

"Parenting teens doesn't come with a manual, but this book comes as close to one as I've ever read." —*New York Times* bestselling author Rachel Macy Stafford

you'll make it (and they will too)

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**Everything No One
Talks About When
You're Parenting Teens**



Amy Better-Midtvedt

Praise for

You'll Make It (and They Will Too)

"This is the book every parent raising a teenager needs. Amy reminds us—as only she can with her genuine wit, wisdom, and love—that we're not alone in our struggles and that our teens will come back to us. As a longtime fan of Amy's, I turn to her advice time and time again while raising my own teens. I know you will too."

—LESLIE MEANS, founder and owner of
Her View From Home LLC

"Parenting teens doesn't come with a manual, but this book comes as close to one as I've ever read. With refreshing honesty, compassion, and humor, Amy reveals the hard-to-decode core needs of teenagers. Parents experiencing frustration, shame, or hopelessness will find real relief and tangible hope in these pages."

—RACHEL MACY STAFFORD, *New York Times* bestselling
author, speaker, and special-education teacher

"This is the book we parents of teenagers will carry around in purses or stash in the center console of our cars so we can return to it every time we wonder, *Am I going to get through this? Is my kid going to be okay?* With compassion enough to make us feel safe and wisdom enough to help us hold on to hope, Amy Better-Midtveldt is the mentor and friend we can count on no matter what."

—MIKALA ALBERTSON, MD, family practice doctor and author
of *Everything I Wish I Could Tell You About Midlife*

“Amy shines a spotlight on the importance of putting the relationships we have with our kids ahead of everything else—and that leading with love, acceptance, and grace can help us weather any storm. I found myself nodding as she detailed the complexities of raising kids today, belly laughing at her relatable stories, and choking back tears at the love she pours into her family.”

—WHITNEY FLEMING, author of *You're Not a Failure: My Teen Doesn't Like Me Either*

“Amy helps normalize the experience of parenting teens as she talks about the things we desperately need to hear: mental health, faith, social media, friendship, letting go, and more. Her words bring comfort and provide companionship as we come to see that we really aren't the only ones who are trying to make it.”

—JEN THOMPSON, creator of Truly Yours

“If you feel like you're stumbling along the path of raising teenagers, Amy Better-Midtvett offers a steady hand to hold. She reaches into the dark and deep to shed light, and even humor, where we need it most. This heart-healing, soul-filling, truth-telling book will quickly become a coveted companion that not only helps you survive the teenage years but also invites you to embrace them with confidence and hope.”

—MEHR LEE, writer of Raise Her Wild blog

“Amy Better-Midtvett has a profound ability to articulate the things we wrestle with as mothers. She makes us feel seen while also offering an extended hand and the hope that we can get through this. This is the perfect tool kit for the harrowing journey that is raising teens.”

—JESS JOHNSTON, national bestselling co-author of *I'll Be There (But I'll Be Wearing Sweatpants)*

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You're Parenting Teens

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to
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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, and 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 did not see 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 becoming 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. 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 themselves.

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 theres* 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 a 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 a 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 redemption 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 sometimes 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!" she said with a door slam after she headed back to her room following 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 some-

times 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 teenage 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 percent 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.

CHAPTER 2

Getting to Know the New Parts of Your Teenager

Tattoos in the Walmart Parking Lot
and Wanting to Ground Them Forever

I spotted the black little star on her wrist and thought it was a drawing made with marker. For whatever reason, kids in my house and kids in my classrooms loved to draw pictures on their body parts and on their friends. When I explained they should really be drawing these pictures on pairs of white Keds (à la 1985), my people looked at me like I was nuts. But honestly, our moms didn't realize they were blessed that we messed up our shoes rather than our actual selves.

This particular drawing on my child seemed to be lasting quite a long time. After many days spent at the lake without this little star washing off from her wrist, I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach. How much in denial was I that I had somehow believed the star was made with a Sharpie? It was a tattoo.

