

you'll make it (and they will too)

Everything No One
Talks About When
You're Parenting Teens

Amy Better-Midtvedt



WATERBROOK

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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This book is dedicated to the loves of my life:

My dear husband, Todd, without whom this book would not exist in the world for a million reasons.

My children, Ellie, Lily, Thomas, Kate, and Sam,
who are my best teachers.

And my parents, Mary and Tom, for all they
have taught me about how to parent for
relationships and love.

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PROLOGUE

In the Dark of Night

I was just lying there, body not moving but mind spinning out of control. It was the dark of night—that time when a million different scenarios presented themselves to my now-wide-awake brain, all of them ominous and highly unlikely. But at two o'clock in the morning, my mind was not reasonable.

I should have known. How had I missed it?

Last week, during a moment when all was (seemingly) calm for the first time in a while after a big batch of teenage trouble, my girl wanted to sleep at a friend's house where she had slept a million times before, and we gave in. We were wary, but she had covered all her bases, promising to call to tell me who was there and then checking in again to tell us about the tents they set up, saying, "It's so much fun, Mom! Thank you for letting

me come.” We even got a goodnight call from the backyard, and naive me thought, *Maybe things are going to be different. We have clearly turned a corner. Well done, us!*

I actually slept well that night.

The next day I opened Facebook and saw not pictures of her in a backyard tent. No, instead, I was confronted with photo after photo of her dancing on cliffs at some park with her friends. She had been hours away from home, which I could see thanks to her friend’s post with pictures of the tomfoolery that outed the lies. A social media win! Let me tell you, rage doesn’t begin to describe what I felt scrolling through those images.

But beneath the rage is always the fear, right?

That rage led to a bunch of yelling when she got home, a giant grounding that would last months (she cared not . . . said she would “catch up on her art”), and more sleepless nights for me as I wondered how we had gotten here.

As I think about it, my friend, I have been up at two o’clock in the morning for roughly twenty-two years—the years of nursing babies or trying to make room for myself next to a squirmy toddler or wondering how I was going to do all that needed to be done for the school-age kids. And though we had now reached the years where those kids needed me less during the day, I was awake in the middle of the night more than ever.

Lying awake on any given night, I pictured every single horrible outcome that could happen to my kids: *Lily is heading to the mall tomorrow with friends. I hate that they are going alone. Sam is heading to camp on his first weeklong excursion. What if he can’t sleep or they don’t supervise him swimming? Kate is about to get her driver’s license. What if she is the one to get in an accident on that horrible drive to school? Why do we even let these kids drive? It is madness. And where is Thomas really when his Life360 “accidentally” turns off? And was I right to ground Ellie for two*

whole months? What on earth am I doing about that kid anyway?

The not knowing was the worst. There were so many ways the world could hurt them. And so many ways I could get it wrong. My brain raced to find ways to control all the outcomes even though I knew it was impossible.

My thoughts can get so dark in the middle of the night, imagining every disaster. The level of anxiety in my soul sends me walking from room to room to check on my kids. I just need to see them and maybe touch their legs or their foreheads. Each of my children would readily confirm that they have experienced at least one moment of terror opening their eyes to find me bending over them, looking at them, as I tried to find calm and reassure myself that they were okay, at least in that moment.

One night, I had just returned from my wandering and checking and lay staring at the ceiling, listening to my husband breathe through his CPAP machine and struggling not to be jealous of the way that man sleeps. I tried to calm my worried heart. Suddenly a memory came so clearly to my mind that I was transported back in time to when my now-tall kids were still so small.

I could see and smell and feel them—my five babies, all bathed and sweet-smelling and jammied up in little nightgowns and footed pj's, as they ran around the family room, hid behind the curtains, and then threw themselves across the room, crawling all over me and one another. I sat on the couch exhausted in my soul, wishing for bedtime but also in awe that I got to parent these kids. When I couldn't take it another minute, I gathered them in front of me for what our family called the popcorn game.

The popcorn game was one of our favorites. I had made it up one day in a desperate attempt to contain all my crazy offspring in one place. I would sit on the couch, and they would

lie on the floor in front of me and pretend they were kernels of popcorn that I would pretend to pop on the stove.

As always, the oldest, Ellie, took control of the group. "Get into position, guys!"

