

## Dear Elizabeth (My Daughter, Motivator, and Best Friend)

Amy Rogers

**Abstract:** Her name is Amy Rogers, and she is a first-generation Ph.D. student from Durham University, England. In this piece, Rogers writes a letter advising her daughter on her first-generation experience and lessons learned at university to ensure Elizabeth does not experience imposter syndrome and fits in! The real message is: “Do not expect perfection. Aim for the moon, and you are doing amazing things if you reach the stars.”

Dear Elizabeth,

As a child, I was asked, “Do you like school?” and threatened with “be good, or you’ll be sent to school.” These negative connotations were planted in my head from an early age. The adults around me depicted school as in *Matilda* when she was locked in the “chokey.” If adults don’t see the importance of education, how will it be instilled in their children; similarly, if an adult fears spiders and displays this behaviour around their children, then that child will have a fear of spiders—Social Learning Theory (Bandura)—look it up! Let us fix this problem. Elizabeth, with a simple language shift. I asked you, “What amazing things did you learn at school today?” You replied with a smile from ear to ear: “Giraffes eat leaves.” The hope is that the educational, generational bias is removed and not passed down to future generations and that you love school. You are three years old, and you said, staring at me with Nutella all over your face, “I want to be a doctor like you, Mammy, but a vet or a doctor that lives in a truck.” I replied, “Do you mean a paramedic?” and you said, “Yes.” Elizabeth, you keep me going through education and working full time, not attending playdates and the feeling that I am missing part of your childhood; I know being an inspiration and improving your life makes it all worth the while. I want you to love learning and see education as the best opportunity you will ever have, opening many doors and opportunities. My motivation for pursuing education is that I wanted a better life for you. To be able to buy you everything you want and to be a role model and show you that if you set your mind to it, anything is achievable.

Education is transformative; from changing you and how you think and feel, you will never take things at face value again. Education will enhance your career paths and finances (you are expensive; ensure you secure a well-paid job). You will not have imposter syndrome, and you will feel like you belong in education. Once entrenched, it is difficult to shed the imposter syndrome mentality. Even after I have “Dr.” on my bank card and office door, I will still feel like I am an imposter, but this is changing over time. I do feel my presence is valued and my voice is respected. Education has even changed the way I parent you. Knowledge is power. Not only can children be financially disadvantaged but also be “word poor” and have a limited vocabulary. This limited vocabulary is correlated with rates of achievement. Elizabeth, imagine reading something in a language you are not familiar with. Elizabeth, this is why I read with you daily to ensure you do not feel like an imposter in education. I have even changed how I speak; I no longer say “doesn’t” or include “like” in every sentence; I now speak correct English and punctuate my words to ensure you are accepted in education.

Now a first year Ph.D. student and a program leader of criminology teacher—your mammy and role model (the most important role of all). I need that motivation and determination to keep me going and to balance life, and I am still looking for the point where the scales do not tip, but you keep me going. Motivation and determination are essential as a 1<sup>st</sup>-generation student. I never

had the advantages of a private school, tutoring or being able to afford all the academic conferences or overseas visits. Although being brought up without privilege enables you to be relatable, down-to-earth, and employable.

Elizabeth, on your educational journey, do not expect perfection. Aim for the moon, and you are doing amazing things if you reach the stars. Do not cry if you do not get the highest grade (I have been there twice). I wanted a 1st in my undergraduate degree (I achieved a 2.1) and wanted distinction in my M.A. (I achieved merit). I tried my best, and that is all I ask from you, and ten years into my career, no one has asked to see my degree certificates! If you need to learn what a word means, Google it! If you struggle with grammar and spelling, use Grammarly but do not worry. In real life, you always have spell check! Get some work experience or volunteering; this will help you stand out when applying for jobs and help you choose or exclude professions. Work experience made me realise that I could not be a primary school teacher. (Imagine 30, 4-5-year-olds with yoghurt all over their jumpers asking to touch my hair and try my glasses on!) Ask questions. There is no such thing as a silly question (use the lecturer's office hours—that is what they are there for). Space out your student loan weekly. I did not; when my loan came, I bought expensive clothes (this is something you will do at three years old; you love glitter shoes), and then I had to live at Pot Noodle's until my next loan came in. If you feel like university work is getting on top of you, ask for an extension, especially if you complete the essay the night before! Or ask for help from your lecturer! No one should ever say that “you should not work full time and be in education”; they are not you or know your circumstances; if anything, they should be offering you more support! Join a mailing list in your subject specialism (you will be updated with events and opportunities). Find a job you love, and you will never have to work for a day; it will be fun. I love teaching, and teaching does not feel like work (not paperwork or everything else that goes along with education, but do not let that put you off; teaching 90% of the time is student-facing). But never stay in establishments that under-appreciate you; life is too short; with your resilience and education, find a job you love (I learnt this recently when I changed jobs after seven years, and move if you are unhappy). Societal pressures will try to mould your journey. Resist and follow your passion. The hurdles in life will be the making of you; grow and build your resilience, and remember time heals everything, and nothing can take away your qualifications; they are yours forever, cherish them.

Hard work does pay off. I have yet to reach my dream of being a professor at university and publishing articles that change policy and the lives of women in prison. But I am getting there; I am the subject lead of criminology. I am not a millionaire and do not live in a mansion with a pool and do not drive a Range Rover, but I do live in a detached 3-bedroom house in a nice area with my family that I love. I have worked hard for all these things and achieved them myself and they were not gifted. Education is the gift.

Education is limitless. You never have to stop learning and finding your passion. Be proud of your accomplishments, but always be humble and kind! I have given you the wings to fly. Now, go and find your educational journey.

Lots of love,  
Mammy x



Dear 1<sup>st</sup>-generation students,

Although we all have different motivators, as 1<sup>st</sup>-generation students, you have skills that cannot be taught, which is something to be proud of. Bare the dark with the light; the sun will always shine again; trust the process. You are changing lives for yourself and your children. Keep going!

Good Luck

Amy x