A tattoo on my sixteen-year-old, too-young-to-get-a-tattoo child. Also no one had permission for a tattoo. (And who puts a tattoo on an underage child?) I wish I could say I took a deep breath and strategically planned how to deal with this situation. Instead, I did this: “Oh my, child! Is that a tattoo? Where did you get it? What were you thinking? Don’t you know you have marked your body *forever*?”

To my credit I held back from adding, “And it looks like a monkey did it!”

She looked me in the eye and said, “Mom, it’s no big deal. Carol’s friend was giving tattoos from the back of his van when we were in the Walmart parking lot. I knew if I asked, you would say no, so I just went for it.”

(Please note, this is the child I previously mentioned who later let me know that she calculated punishment versus reward for all decisions in her teenage world and often thought things like this were worth a little grounding or getting her phone taken away. In finding this out, I didn’t know whether I should be horrified or proud.)

This was the moment when I should have taken a breath but instead went ahead and lost my mind. We were at the lake cottage, so my hair had already lost it in the humidity and was horrifyingly big and looked flat-out bananas. My eyes were wide, and I held my breath. My kid looked at me like she knew exactly what was coming, and she was not wrong. She finally looked a little bit scared yet still a touch defiant. Before I could even stop myself, I let her have it, just like she knew I would.

“You did *what*? Oh my gosh, you might have a *disease*! Blood poisoning! Hepatitis! What were you thinking? You clearly weren’t, and you cannot be trusted. I cannot even let you out of my sight! You are so grounded, kid. Did you hear me? *Grounded*! FOR ALL OF THE DAYS. Do not ask to do a thing. You are going nowhere! And give me that phone. And

no TV. I'm not even done with you yet. And you are going to the doctor to be sure you are not going to die of an actual *tattoo*. Argh!"

We stared at each other. I watched as this kid buried her fear under her bravado, looked me dead in the eye, and said to me as if I were the crazy person in the situation, "Gosh, Mom. You don't have to freak out so much. Whatever."

The word *whatever* said in just this tone did nothing to help my mood. I continued to act indeed like the crazy one in this situation.

"Whatever? *Whatever?* I want to know what you have to say for yourself. *What do you have to say?* Explain yourself! Now! I want to know! I mean, what could you possibly say? What reason could you have? But I want to hear it! Now! I cannot believe it! What? What is the *reason?*"

Well, as you can imagine, nothing gets a teenager talking about their heart and motivations quite like a parent screaming in their face like a lunatic. It was also a nice touch that I asked questions without giving her space to answer while also letting her know I thought she was an idiot, so who cared what she said. This moment ended with the child heading off to her room and slamming the door while I seethed and worried and called our pediatrician, whose reward will be long in the land after dealing with my crazy family.

The kid I knew seemed to have disappeared, and in her place was a stranger who seemed to not like me very much and who made very, very questionable choices.

What You Can't Do

You cannot focus on what you are losing or lean into fear. The moments when you are looking at all that is no longer there are the hardest. Especially when you are focusing on the worst

parts of having a teenager. You cannot stay in the past, but man, it's tempting. These moments caught me so completely off guard, and the grief I felt over the loss of my small, curly-haired little buddy threatened to leave me completely undone. How was a person so deep in this kind of grief supposed to think clearly and rationally and act as if everything was okay and was just the natural way of the world?

Well, at that moment, I couldn't pretend it was all right. I was miserable, and I kept trying to hold on to what was. I would lie on the couch and dream of the series of kisses she used to give me each time she left the house, and I would feel my heart breaking again and again. I leaned right into this sadness and wallowed in it within my soul. (I am an excellent wallower.)

In reality, that little girl I longed for was still sitting on her same childhood bed. But now the door was closed, so I couldn't see she was also sometimes miserable, unsure of who she was becoming. And instead of her mom pulling up alongside her to let her know it would all be okay? Well, with every reaction, her mom was assuring her that her growing up was terrible and that she was messing it all up. It was all a tragedy.