They would all scramble to the floor, Lily helping Sam become a still, little popcorn seed, a position he could maintain for about thirty seconds before wiggling around. Soon all five were curled into little balls, waiting.

My job was to tell them when to pop.

I would pause for a moment to drink in the stillness before saying, "Oh man, I would love some popcorn. Look at these seeds here just lying in the pan. Here I go, turning on the heat. Oh, they are moving all over!"

The kids would start to roll around on the floor, giggling.

"It's getting hotter. Any minute now they will start popping!"

The kid who couldn't wait for another second would jump up and pretend to burst out of their shell.

"Oh my goodness, popcorn is flying everywhere!"

At this, all five kids would jump up and around, bumping into one another and yelling, "Pop! Pop! Pop!"

When the popping got almost out of control, I would say, "All done! I can't wait to dig in!" And all the kids would fall to the floor, still as can be, ready for me to jump in among them and start tickling and pretending to eat them up.

It had provided endless hours of fun over the years and may also show that my kids had a low bar for what qualified as entertainment.

Those days were so sweet and now so very far away. We hadn't played the popcorn game in years. Who knew if they even remembered it.

I had the realization that this game was a moment when I could control their every move. And now as they were becom-

ing teenagers, I felt I had zero control over *any* of their movements, thoughts, or actions, and the odds of them all gathering at my feet because they just wanted to be near me were slim to none unless I was handing out cash or something.

As I looked back during the dark of night, I couldn't help but long for the days when my worries were about smaller things. When I still had control over what they did, like when they were seeds at my feet.

The little worries are still here, but now there are big worries too—the kind that make you lie awake and wonder where you have gone wrong. Worries like *How do I let them leave and drive actual cars?* and *Why are they handing in zero homework?* feel small when you look at bigger worries like *What if I find alcohol or pot or condoms or a vape pen or something else shocking in their childhood bedroom where their stuffies still live?*

If you are like me, your heart might break a little when these bigger worries actually come true. You might feel betrayed or terrified or let down. And you might feel like it is all your fault.

But it isn't.

These kids are struggling. Our now-tall babies are trying to find their place. They might be slightly terrified or betrayed by their own bodies or minds, and they might even feel *we* have let them down. These kids might feel like every mistake is all their fault (even as they tell you everything is your fault, but don't be fooled).

It isn't.

It's all part of the struggle. You and your kids have to walk some of this journey apart, but you are still in it together.

When our kids are wandering *way* off the path (or onto literal cliffs!), it can feel like nothing is going to be right again. The first time a kid went flat-out off the rails, it threw my heart for a loop. I had tried to use my words to control the

situation with my daughter. “Do this! Stop doing that! Listen to me!” None of it worked. Instead, it all got worse—the arriving home late, hiding things under her bed, and telling small lies that seemed like nothing but that actually revealed all the ways she had closed off her heart from us. And with that closed heart she walked forward into bigger and worse things.

I had so much *fear* in my heart for this child. I could see all the mistakes she was making, and I wanted to stand in the way of every single one. And, yes, this probably made all those mistakes look even more tempting, just like when she was little and we put something breakable high out of reach and suddenly that was the thing she *had* to have.

I was terrified of the path she was tromping with wild abandon. Also, this kid was having so much fun on this trail that there didn't seem to be a reason for her to listen to our calls home. Home was boring! What her friends were offering her was way, waaaaay more fun, and they were the ones she was following.

I wanted absolute authority over this kid. I wanted her to *listen to me!* But this was not mine to have. She belongs to God and to herself. Sadly she wasn't listening to God at this time, either, and her self was leading her in the wrong direction. My fear made me want to control her moves, stop time, and keep her home.

I let that trembly, heart-stopping fear call the shots for a while, and it made me reach for all the control.

My love for my dear girl hid behind fear, panic, and a lot of long, long lectures.

Trying to control and punish my way into her heart wasn't working, so I changed direction. I know that on occasion love looks like hard consequences, but mine were coming from fear. And I started to realize that love sometimes looks like letting small things slide. Sometimes it looks like working to get the

door open so they will talk to you. Sometimes it looks like giving them space. And it *always* looks like finding all the good in these people. We must remind ourselves they are doing their best; they are good and worthy and just messing up like humans do.

When our kids are actively running off the path away from us, it is a nightmare for us, but they think there is a payoff for them. My oldest now tells us she would weigh being grounded against whatever fun she was about to embark on . . . and decide that fun was completely worth the punishment.

