

6 WAYS
to KEEP
the "LITTLE" in
YOUR GIRL

Guiding Your Daughter from
Her Tweens to Her Teens



DANNAH GRESH

Author of *Six Ways to Keep the "Good" in Your Boy*

“You’ve probably seen middle schoolers wearing more makeup than you do. How do you keep your daughter little in this growing-up-too-fast, social-media-crazed world? Dannah Gresh has done us all a favor by writing this book to help us raise our girls to be body confident and age appropriate. Dannah is not afraid to tackle hard questions about depression, sexting, dating, and eating disorders. Her stories, research, biblical wisdom, and practical advice will open your eyes. You can protect your daughter from harm, and this book will help you.”

—**Arlene Pellicane**, author of *Screen Kids* and *Parents Rising*, host of *The Happy Home* podcast

“A practical, biblically based resource to navigate the rapids of raising a tween girl.”

—**Juli Slattery**, psychologist and founder Authentic Intimacy

“I have three granddaughters (and five grandsons), and the topics in this book are the things I pray about. I am deeply burdened about everything the world throws at young girls, and Dannah confronts each of those concerns. As I read, I sometimes thought, *Oh, I hope she addresses such and such*. And by George, she did—and so graciously and forthrightly! I think you will find the same answers to the prayers on your heart for your daughter.”

—**Fern Nichols**, founder, Moms in Prayer International

“*Six Ways to Keep the ‘Little’ in Your Girl* is full of invigorating Scripture, relatable stories, wisely curated science, and practical application to make the most of our daughters’ childhoods while preparing them for the future. The first edition was helpful and effective when my teenagers were young, but now I have four more children ten and under, and I don’t want to miss the opportunity to nurture them well. Just when I was feeling weary, distracted, and overwhelmed, the revised edition of this book jolted me awake (in a good way) with a renewed vision for the impact I can have on my precious children. I feel motivated to keep a warm heart and equipped to make wise choices. Oh, God’s amazing grace—I’m excited to begin again!”

—**Laura Booz**, author of *Expect Something Beautiful*

“Our culture obsesses over secular habits and indulgences that promise freedom but ultimately lead to bondage and shame. Dannah is well-versed in compassion

and urgency for our younger generation of women to be lovers and doers of God's Word. She is uniquely gifted to create a bridge for moms and daughters to engage with God's Word in an effective, biblical, and relatable way. In this book, Dannah graciously invites mothers and daughters on a discipleship journey of deep, spiritual formation that leads to freedom from shame and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. A must-read!"

—**Amanda Kassian**, founder and director of Seen Ministry, Alberta, Canada

"If you feel like you're ready to give up on the mission of parenting, this book is for you. As a mama of four, I need daily practical wisdom to nurture my relationship with my children. It's not an easy job to stand against a seductive culture that is trying to entice the younger generation. In this book, Dannah calls us to rise up and be intentional as we remind our daughters of their true value, identity, and purpose. Every chapter is filled with down-to-earth practical examples, current research, and stepping-stones that will encourage you to consistently dig deep to guide your child's heart in a biblical way. There is hope for our girls, and there is hope for us."

—**Alejandra Slemín**, cohost of Revive Our Hearts' *Grounded*

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To my daughter-in-love, Aleigha!

*I will walk beside you
to keep the "little" in your precious girls.*

*Thank you for the gift of letting me help you
plant truth into their hearts.*

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FOREWORD

I met Dannah Gresh when I was a new Christian in my junior year of high school. I have known her for almost 20 years and have found her to be one of the most joyful, genuine, and consistent people I have ever known. She seeks the Lord's truth in the early morning hours. She asks difficult questions and searches for honest answers, even if they are unexpected. She studies current statistics about the risks we encounter in our world. She has fought on behalf of you and me, and on behalf of our sweet daughters. She poured truth into me years ago when we were strangers, and she has continued to do so since becoming my mama-in-love when I married her son, Robby, the best person I have ever known.

Just a couple of years ago, Bob and Dannah opened their home to Robby and me when we brought our beautiful twin baby girls home from the hospital. Bob and Robby cared for our girls late into the night. Dannah woke up very early to help me with the first bottle feed of the day. We sat in two cozy red rocking chairs, snuggled up close to her fireplace. For me, these chairs are holy ground, a precious place where I encountered the radical and undying love of Jesus. Dannah and I held my baby girls and talked and laughed and cried and prayed. She listened to my heart and spoke truth into it. Truth about my Savior who sustained the lives we held in precarious times, truth about my girls, truth about me.

When you pick up this book, dear reader, you are cozying up in Dannah's red chair in her living room. You are laughing and crying and receiving truth from her heart to yours, and the immense love of your own Savior, Jesus Christ.

Aleighta Gresh



Addie (left) and Zoe (right) Gresh

INTRODUCING THE SIX WAYS

I am a woman whose life has been devoted to encouraging other moms to strategically connect with their daughters. This didn't happen by chance.