I stubbornly tried to hold on to the past, to keep her safe and tucked away, and she stubbornly tried to keep doing the work of pulling away and growing up. One day when I was yelling at her about something, I looked at her face—really looked—and saw utter defeat there, together with a little fear and a whole bunch of sadness. My heart broke in a million pieces when I realized I was the cause of most of what I was seeing in her eyes.

I thought again of that little girl, and I could now see the little and big versions of my baby layered on top of each other: The girl in the princess dress staring out from behind the girl with the tattoo and newly dyed hair. The one who loved me

like I was the best person on the planet and the one who wished I would just get out of her way so she could *live*. And in all of that, I could see I was hurting her by holding on so tightly to my fear of everything that could happen as she grew.

I knew I never again wanted to cause the look I saw on her face. In my fear of change I was refusing to see her. I needed to remember that I had not lost my girl. She was right there. And if I didn't spend some time getting to know this version of her instead of longing for a past version, I would lose her completely. Because who wants to stay connected to a person who is focused on all the things you no longer are or are doing wrong?

What You Can Do

You can pray, focus on connection, and notice the good. I prayed so many prayers. So. Many. Prayers. You can always, always pray.

I could almost hear God whispering in my ear that I needed to get a grip. I had to work very, *very* hard to let go of my fear. I needed to do a little repair for the things I had already done and said, and I needed to talk *with* her instead of *at* her. I needed to get to know who she was becoming and find all the ways this version of her was also wonderful.

And she *is* wonderful.

And when we mess up, we can reconnect. I got pretty deep in the weeds at first, so my reconnection with the tattooed lady didn't happen overnight. One thing that helped pull me into a better place was tapping into my teaching brain. I pulled out this little thing we in the biz like to call "*notice and name*." This is simply noticing what you see your kids doing and naming it in a positive, building-up way.

It looks something like this: Let's say your child has decided to plan the world's best outfit, and as a result, everything

they own is all over the floor. You might say, “I see the way you love fashion. Your outfit turned out so great [*noticing*]. You are so creative and fun [*naming*].” You are looking for the positive things, the good ways they are already showing up in the world. You are helping them claim a beautiful and true identity.

You may also note this sounds a thousand times better than “You’d better clean that up when you are done,” which would have been my old go-to when I wasn’t looking at her with the most generous interpretation. “You’d better clean this up” notices the mess and names the flaw—not an identity that is helpful or connecting. We can spend so much time focusing on the wrong things and missing the gift that each kid is. And if she indeed forgot to clean up (let’s face it, that’s likely), I learned to just gently remind her like I would for a friend instead of making it a huge deal. This was a major shift for me.

I used this noticing and naming to remind both myself and her of all the good and positive things she brought to the world. I bit my tongue as hard as I could whenever I could, not lecturing her about outfits or friends or any of it. And the more I looked at her this way, the more I saw it all a little differently.

You can notice and name all the things with all the people. “You stick by your friends through so many things. You are a really loyal friend.” Or “You are an amazing brother. You spend all this time with Sam, and it is so important to him.” The things we name become their identity. The way I had been doing it as a nagging, worried mom was creating an identity of failure in my kids. *You are late. You are lazy. You do not follow the rules.*

We gave our girl the identity of capable problem solver by pulling her in to help decide how our relationship would run and what would happen if she broke our trust or violated a boundary. She also helped set what those boundaries were. Like what should happen when you go behind your parents’

backs and get a tattoo in some van when you are underage. This still needed to be dealt with, and surprisingly she agreed it was not her smartest moment. Together we decided what tighter guardrails she needed for a while. Our teenagers *want* boundaries, and they also want to have some control over their lives. Negotiating together is so helpful here.