To be honest, not only was I living in fear for her safety, but I also feared what everyone else thought. I remember feeling shame for not being able to *make* my daughter do what she was supposed to be doing. That was what a good mom did, right? A successful mom got her kid to do all the right things in life—have good grades, a pleasant demeanor, and a job they could handle along with all the AP classes and activities that she could watch them participate in and post pictures of on Facebook. Being a good mom meant your kid looked shiny, perfect, and mistake-free. People would stop you in the street and tell you how great your kid was. *That* was success.

So we pretend, don't we? We shine it up for one another and for our kids. Yet pretending is like a wall that rises between you and your child, and big bold letters on their side of the wall spell out, "How this looks is more important than how you feel." But that message will make them run away from that wall and from you.

Because being shiny doesn't cut it. Instead, being a good mom might mean letting a kid break into a million pieces and then helping them put those pieces back together in a way that is somehow both battered and more beautiful. It is doing the work no one ever sees—the work that keeps you in a relationship with your kids in a way that helps them become them-

selves.

If you want to be included in their growth, you have to let them grow without insisting it looks perfect every step of the way. Love is the tool you will use to do this. It's the only way. Looking at them through the same eyes you used to take in their newborn faces will make it much easier.

We had to let go of this daughter . . . with love. We didn't give up, but we gave her space to make her own mistakes and to own the consequences. We talked it out and worked it out, and sometimes we messed up and tried again. But we kept on coming back to the love and to the relationship, remembering that this kid was doing the best she could and so were we.

So that child who was grounded and who made about a million of my hairs gray? By the one-year anniversary of the Great Grounding, we were walking together again. And as a silly token of goodwill for this new and different path we were on together, we presented her with a necklace that held a small amount of soil from the park where she had been dancing on those cliffs. It was a symbol of all that had changed between us.

We had made it through, and we could laugh about it (now). We had become different, closer. The controlling, terrified me who sat at the table waiting for her to arrive home could never have predicted it, but here we were. The mistakes she made no longer defined her. Instead, the love we had for her won the day, and we sat together as flawed humans doing the best that we could. We were all learning together.

There is so much hope and joy to be found. I have parented and am still parenting my own five kids, ages twelve to twenty-two. None of it is easy. It is messy and filled with so many emotions that make us doubt both ourselves and our kids. In some moments, we are ready to push them out into the world, and in others, we want to hold on to their legs and beg them to stay forever.

So often, all I needed to get through the tough times was to know I was not alone. I am here to tell you that you are not alone either. We will travel together through this book to help you see the beauty where you can and make it through the hard times. Because the hard times will inevitably come, and in those moments we need all the tips, lessons, and *I have been there's* that we can get.

Along my path, I have studied child and adolescent development, leadership, engagement, behavior, and all the things. Because I have been an educator for twenty-five years, I have been around and connected to children for so long that I want to pass all I have learned on to you too.

This book is born from a journey of loving so much that it made me afraid. And in my fear, I spoke not love but authority into the ears of my children way too often, believing it would keep them on the safe, straight, and shiny path I wanted them to take. I didn't realize that every time I tried to control everything, it would make them want to veer not only off the path but also far from my love.

It was the journey of too much talking to my kids about what I thought and not nearly enough listening. Too much worry and not enough letting go.

It was a journey that pulled me away both from what the world was saying and from what I thought a good parent would do. It brought me back directly into my love for my children and to my desire from the very beginning to connect with them deeply in a way that would lead us into a lifetime relationship. It led me to look away from the glory of a passing moment that might impress other humans.

But more than all that, it has been the journey of how my kids and I found our way back to one another—and how you and your family can too.

Because the journey is also about encountering joy and re-

demption and finding all the wonderful moments with these people who once depended on you for everything. It's about discovering the beauty in their becoming and celebrating all that they are, just as God made them. It is about helping them find God even though they are asking the hard questions that we start asking too. It is also about the funny and fun parts of parenting our teenagers—because they are flat-out hilarious a lot of the time. I promise you will laugh a little as you tag along through our adventures.

And it really is about the love. I know you have so much of that in your heart for your people.

