



In the cockpit, Lily, 5, is learning not just how planes work, but how to be self-confident

My secret weapon

To help her through her toughest growing-up moments, I'm teaching my daughter the best lesson I know **By Phaedra Hise**

My daughter, Lily, is only 5, but already I'm working on her self-image. My goal is to start fortifying it early, so that by the time she hits adolescence her ego might be strong enough to carry her through the punishments of peer pressure. For this job, I have a secret weapon. It's an airplane.

Face it, girls' egos are at risk particularly during the perils of adolescence. What parent of a boy worries about date rape? Bulimia? The simple truth is that girls, more often than boys, become victims—of others, or of their own grotesque self-images. But a girl who grows up feeling powerful, intelligent, skilled—won't that girl be less likely to be victimized?

I sure hope so. That's why I take my daughter flying. My husband and I are pilots, and we use our single-engine plane pretty much the way other people use their boats, RVs or cars—sight-seeing on weekends, visiting the grandparents, taking a vacation. At the same time, I'm encouraging my daughter to help, playing up her strength and ability in doing a tricky job. While the auto-pilot flies the plane, I let her sit in my lap and hold the yoke, or steering wheel. I ask her to unfold the maps and help spot other airplanes below and above us. Before we start the engine, it is her special job to holler "Clear!"

out the window. She knows these are important tasks, and swells with pride doing them. (Lucky for me, she likes to fly, but even if she didn't, I'd find some other skill to teach her.)

Compared with my daughter, I came to flying late in life, at 17. But it quickly became a reliable ego boost, my fix in the face of self-doubt. Maybe you know that skin-crawling sensation of hating yourself. The taunting voice inside your head that points out how fat your thighs are—soft and white like dimpled marshmallows. The voice that laughs when you wear the wrong outfit to a party. The voice that builds into a crescendo of accusations, demanding, Why should anyone like you?

The climb back to normalcy from this fear-and-loathing frenzy is slow. I reassure myself, listing the things that I do, and do well. At the top of the list is always the same big thing: I am a pilot. I can take a heavy chunk of metal up into the air and float it back down again safely. The complex and dangerous machine does what I tell it to. Only a fraction of people in this world can accomplish that, I remind myself, and only a handful of those are women. So what if I have bad hair, no Manolo Blahnik shoes.

What gives girls the confidence to spread their wings?

Those tiny transgressions are nothing compared to what I *can* do.

It's the biggest gun in my ego's arsenal, and I hope it will work for my daughter, as well. Today she sits in the cockpit with me

and confidently turns the radio dial. Tomorrow she might boldly raise her hand to try out for the role of Juliet in the school play. If she fails in some of the high dramas of adolescence, she'll already have one strong accomplishment to fall back on. If she doesn't make cheerleader, maybe she can console herself with the thought that none of those girls ever flew their mom's airplane.

Even if I don't teach her to fly solo, I think it will be enough for her to have helped. She will grow up understanding the mysteries of aviation, knowing that girls can master something so complicated. Whatever it is that she wants to do later—program a computer, try out for pole-vaulting, ask a boy out on a date—I want to give her the confidence to go for it. In letting her help fly the plane now, I'm handing her a powerful weapon for facing the battles of adolescence and beyond. ■

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