But instead of taking it as a personal attack when she broke the rule, now we focused on helping her figure out what she could have done differently or what she would do to repair the situation. She bore the consequence like all of us do in life when we zig where we should have zagged. We celebrated small wins.

As we focused on working together, we found our joy again. Learning to know the teenage version of your child happens in all the small things—taking a trip to Starbucks, walking through the mall looking for new shoes to fit growing feet, washing dishes together after dinner, or sitting together watching *The Office* on a loop before bed. When you are connected, these things are easier and more fun.

It was in these moments with each of my people that I could get to know their world. Asking which class was their favorite instead of asking how they were doing in classes. Asking whether they had a teacher who inspired them or what the best lunch option was in the cafeteria. Just being genuinely interested in their daily lives. It meant going in gently and with curiosity instead of judgment. And it meant not taking personally any “I don’t feel like talking” comments or grunts instead of answers, because despite your best efforts this will still happen.

The only way to connect with them is to stay open and really listen. God placed this exact child in your family for you to know and love forever. He made them to grow and change and become the person they were meant to be. He wants the same thing for us; He wants us to grow and change and become the people we are meant to be, right alongside these children. As they grow and change, we need to as well. And we need to

keep our eyes on His creation—these blessed babies He loves even more than we do.

What Happened for Us

We figured it out and never had a single problem with our teens again.

Ha! I kid.

I think this next story sort of sums up what happened for us, and it's a doozy because it involves teens and driving—clearly one of the hardest things we have to experience as parents. I mean, we let a kid strap into a giant hunk of metal that can go more than eighty miles per hour, and then we hand over the wheel and tell them to go with God? It makes no sense to me at all.

Yet we do it. One particular day I picked up a kid from work and then bravely let her drive us home. She navigated the short drive, pulling into our driveway with seeming ease. I was feeling good about myself and about her. *Maybe this won't be so bad*, I thought. Out loud I said, "You did amazing! Way to go, kiddo!" She looked at me with a huge smile.

Then she randomly hit the gas instead of the brake and drove straight into the closed garage door.

The huge white door crumpled like a piece of tinfoil. She hit the side of the doorframe, which stopped the car. This was fortunate because the girl never did find the brake.

I sat in shock for thirty seconds, then reached over and put the car in park myself. I got out and walked around to the driver's side. My girl was sitting with her head in her hands, stunned and I'm sure terrified.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, Mom. I am SO SORRY!" and she burst into tears.

I will forever feel very proud of my reaction. I assured her it was fine; we were both okay. I hugged her for a long, long time and then led her into the house, where she ran to her room.

I grabbed Todd, who followed me outside. Only then did I blurt out, “It was so scary! She had no idea what to do. *Why* are we letting our kids drive?”

I’d spent so much time wondering how we could send them on purpose to get milk and just wave goodbye while also hoping they did not crash. And now here we were. Fears realized.

But I had kept my cool with her. When things suddenly went off the rails, I held on and kept her connected through all of it. This is what it is all about: They need us to let them go yet be there with cool heads and warm hearts when things do not go as planned.

Later she had to own the consequences of her actions. She paid the deductible, which is what we agreed you need to do when you hit buildings with cars. And then back behind the wheel she went, because they have to keep growing up.

Note: After having suffered through the learning experience of the first couple of kids, I now flat-out refuse to ride shotgun. Yes, even after they have that license. I have tapped out. I cannot do all the things well as a mom, and I have decided I’m going to put zero energy into trying to be good at this. We are allowed to wave a white flag now and then, and this is mine. When the fear is overpowering, we can also step away from it.

We have to keep as connected as we can and then let go and live like they will be just fine. It is hard to do, but we have to let them go *anyway*.

The Good News

I wasn’t sure how I found myself full circle, now sitting in a tattoo/piercing parlor with my fifteen-year-old, but here we were.

Kate had been begging for a piercing, and when my sister decided to take her girl, she asked, “Would Kate enjoy this too?”