There is no magic formula for raising teens. (Oh, how I wish there were!) This book is a conversation steeped in stories, hope, and prayer—one in which you may see your own hopes and struggles in the raw and real moments of our parenting journeys shared. And my prayer is that when you feel alone, you can turn to these words and remember you are not—not even a little bit. In each chapter, you will find tips for what you can't do and what you can do, stories of what happened for us, and some really good news about parenting teens. For those moments when you need advice in a hurry, I have included some fast tips (making my long stories short) and a prayer for you to pray when this all just brings you to your knees.

Let's walk together out of the dark of night, through those beginning tween years, and into the struggles around things from curfews to fashion choices. Let's dig into teens dating and what it is like when their friend groups fall apart. Let's not shy away from the hard mental health moments and the launching of our kids, ready or not. Let's talk about the hard pieces, but let's also look at all the joy. Let's celebrate letting our kids become exactly who God created them to be. And together we can walk through this time of continually choosing love and

relationship over being right and being obeyed, until we feel like home for our people. All you need to do is bring your love for your kids and turn to the pages that follow.

I hope this book helps you see how to connect with your teenagers in a new way that brings you closer to a real, loving relationship that will last your whole lifetime.

Before I send you into the first chapter, I have a confession. Over and over you will read the word *I* in this book when I really mean *we*. My husband is the other half of that *we*, and he is the man behind this whole operation. I used all those *I*'s to remind you I'm including my perspective but never to imply I was doing this alone. My husband is now and always has been an amazing co-pilot every step of the way, evening me out and calming me down.

It is one thing to figure out how to parent, but it's another to agree about how to do that with another human who was raised differently than you. We have worked hard at it. So please know that when you read the stories of things we have gone through with our kids, if he wasn't there in the story itself, he was behind the scenes getting a crazed text from me while he worked, putting his arms around me and bolstering me when he arrived home at night, or heading to the kid(s) and putting his arms around them. This man is a one-in-a-million gem, and I am grateful and lucky in this department.

A couple of final notes. Some names have been changed, and in other instances identifying details have been altered a bit to keep a little mystery about the teens involved. Sometimes I have used their actual names, and other times I have left names out of the conversation for the good of the people. All feelings in this book are mine, are true, and were some-

times hard to write, but my teens' feelings and thoughts are theirs to tell. If a teen's story is included in this book, it is with their permission and blessing.

Finally, I'm going to talk to you about struggles our kids go through and about the struggles we might have as parents. We will talk through stories and strategies and thoughts around them, but nothing in this book should ever be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, treatment, or prescribed medication. If you have worries, questions, or doubts regarding your child's well-being or your own, please seek medical and/or psychological treatment from a qualified professional. This is what I do regularly and there is no substitute for it. Okay, we're done now. Let's get started!

CHAPTER I

The Tricky Tween to Teen Years

You Are Suddenly Uncool
(and Their Brains Are Doing Really Hard Things)

My kids are liars.

Every one of my children made me the same promise, and every one of them broke that promise. I have video proof of their lies. I forgive them because they believed their lies when they said them. They couldn't know what was coming, the change that was waiting for them even as they denied my predictions could ever come true.

It went something like this: As a mom of five, I saw the signs repeated each and every time one of the troops turned twelve or thirteen, and I knew just what those signs meant. Like the afternoon when sweet little Lily got dropped off by the bus. She had always been my hugger; her nickname "Lily bug" came from so many days spent calling her our snuggle

bug as she tried to be as close to us as possible.

As always, I was ready and waiting to hear about her day and get that hug. But as she stepped onto the curb, I knew something was brewing.

A pang in my heart. This was it. A child who hurried up the walk, not running into my arms so happy to be there. She had *always* run into my arms. Instead, she huffed past me, throwing down her backpack, heading straight up to her room. And as she made her way up the stairs, I still tried to get her to come to me because I had not yet learned some things. "How was your day, kiddo? Want a snack?"

"UGH! No, Mom. I'm not even hungry! Geez!" she said while closing the door.

Apparently seeing me at the end of the day was not the thing that comforted her soul anymore. *Got it.*

The next phases were predictable. Like the sister before her, she started with the eye-rolling. Oh, the eye-rolling. And a little bit of back talk that surprised both of us, frankly. And inevitably there was the moment the hormones surged and she lost her cool when asked whether she had done her homework or could put away the dishes or some such nonsense.

"Mom, stop it. I KNOW! I need to be alone!" followed by a door slam after she headed back into her room after dinner instead of to the couch to watch shows with the family.