One reason this came to be is that I have absolutely *loved* being a mom. Oh yes, I was exhausted by sleepless nights and overwhelmed by the toddler years, and I didn't always know what to do to help my elementary-aged children succeed in life and relationships. But I loved it! The tween and teen years were especially full of sweet moments of connection. There's nothing but joy in my heart when I think of my Robby, my Lexi, and my Autumn. (Oh, I'm so thankful to God for being gifted with them.) Perhaps it was because I enjoyed it so much that I tried to do it extra well. This resulted in devoting time to reading and researching child development and parenting books. (I also really enjoy books, so this was as much an escape as a preparation.)

The other reason I am what I am is that I started praying for it when I was 19.

Why 19? Let me back up to a really critical part of my story. And it could be that parts of it may sound oddly familiar to you as you look back at yours.

I was 15 years old, a perfectly well-adjusted and loved Christian teenager. While attending a conservative Christian high school, I remained

active in a very loving missionary-driven church. To be honest, there was tension between the more learned-faith experience I had in school and the Spirit-driven experience of my little church congregation. I've chosen to embrace the best of everything God allowed to be planted in my heart through those influences. From my school, I learned to study the truth and serve God. From my church, I learned to experience God's presence and to love Him. As a teenager, I did the only thing I felt I could do with these overflowing supplies of service and love—I signed up to be a missionary for Child Evangelism Fellowship.

I wanted my whole life to point to Jesus!

Three months later, I chose the unthinkable. It made no sense. Although I take full responsibility, years later I can't help but see the deceptive trap set for an innocent teenage girl who was crazy in love with Jesus and on a path to do big things for the kingdom of God. I won't share the details—but with a summer of service and loving the Lord behind me, I ended up having sex with my boyfriend.

I now know that my mind and my emotions weren't ready for that kind of experience. That "one time" would begin a terrible cycle of sin. When the reality finally sank in that I couldn't live a life of integrity before God *and* stay in a relationship with this guy, I found the courage to break it off.

But I was plagued by depression, self-inflicted rules of penance, and loneliness.

And I told no one.

Next came what I call the long and lonely pause in my life. During this time, I didn't know what to become. What I had been becoming—a woman who wanted to tell others about the love of Jesus Christ—had been ripped up by pain and shame. I felt gagged and unusable.

But I knew one thing: I did *not* want my daughter to know the same sense of shame that I was experiencing. It was then that I wrote this:

I hope and pray that I'll be able to know when to guide my daughter in building up defenses so she will have a little better

time of it than I for waiting. I've wasted precious years of growth with the Lord. Now it's like starting over! That's the hard way to go. I know there is no way I can decide how things will go for my daughter, but I'm praying God will give me wisdom to be her friend and guide.

I wrote countless entries like that during my college years. Some were the ramblings of my heart. Others were prayers and pleadings with God for my daughter, though she was yet to be conceived.

But there was good news to be discovered in my hurt that might encourage you. My secret sin—when I gave it to the Lord for forgiveness and healing—became the very strength of the Lord's plan to use me. As I came out of hiding to tell my story, I found so much comfort in the name of Jesus Christ that I had to pass it on! This Bible verse became my treasure:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who
comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able
to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the
comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4 ESV

It is out of God's comfort in my life that I have served him most powerfully! It is out of the comfort of Jesus Christ that I've been able to love my daughters (God gave me two!). And it's out of comfort I lead a team of women who coach tweens, teens, and their moms through online Bible studies, live events, and monthly discipleship tools. God's comfort flows out of my life!

Does it flow out of yours?

I've learned that many moms have heartache of some kind that began in their teen years. Boy craziness. Eating disorders. Porn addiction. Body image issues. Friendship drama. Or even horrific abuse.

Have you allowed God to comfort you?

That's a really important question because I've discovered that *many*

of us pray for God to let the pain we knew as teenagers bypass our daughters. But some moms don't actually take the first and most important step to prepare to mentor their girls: They don't pursue and experience God's comfort. As a result, they don't know how to begin to talk to their daughters about the evils they've known. They just feel a lot of fear.

Do you feel comforted by God when you think of your past? Or do you feel fearful? If you're living in his healing, move full steam ahead through the contents of this book. But if you feel anxious, unsure of yourself, and fearful, I encourage you to begin or continue your own personal journey of healing as you read this book. Phone a godly friend and tell her what still hurts and ask her to pray with you. Hire a Christian counselor. Saturate your heart and mind in biblical truth about your past. But don't skip this critical step. And do it soon because time goes so quickly with our girls, and we have to get to the task of planting seeds of truth much earlier than expected!

If your daughter is between the ages of 8 and 12, she's in the crosshairs of the world's pressure to make her grow up too fast. The reason it's so important to intervene is this: Kids' value formation—concerning sex, family structure, sobriety, eating disorders, body image, and other all-too-common teen issues—*does not occur during the teen years*. Those values are formed before she is 13. Many parents do not realize this and inadvertently allow the culture to speak loudly as they remain mute, planning to deal with the "uncomfortable" issues later. In the meantime, their daughters are pressured to skip being "little" girls and live like they're teenagers. The influence of social media, makeup advertising, music with lyrics that aren't age appropriate, Netflix programming fueled by mature themes, and friends who have boyfriends—so many 7-year-olds are living with pressure to live like they're seventeen!

