

# How to talk to girls and women

Break the ice without putting undue focus on physical appearance

By KATY WALDMAN  
Slate

WASHINGTON — Writer Kasey Edwards voiced understandable indignation in December about the way strangers break the ice with her 4-year-old daughter.

During a trip to Santa's cottage, she noticed that people (and North Pole-dwelling elves) tended to zero in on Violet's appearance, to the exclusion of, say, her thoughts or interests. She takes Santa to task: "You remarked on every item of clothing Violet was wearing — including her socks. And then you told her she was the most beautiful and best-dressed person in the shopping center. ... You kept going and suggested that she takes up modeling when she grows up." Meanwhile, with a young boy, Santa talked about his reindeer.

It's not just Santa. Like most girls," Edwards laments, "my daughter hears, 'That's a pretty dress, did you pick it yourself?' or 'What lovely hair you have,' or 'You have the most amazing eyelashes,' or 'I like the bows on your shoes,' or 'You are so cute' almost every time somebody engages in conversation with her."

She worries that her daughter will internalize this aesthetic focus: "If family, friends, shop assistants, complete strangers, and even Santa only remark on how girls look ... how can we expect girls to believe that they have anything more to offer the world than their beauty?"

That is an excellent question. How very true that the universal first step to building rapport with young girls is complimenting their looks. And how very true that this sends the wrong message, just as the sparkly vapidity of the "pink aisle" tells girls they should be interested in gleamed-up surfaces over substance. It's so obvious, except, reading Edwards' *cri de coeur* on [rolereboot.org](http://rolereboot.org), I got a sinking feeling, because I'm pretty sure I do this all the time: <http://bit.ly/JhP111>.

I don't mean that I won't also ask little girls what they're reading or learning in school; or the names of their friends; or whether they like Mom or Dad better. (That is always a fun one.) But usually, upon meeting a cute female child, my first reflex is to compliment her on some aspect of her appearance, especially her hair accessories, because little girls

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have the best hair accessories. I've done it with my young cousins, who are brilliant musicians and athletes and scholars. I remember older female relatives doing it to me. Anecata confirms that this is not an easy, socially approved tactic for expressing benevolent interest in a little person you do not yet know — and it is a scourge.

It is a scourge not just because of what it says to girls about what we value about them, but also because girls absorb this mode of interaction and use it for the rest of their lives.

When I meet a new woman and have no idea what to say to her, I often revert to a default mode of perceiving ladies as decorative, and blab up my own comment, like

"great hair!" Part of this is a pure lack of imagination. You're casting around. You see boots. They're right in front of you! It's so easy! I like your boots, you cry. But the range of possibilities even for uncreative chitchat is vast; you can absolutely bore the pants off someone without referencing their pants.

At the end of her article, Edwards offers a few suggestions for how to break the ice with preschool girls in a way that doesn't spotlight their physical cuteness:

- Where have you been today? or Where are you going today?
- How old are you?
- What do you want to be when you grow up?
- What's your favorite book/toy/sport/animal/food/song?

In that spirit, here are some lines for when you've just met an adult woman and are flailing in

a riptide of conversation-block.

- What have you been up to this week/weekend? or What are you doing this week/weekend?
- How young are you?
- What do you do for work? (AND/OR: What do you do for fun?)
- What's your favorite book/magazine/piece of wearable technology/Netflix guilty pleasure/fad restaurant trend/craft beer/karaoke go-to/political cause/alibi?

Or you could try observations:

- This canapé is delicious/gross!
- The man on our left appears to be a kleptomaniac.

• I think that ottoman cushion is on fire.

And if you really, sincerely like a woman's boots, you should go ahead and tell her, but she'll probably assume you're full of it. She was once a little girl too.