As each sibling entered this phase, the littles would look up and one would proclaim with all the love and fierceness in his heart, "Mommy, don't worry. I will *never* act like that. I will always be nice to you and love you."

Liars, one and all.

By the time we got to the third kid stomping from the room, I pulled out my phone and made the last two littles promise me *on video* that they would love me and be sweet to me forever. And I saved that video, even though I flat-out knew

these were lies. I also knew I had to let them believe it for now because they couldn't fathom a day when their sweet selves wouldn't want to sit right next to me on the couch.

I, of course, knew the truth. But I really didn't mind living with the lie for a little while longer.

Actually, I preferred it.

What We Can't Do

We cannot stop change, and we cannot hold on too tightly. Throughout my life, I've hated change. Even though change often brought all the big and beautiful gifts, I still resisted it with every inch of my being. I wanted to hold on to whatever was good and keep it forever. I'm a holder-on-er.

In my earlier years, I settled into whatever circumstances life brought my way and dug in hard. I liked how things were, thank you very much. And when my firstborn turned twelve, I got a big dose of change. I had spent twelve years rocking it as a parent. I was great at reading bedtime stories, making lunches, having Friday night movie and dance parties, squeezing onto the couch with all five of my kids, and being able to fix a hurt with a single Band-Aid. I loved every single minute of it.

So, when the tweenage and teenage stuff started happening in my house, I asked myself, *How do I keep this from happening?* Ha! I learned both my soul and heart were pretty much doomed. I couldn't prevent change, as it was inevitable for both my kids and me. Without further warning, I was given a ticket and pushed onto the parenting-a-teenager roller coaster without my consent. I had no choice; I had to figure it out.

The roller coaster goes like this: One minute you feel like you know every single thing about your kid. Heck, she might have even called you her very best friend. She wanted to dress

like you and be by you. For an entire decade this child was all yours. Then it all starts to change.

So much weirdness comes when they go back and forth between staying their old selves and becoming their new ones. Conflict will suddenly flow out of nowhere over nothing, and your once-snuggly child will find you super annoying and want nothing to do with you. Then, after you are good and exasperated, she will come out of her room and want to snuggle next to you on the couch like nothing happened at all. One minute she is putting on makeup, trying all sorts of lipsticks and eye shadows she bought with her birthday money, and the next she is in her room with all her American Girl dolls out. Your heart might leap a little. Next, you will overhear your son talking with his friends about which girls are cute, but at bedtime, he will change into his giant Minecraft jammies and ask to be tucked in. You might even spot his lovey hiding out under his pillow. It is just a confusing time for everyone.

Becoming yourself is hard—it might even make a person act a little crazy.

So how are you supposed to treat them at any given moment?

No idea.

Because here is the thing: They don't know either. You are walking a prepubescent land mine of emotions. At any moment you can step into a spot that causes so many tears to flow, and then the next moment everyone is fine. You need to make your peace with the unexpected. There is no other way, and one of you must stay on solid ground—and it won't be them.

It can be shocking to come out of that golden era when our ten- and eleven-year-old children were leading us down the primrose path. This is because we lulled ourselves into believing we had all the parenting nonsense figured out. We had successfully survived raising infants, toddlers, preschoolers,

and elementary-school kids, and now we had arrived. *Go, us.*

But these ages were just the wonderful ones where our kids gained all sorts of independence and still found us charming and delightful. Oh, that glorious time filled with kids who made their own breakfasts and yours too. We got to see the fruits of our labor in these delights who complimented our fashion choices and talked our ears off with awesome stories we understood. Go ahead and have all the nostalgia for ages ten and eleven, and briefly pat yourself on the back for a job well done.

Then gather yourself, my friend, because the truth is . . . we were fools.

We knew nothing.

We were being given a small reprieve before the real stuff hit the fan. The hormones start surging, the bodies start changing, and it is all over but the crying—both theirs and yours.

This brings me to what is happening with them physically. We can see the visible parts of this tweenage phase take place before our eyes as their bodies start changing. It is a really big deal, and you will be super happy if you have been open and honest about all things body when this time hits. The little-kid part of your child will keep you posted about armpit hair for a while, and then the teenage part will go dead silent and run to another aisle when you offer them a deodorant while shopping at Target. You will have to start reading the room to know whether it is an okay time to talk to them about what we refer to around here as the pubening.