I knew she would. I dug deep. The mom who freaked out at her sister's tattoo years ago and who had also outlawed piercings of all kinds said yes.

Together we sat, picking out her piercing and chatting away. Her sisters had only minimally grumbled that I would never have let *them* do that at her age.

Sometimes we need to let go of the rules and focus on the human. We show them that they are still seen and that they matter. So sometimes we will find ourselves dropping everything to get them to a piercing parlor. Who would have thought it?

There are so many ways we need to get to know and understand our newly minted teenagers. (And it doesn't even have to involve piercing.) A lot of it will be familiar: You will be feeding them around the clock, and you won't be getting a lot of sleep because they are up until all hours. And the new parts? Well, these nearly grown humans are full of fun, humor, and joy in so many moments that you will be able to glimpse the adult friendship that could be yours right around the corner. They will get your jokes and be fun to take on trips (mostly). You will wake up in the morning to a dance party in your kitchen and a stack of pancakes made just for you. You might even be able to steal their shoes, and you have built-in tech support under your roof. And when things are not so fun? I promise that you can handle every bit of it.

Long Story Short

- Our babies are right there in our big kids. Remember to look at all the good in front of you and *tell them* what you love about them getting older so they don't think you only long for their littleness.
- Our kids will do dumb things and break the rules, but we need to stay calm, smart, sane, and regulated.

- Notice and name the good you see in them. Assume they are doing the best they can.
 - Prayer and therapy both help.
 - Find ways to connect with your kids by learning about and listening to their passions. Just like when you watched *Dora the Explorer* on a loop, you may now have to follow weird people on TikTok and learn about cars.
-

Dear God,

Please give me the strength to be the one who remains calm and the one who reaches out. Please let me overcome my pride and apologize to my kids when I wrong them. Grant me patience for every tattoo and weird haircut and piercing.

Also let me stop yelling. Silence my tongue. Let Your words come from my mouth and not mine. Put Your holy hand over my mouth lest I send my child into the well of sadness. Let me remember their brains are growing and changing as much as their bodies, so this is why they seem a little crazy. And this is why they are amazing, creative problem solvers. Help me appreciate that, even when they are trying to creatively problem solve their way out of cleaning their rooms.

Help me notice and name the good in them, and help me listen to all their ideas about cars and fashion even when it is past my bedtime.

Amen.

CHAPTER 3

Communication and Connection

When to Try to Talk to Them and
When to Just Give Up and Text

Iwalked down the stairs and knocked on her door like it was a regular morning. I had no idea it wasn't. I didn't know that sometime in the night the kid behind that door had had her heart broken into a million pieces.

I said, "Hey, kiddo! Time to get up! We are doing an awesome family breakfast this morning."

She answered with a text: *Mom, Greg and I broke up last night. I am not coming out today. I don't need anything. I'll be okay. I just don't want to talk to anyone.*

And what was I supposed to do with that? I wanted to barge in and hug my kid and yell at Greg. Or maybe hug him too. Who knew what was happening here.

But I could do *zero* of those things.

I did try to get my foot wedged into that very closed door and say something to help. Because of course I didn't yet believe my child when she said that words wouldn't help and that she didn't want to hear them.

"Can I bring you food? Your dad? Are you sure you don't want to talk?"

Mom, I'm fine. Please leave, she texted.

"Okay, but I need to hear your voice," I said.

"It's okay, Mom. Now go."

I went. But my heart was breaking, and that awesome family breakfast suddenly felt like the absolute last thing in the world I wanted to do. I wanted to fix my kid's heart.

I wanted to burst through that wall of privacy. I longed to scour social media and all her texts to find out how she was doing. But these were hidden from me with the stealth of a grade A spy. I had to face facts and realize this kid was miserable and I wasn't getting in. I could see her misery. I swear I could feel it in my mom bones. And I had words that I felt would help her heal and move forward. But parenting teenagers sometimes means giving them more space than we want to.