That's why True Girl—my ministry of connecting the hearts of mothers and tween girls—was born. I want to encourage you and your daughter as you grow closer to each other and closer to Jesus. My team produces resources to serve as your toolbox for mom-daughter connection as you strategically plant truth in her during the years her little brain is at work deciding what she believes.

Most of my True Girl resources are tools you can use with your daughter, and in them I try to keep things pretty light. In this book, however, I speak plainly about the *risks* and *risk reducers*. I'll share six ways you can help protect and guide your daughter through critical value formation years, including how you can

- give her the right “toys” to play with
- help her celebrate her body in a healthy way
- unplug her from a plugged-in world
- unbrand her when the world tries to buy and sell her
- become the carpool queen and sleepover diva
- dream with her about her future

This book is my invitation for you to join me in standing together against the pressure this world is placing on our daughters to grow up too fast. Together we will cry out to God for our daughters!

**AS YOU GO ON TO THE NEXT
CHAPTERS, THERE ARE A FEW THINGS
YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SIX WAYS
TO KEEP THE “LITTLE” IN YOUR GIRL.**

1. This book is not meant to be a comprehensive overview in parenting girls. My experience and research are primarily in the field of sexuality and gender and the related areas of body image and depression. This naturally led me to study the pressure our daughters face to grow up too fast. What I'm going to bring to your parenting toolbox are specific skills to raise a tween girl to become body-confident and age-appropriate, and to align her views to God's written truth. In part 2, I'll introduce six ways that make this

achievable and give you specific, creative ideas to put these ideas to work in your family.

2. The research in this book is valid no matter what your faith is, but I'll write from a specifically Christian perspective. When I first penned this book, some people urged me to write from a more neutral worldview. "What you have to say is for every mom," they reasoned. "Don't box yourself in!"

My goal has been and always will be to raise children who grow up to be adults who embrace God's written standard of truth, the Bible. That will be apparent as I write. Even so, some of the thinkers who have shaped my parenting in the area of sexuality and gender don't share my faith, but they provide great, intellectually honest research that show that God's Word and his ways are worth respecting. When it comes to protecting our girls' hearts, we can find a lot of common ground even with differing faith backgrounds. I hope you'll see that as you read this, even if you don't share my worldview. So turn away from the explosive disagreement on social media and sit down for a while with a friend.

3. There are exceptions to many things I write in this book. For example, when I say that most tween and teen girls will struggle with their sense of beauty, I mean just that. *Most!* Not all. There will be exceptions. Throughout the book, I let you know what the norms are so you can determine your daughter's readiness for things like talking about sex or being introduced to the Internet. I might suggest a parenting skill that will help with her sense of beauty or her obsession with Netflix, but that doesn't mean it's going to work for your

daughter. Every child is unique. There are also girls who need special individual care and counseling. Please don't use this book as a cookie-cutter method of raising a strong daughter.

4. This book does not give you methods that guarantee how your daughter will live out her beliefs. Instead, it helps you to faithfully have strategic conversations in critical areas of value formation. I'm not offering canned rules and step-by-step instructions to create a generation of super-daughters. I don't believe any one set of parenting methods guarantees a specific outcome. (Kids throw great curve balls at stuff like that!) Rather, it is ultimately God's grace that will craft the values of self-control and self-respect into our children.

God gave my husband, Bob, and me our three children with the expectation we would teach them moral values to help them to be physically, emotionally, and spiritually whole. But he also gave each of them a free will to choose to obey the Lord or reject his truth. As we watched our kids emerge into adulthood, we experienced great peace in knowing that we were faithful parents—though by no means perfect. If this book helps you experience that, it will have done its job.

5. The goal of this book is not to make you feel guilty. You may read about something in this book and think, "Oh, no! I didn't do it that way!" The way you have chosen to parent in that area may be right for your family. Each of us has different family needs and capacity. Please don't embrace unnecessary guilt. I repeat: Do not embrace guilt! But keep your heart open to conviction and the sweet invitation to learn new patterns of parenting if God puts those things on your heart.

6. Faithful parents are often required to apply grace to children who don't embrace moral values. My parents, who are *still* exceptional, had a daughter (me) who brushed up against and got bruised by sexual sin. Faithful parents often find themselves aching over their children's struggles or outright rebellion. It started in a place called the Garden of Eden, where two who walked with a perfect Father rebelled. And it hasn't stopped. Be ready at all stages of parenting to apply grace. Just as your 2-year-old threw a fit in public and needed grace, your 16-year-old may create a scene that needs much grace, and your 21-year-old may test the roots of faith you planted so carefully. Apply grace. Ultimately, that's what our Father God gives to us each day, isn't it? Grace!