And it is not only their outward bodies that are changing. You will notice their behavior is, shall we say, *a little off*. Their brains are going through a huge and rapid phase of development. And this is the reason we see so many confusing things—the wild swings back and forth in their moods; the need to

totally separate from us and then cling to us like barnacles for an hour, only to act like we are worm sweat thirty minutes later; the seeming need to push all our buttons or to ask for our ideas and then act like every one of them is the dumbest thing they have ever heard in the history of planet Earth.

Although this phase of rapid development doesn't end until they are roughly twenty-four (*I know!*), this beginning part will sometimes feel excruciatingly long. Our kids will stabilize a bit after the age of fourteen in the emotion department, so hang on to that little fact, my friend.¹ Both their bodies and brains are doing so much, so there is a really good reason these moods are happening.

We cannot ignore the changes and must parent toward them instead of getting locked in a war of wills. The brain changes that enable our kids to separate, go out on their own, have the courage to take risks to try new things, meet new people, become themselves, and develop into independent adults are a good and important thing. It is our job to help them out with some guardrails when their behavior is off the rails, like when they are caught sneaking their phones to check their Snapchat quick even though they are grounded or when they are old enough to drive and get their *third* speeding ticket.

What We Can Do

We can empower our kids and ourselves by reminding us all that these things are normal, and then we can remind ourselves we already have the parenting tricks we need. Some of their behavior is biological, so there is a limit to what we can parent our kids into and out of. We cannot nurture them right out of their nature. Rather, we can nurture them *into* it—for example, by helping them know more about what is happening to them and why. Their biology isn't an excuse to break the

rules and act like crazy people, but it is the reason they sometimes do. And we need to remember that the goal isn't to raise kids who never make a mistake but to raise kids who can come to us for understanding and advice when they inevitably do make mistakes.

You might hear them say things like “It seemed like a good idea at the time” after engaging in some sort of foolish behavior. I remember one of my kids walking home late at night instead of calling for a ride like they were supposed to. Of course, when they didn't show up at home and couldn't be found anywhere, there was an all-out search. When we finally found them, all they said was that their phone was dead, so they just walked, which seemed like a good idea to them. *For the actual love, kid, why did you not use the phone that was right there in the building?* They don't always think of the next best thing, just the next weird idea that makes sense to them. It is exhausting.

You might catch your former rule-following tween with his bike helmet on his handlebars instead of on his head because he “forgot” to put it on. If you wonder whether said child is lying to you, yes, he is—but it is because he is too embarrassed to wear a helmet when the other kids aren't, not because he is a liar. Tweens lie because their developing brains keep them doing things that are new, interesting, and in line with their peers much of the time. This is *normal*. Before I understood how their brains work, I really thought that each situation was a tragedy, things were off the rails, and it was all a disaster. Not so. It's normal. Repeat on a loop.

While you remind yourself their changing self is normal, you will also have to remind them. The conversation we dread most is, of course, the one about their bodies that most parents simply whisper about, calling it “the talk.” I highly recommend you have said talk with your kids before they hit the tweenage years. Things get so awkward around this time that if you have

to bring up s-e-x with them out of nowhere, it might not go well. But if you have laid the groundwork here, you can just keep the door open and not have to introduce them to all the things that are happening to them in real time.

For the record, when I had “the talk” with one of my kids, her response was that this information “ruined her life” and she then burst into tears. So I get it. It is not my favorite parenting day, but it has to be done. You also want to be the one giving them the information. They have heard things on the bus . . . and let me tell you, you do not want them walking around believing the nonsense Marsha told them in hushed tones in the back seat. Trust me. Talk about it early and often, because once the pubening hits, they are embarrassed by everything and this topic most of all. If you have waited, just make your peace with more embarrassment and move forward. You can do it.

It is just as important to talk to them about their brains as about their bodies. Reassure them they are normal, and let them know a little bit of what they might be in for. Let them know all the amazing changes that are happening, and acknowledge that they might feel out of control in their emotions and that you understand it might be hard for everyone sometimes. Let them know it was hard for you. Help them make sense of their own behavior when you can.

Have these big talks when you aren't in the heat of the moment. Pick a time when they are open to listening to you, maybe when you are sitting in the car or on the couch. You will want to tell them things like this:

During the next few years, you might have times when your emotions are out of control or you really feel like you can't stand me. You will want to be with your friends more than you want to be

with us. I want you to know that is normal, and we will understand when that happens.

