

#1

This vignette is so precise and real that it deserves a textual approach.

*My 13-year old daughter approached me*

Something is going right. Young adolescent girls very much need the possibility of approaching their mothers about sexual matters. Creating the atmosphere in which such an approach is possible is no small achievement. So our principle will be: *primum non nocere*- do no harm. You will want to preserve this atmosphere in your response. Part of your question may be: how do I avoid overdoing that would harm this precious and fragile balance.

*she is becoming aware of her father as a male*

Your daughter is speaking from within developmental change. Her new sexual awareness has taken her by surprise. She is feeling an imbalance in relation to her father. She is telling both herself and her mother about this change. This is not a simple report- it is an emotional act of deep significance that is taking the external form of a report. The emotional act has three levels:

- 1 - she is putting into words a sexual awareness and thereby assuming more authorship and mastery over these feelings
- 2- she is sharing her sexual awareness with her mother, a way of gaining mother's permission to take part in nascent femininity and sexuality.
- 3- she is telling mother about sexual awareness regarding father, a way of determining the safety of her incestuous and competitive feelings that are compatible with the durability of her relationship with mother.

*when she hugs him now she feels a bit uncomfortable*

She is able to admit to herself that she does not feel entirely in control of her sexual development. And well she should not! One of the most difficult aspects of adolescence involves the struggle between loss of control as body mind and society transform at an astounding pace, and the need to feel an assert full control over oneself. Your daughter has found just the right niche - her mother- to admit to herself and to her mother that she can feel at times overwhelmed and not yet in full control. We are used to calling adolescence a moratorium from the world. Here your daughter is showing the other side- she at times needs a moratorium from adolescence. This moratorium is safe only if the dependency that she allows herself on her mother feels safe and does not threaten to take away the independence she will need to feel and show the next moment. So- another big compliment for Mom.

*I told her it's natural to have such feelings...*

As a well-meaning mother, you address her anxieties and try to allay them. But your daughter's situation involves not only the anxiety, but the awareness that she is out of balance. If the feelings are natural, then why should she be anxious? So she has natural feelings and unnatural anxiety about them?

*That didn't seem to be enough for her.*

I think your daughter would like you to recognize her at this age as an

active participant in her own development. This would entail a complex response in 3 movements:

- 1- Your development can feel temporarily out of balance without your losing your handle on yourself- including sexuality.
- 2- You are working on this personal problem as you put it into words and express it to your mother. You will continue to work on it in your own time and will solve it at your own pace. In the meantime, things are moving ahead even when you are not sure just how.
- 3- These kinds of confusing and surprising feelings are recognizable to your mother and to other women. Something about what you recall of your own adolescence goes a lot further here than general reassurance.

*I asked her whether she felt attracted to her father...*

Perhaps you felt a bit pressed to foreclose the problem at a content level- as if once she knows about such an attraction she will quiet down. It might have been more helpful- and may still be so on the next round of this likely-to-be-circular conversation- if you were to comment that these kinds of feelings can include all sort of things, some of which can seem surprising or even embarrassing. You wanted to help her get to this attraction in her own time and pace, and your direct question forced the question.

*she said she didn't know.*

She is right- she does not consciously know this. Since the question did not spring directly from her words, she is probably actively involved in "not knowing" even more strongly as she speaks.

*how can I make her feel more comfortable with the situation?*

With which situation?

- 1 With herself: She is doing fine. She needs the recognition that she can take on these feelings in her own way.
- 2 With her mother: You are doing fine together. You can make more explicit how you appreciate and value her turning to you, and think this is good for her and for you. You can create a new space where you recognize that she is hard at work, and that you are there to help if she feels stymied or overwhelmed, but that in the meantime, a girl her age needs a mother who gives her room to work by herself on what she feels.
- 3 With her father: You might suggest that she can refrain from hugging if it is uncomfortable for now, and that you are sure her father can respect this. You can talk to her father about respecting this.

Now let me repeat the caveat I gave you, this time for me: This is a very healthy story. Use from my comments only what feels right for you and your daughter. Otherwise- leave well enough alone.