I gave space, then broke down and tried to give words. I heard over and over again, "Mom, I will be fine. I just need to be alone."

I had to face the hard truth: I couldn't fix it. Instead, we all lived through some miserable weeks. This was the first big heartbreak in our family, so it was the hardest. We were sad and afraid for her. We couldn't know that behind that closed door, this child was working through it and eventually would open the door and rejoin the world. And of course she didn't want to talk about it even then. Trust me, I asked. A lot. Eventually I had to accept that this was my kid's way of dealing with things and that it was very different from mine.

When she finally did come out of it, I heard some hard

truths. She was very honest about how my pushing actually made things worse. (Side note: When kids are very sad or hiding out, we also need to monitor their mental health and make sure they know when to reach out for help—hence my checking.) I didn't yet know how this kid would work through things. It was a whole year later when she finally told me what had happened to initiate this heartbreak.

It is so hard to get used to pulling back and waiting and listening, isn't it? Especially because there was a time when everyone wanted a piece of us.

Back in the day of parenting five littles, I often ended the day feeling like there was never enough of me to go around. I would plop down on the couch in utter exhaustion after making the food, cleaning up the food, and navigating the daily "they got the blue/red/pink cup yesterday" thing, and I would be flat-out done. But they were not. They all still wanted to sit by me and talk to me and tell me all the things. So. Many. Stories.

I remember grabbing a bag of Doritos one afternoon, sneaking upstairs to my room like some sort of lunatic, locking my door and sitting up against it for good measure, and then texting my husband to say that I thought my ears were actually bleeding from so many sounds coming in. I was touched out. Peopled out. But even when I hid, they would find me, and soon little fingers were poking under the door while a little voice said, "Mommmyyyyy . . . I neeeed youuuu." (It is no mistake that my original blog was named Hiding in the Closet with Coffee.)

And then, just when I thought I wouldn't make it through another Minecraft story or round of Barbies, it turned out I didn't have to. All at once, it seemed, they stopped talking. They stopped saying, "Look at me!" and started saying, "MOM, stop looking at me. Geez!" All of my people were suddenly just

beyond reach, behind their bedroom doors, locked in relationships with their phones that held a million text threads to all the people they were chatting with all day long.

It shouldn't have shocked me that this kid didn't want to spill her guts about a breakup.

What You Can't Do

You cannot force them to talk. Darn it all. Some days I would pick them up from school and those kids who used to fight over talking to me barely grunted in my direction. I remember one day when I picked them up from the middle and high schools and tried to start up a conversation. I tried all the tricks, asking questions about their day (which is really the most boring thing you can ask them), about the song on the radio, or whether they wanted to put on Spotify. I was asking what their plans were for the night and what they wanted for dinner (I was grasping) when finally one of them put me out of my misery. "Mom, it's nothing personal, but we really just don't want to talk to you after school. Maybe later, okay?"

Welp, that was a nice little hit of honesty. The other heads in the van nodded in agreement, and my son even gave me a little sympathy pat on the shoulder as he put in his earbuds. He felt sorry for me. *I am suddenly the one on the outside they all feel bad for? Like, poor Mom; let's just humor her? Hey, I used to hide from you, kid.* But to be fair, I felt pretty bad for myself. I watched them text their friends as they chuckled out loud here and there at some conversation I wasn't a part of, and I felt really, really old. And alone.

Even though I knew I was no longer their go-to for many things, I was trying mightily to keep my foot in the door of their worlds. But what was this tomfoolery? *Why don't you want to talk to me? I'm fun! I have good stories! And why can't you just tell me about your day, kid? NOTHING happened at school? I*

need to stop asking you things? You don't want to even say a single sentence to your mom who listened to your stories about Pokémon battles for years? Got it. Picture me standing in the kitchen holding a Wii controller and a dream of getting this tall kid to play one more round of Lego Star Wars with me. But he had gone on to the Xbox with his buddies. Both the Wii and I were old news. Sadness.