Your brain is growing and changing right along with your body. Your brain might also want to do all sorts of risky things, which means we might have to make rules that keep you safe but that you might not like. It is also a time when your brain is super creative and is awesome at problem solving—it is even way better at this than our adult brains! How awesome is that?

We will try to learn from you. It is a great time for you to try new things to see if you like them, so think about what kinds of things you might like to try on to see if they are a good fit. All this needs to happen so you will be ready to leave our house someday and be all on your own. Leaving here will sound amazing to you sometimes and really scary other times. It is all normal. And we are here for you and promise not to take it personally when you want to be away from us.

Yes, this means you actually cannot take things personally, so even when you are a flat-out embarrassment in their eyes, repeat to yourself, *They are trying to separate. They need to be independent. It is all a part of growing up.* You don't have to be the brunt of mean behavior, but you can agree to drop them off a few blocks away from school so they won't be seen with you if that's important to them.

Remind yourself this is normal even when you—yes, wonderful, hilarious, loving you—are suddenly a huge embarrassment. Even when they think that you know exactly nothing and that you are an imbecile. Don't even try to tell them about your college degree or about how you run a company or are

writing a book. They do not care. You do not understand cool memes, and your taste in shoes is abysmal.

Just go with God and let them bask in their absolutely fake wisdom when this is where their brains are. It is a phase, but it is a long one, so buckle on up. You are still wonderful, and the rest of the world still thinks you rock. It is them and not you—look in the mirror and repeat this to yourself at least ten times if you start to feel like you are losing it. And remind them continually that they need to use their nice words with everyone, including you, so disrespect isn't going to fly.

This is also a time when you might start to feel triggered or angry or have your own big feelings about all of it. This may be a sign that it actually *is* you and that you have to get your own stuff together because you owe it to your kids to be the best version of you. Hunker down, talk it out, head to therapy, and just do what needs to be done. They need you to show up for them, full stop.

While your kids think you don't know a thing, you do have some tricks up your sleeve. Tweens and toddlers are incredibly similar, as it turns out. Most of what was true for our kids when they were two is true again now. Remember when they would sob if they didn't get the princess cup and they wanted to spend every day dressed like Spider-Man? You thought those days were behind you, didn't you?

You, dear one, were incorrect.

Now the tall kid will inexplicably sob when a sibling grabs the water bottle they wanted to take to school. This kid will also wear only Nike brand white socks and the same two hoodies in rotation. You will feel like you are parenting a giant version of their two-year-old self. But the good news is that some of the same strategies you used on that two-year-old still work. So we can lean back in and pull out our old tricks.

It is time to rely heavily on the same trifecta that worked

when they were little: *snacks* (you can actually hand out the same fruit snacks and Goldfish crackers they have always liked, but you now get bonus points for fancy coffees), *showers* (like when they were small and you'd put them in a bath, only now a fancy spa bath might be just the thing—or they can sweat it out in a nice long shower), and *sleep*. Of the three, sleep is king. As their bodies start to grow at a crazy rapid rate, they are often tired and don't even know it. Remember that overtired two-year-old running around at the end of their rope? Back then, often the only thing to do was to put that child in a crib with their lovey and let them snooze it out. Same here. They might not love the suggestion (remember how the two-year-old would kick and struggle and insist they were *not tired?*), but send them to their rooms and give them a nice fuzzy blanket and tiptoe away. Everyone is much happier after a rest.

You need one too, since all this navigating and letting go take a toll on your heart—not only because so many changes are happening but also because you will suddenly see the future coming at you like it is going to hit with warp speed.

The season when you were their whole world is ending, and you may be struggling mightily. It's not an easy place to be. Give yourself all the grace.

What Happened for Us

We have made it through four of our five kids' pubening. Currently my fifth pancake is just entering this stage, and the biggest sign is that I am now wrong about almost everything. (Yes, I called my kid a pancake. I'll explain why in chapter 4.) Every comment I make is met with a "No, Mom, it's actually . . ." It is just a delight, I tell you. I can laugh about it this time around and even tell him, "Welp, looks like your brain is getting ready to move on and do its own thing." About 71 per-

cent of the time he finds this funny and hugs me. The rest of the time? Well, of course he says, "No, Mom, it's actually . . ." and I wonder if I will make it.

