he wouldn't take her out to lunch, and then realised that would mean he couldn't go himself, so he gave in. Wanting to be a friend instead of a parent can be equally disastrous in mothers of boys.

Feeling they have a friend instead of a mother can lead to great rage in boys, says Dr Poulter.

There is also research that boys whose mothers don't stand up to them, especially if they are single mothers with no male influence in the household-can be disruptive in schools, as well as frighteningly dismissive of women.

No one wants a return to the idea of Victorian parenting, with its overtones of children being seen and not heard, but we do need to re-establish a sense of parental authority.

Of course, it's healthy for parents to get on with their children, to chat and laugh together, though not to become one of those ghastly mothers who claim their daughters "tell them everything".

Daughters who have been brought up with a clear sense that they have a mother instead of an ageing best friend won't need or want their mum to go on the pull with them, like Fergie boasts of doing.

They will have friends and boyfriends of their own.

And if mothers who want to be their daughters' best friends don't see that, they will remain sad figures trying to prevent their children from growing up - just so they can go along for the party.

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