I can laugh, but I also need a few tender moments alone in the quiet so I can feel all my feelings about the bittersweetness of it all. I know what is coming, so I need time to pray all the necessary prayers. This time in the quiet has been so important in helping me learn to become a new version of myself as a parent. Because as they change, we must change too.

I've learned that the process of letting go and moving forward doesn't happen all at once. It happens in little moments over many days, and sometimes it feels like grief over a child who isn't even at this stage yet but you can see it coming. Other times it feels like excitement over all the amazingness that child is going to bring to the world. Sometimes, just like when they were two, you cannot wait for a phase to end, but mostly you are now trying to slow down time. And you never really get used to it. You learn to act like you do or have long stretches where this all starts to feel almost normal.

That's all good.

I've heard it many times: We need to toughen up or be happier about them leaving and learn to let go. But I am here to say it's okay if you have a lot of feelings about your kids hitting these first parts of the teenage years and your heart is hurting a little or you feel like crying. Feel those feelings, friend.

On the flip side, if you are cool with it and excited, that is awesome too. Every parent will feel differently when their kids start to act teenager-y. And all your emotions are absolutely okay. You are allowed to feel them and express them. You might not be able to talk about your kids' secrets, but you can talk about how hard all of this is on your heart.

And you *can* complain about being tired. I don't care what anyone says. Even though you are not up with a newborn, you

are the kind of tired that warrants complaining. You are *heart* tired, and that is its own thing.

I found if you can let out some of your feelings and deal with what you are going through, you will have a much easier time being a present human who can parent through the exhaustion and sometimes heartache. We need to be able to look into the eyes of our unsure-of-themselves-yet-somehow-annoyed-with-us teenagers and let them know they are okay. It's all part of becoming a grown person, and we love them just as much or even more than the day they arrived in our arms. They need to know we are not mourning and longing all the time for little them. They need to know we love with our whole hearts this slightly taller, more confused, and a little more stinky version of who they are.

The Good News

At this point in my journey, I can tell you a few good things. My launched kids tell me that being open, listening, and loving them no matter what, exactly as they were during those tween years, were the most impactful, positive things I did as a parent. They also point out that when I was too “bossy” or tried to tell them all the time how to do it better, it was hurtful and did not make them change their behavior; instead, it sent them farther away from our guidance. And they admit that even when they said they wanted us farther away, they really loved to be able to crawl back in our laps when needed, even if they didn't totally fit.

I have learned so much from these people I am parenting. And there is beauty in that learning and lots of gifts in the change. Joy comes after and sometimes right in the crazy parts of this age, and you feel so much love for these people all the time. Even when you find yourself not liking them all that

much, you still love them with all your heart. I have found such a holy space with my tall, wonderful, exasperating, lovely people. And I want that for you too. I want you to know you are not alone on this ride.

And if you are reading this and your kids are already deep into the teenage years, know it is okay if you wish things had gone differently. We all have those feelings, and there are times we make missteps. It is inevitable. I am here looking you in the eye and telling you it is never too late to make a change in your parenting. And it is never too late to apologize. I do this a lot around here, and man, I get it.

We are in it together. You will make it. And they will too.

Long Story Short

- Biological changes are happening inside and out for your kids. Knowing and talking about these are good.
- Our kids might swing wildly between acting like children and acting like teenagers. This is frustrating and weird and completely normal.
- Think about how you parented when they were two, and do the things that helped them then. (Don't forget: bed, bath, and snacks.)
- It is okay for you to feel your feelings, whatever they are, and it is okay for them to feel their feelings too. Even the not-so-fun ones.

Dear Lord,

Help me realize that all this letting go is a part of Your divine plan, even the way our sweet, little, good-smelling babies start to pull away and also smell not so good. Please guide my heart during this time to see all the wonderful newness unfolding in this child. Also, help my heart grieve the parts I feel I am losing, because losing that unfettered love of my babies is much harder than I thought it would be. Help me know the words to say to reassure this child that they are just as You made them and that all the changes that are starting to happen to them are a part of the miracle of Your creation. Help me keep my tongue quiet around them when I want to tell them how cute they used to be and instead tell them how awesome they are now. And please, dear God, let me help them know that putting on deodorant is now a must and that they absolutely have to shower more because the miracle of Your creation needs washing more frequently. Help me to help them.

Amen.