Oh, how the tables had turned. Who had I become? Who had they become? And how was I going to figure out how to connect with these tall versions of my babies who were no longer inviting me into their worlds?

The answer was that I wouldn't be automatically invited like I was before. I couldn't force my way in. But that didn't mean they didn't want or need me. It was just going to look different. Those teen brains were growing and changing, and as a result they needed space to sort out their thoughts. And their first instinct was to connect with their friends and push away from their parents.

We might have to get over ourselves here. Many parents may be thinking, *Man, you don't want me around? Fine. Have it your way*—or feeling really sad or thinking they did something wrong.

You didn't. It isn't personal. Knowing that this phase of life is not only emotional but also biological can help us make better plans for how to get our kids to talk and how to listen now that they are no longer crawling into our laps to tell us about everything.

My teens needed a lot less talking and advice from me, but they still needed *me*, just on some different terms—theirs.

What You Can Do, Part One

What you can do is really hard, at least for me. You can be *quieter*. Yup. I know. I got pretty sad about not giving all the

advice. I love to talk, and giving advice is my jam. But I needed to learn to shut up, which is hard when I have really wise things to say. For one of my people, it was absolutely key that I said no words. I could offer ideas sparingly and at just the right intervals. A friend of mine said she had to learn not to ask questions, because questions drove her teenager mad. Another had to learn to love going to the mall because that is where her kid opened up. She hated the mall with a passion, but her kiddo loved it and would talk there, so to the mall she went. If we want to keep those lines of communication open, we have to follow our kids' lead and lean into what they know and love.

A big part of this parenting-teenagers gig is just making ourselves available. It reminds me of the feeling I had at dances in high school, milling around waiting for a boy to notice me and ask me to dance. It's so tricky. And just at the point in life when you start wanting to go to bed earlier, they will want to spill their guts around midnight on a school night. Prop those eyelids open with toothpicks, and take advantage of the opportunity to listen up. My boy became so elusive as a teen that now when I hear him come home from work, I drop what I am doing and run to the main floor. I try to get a few words in and a nice hug while he grabs a snack before he disappears into the basement.

These days if my tall kids look in my direction and move their mouths like they might say something, I don't move a muscle. I do not want to spook them. I don't even really make eye contact. Either I just wait, or if the mood seems right, I say something really chill like "How's it going?" and hope for some sort of answer. I busy myself in some way until the conversation is really going, then sit down and listen with all my might. The trick to keeping the conversation going is giving the right responses.

These cannot be invasive or contain any kind of judgment

whatsoever. If you are *too* interested, they might stop talking. And if they get even a whiff of an opinion they haven't asked for, you are done. For some kids, even if they ask for an opinion, you might need to hold back until they have asked a few times and then make sure your opinion is very light and leaves a lot of room for them to think about it.

They need to start working things out for themselves. Pulling back on sharing *all* our own thinking gives them the chance to be the ones who do the thinking and deciding—something they desire. We are just there to guide and coach, not to tell them exactly what to do, which is so easy to say and so hard to do when we can see exactly how they should move forward. For them to become independent, they need to practice being independent. We are there to support, not to give directions.

We need to give our kids space and privacy and then a wide-open door to tell us what's on their minds. Sometimes they will open their own doors and invite you in, ask your opinion, and maybe even share about what is happening. Take advantage of these moments! You cannot force them to happen, so when they do, you need to be prepared. Have a little nonjudgmental advice at the ready.

Their invitation is key. When you have something to say, you need to ask yourself whether the door is open. If it is not, do not say the things. This will save you endless amounts of conflict and grief. If your teenager doesn't want to talk, you need to respect that boundary. If you try to deliver the lecture through their closed door, I promise you they are not listening and will not be likely to open the door anytime soon.

It can be so frustrating when you are *full* of wisdom and nobody wants to hear it. I can picture one of my kids sitting in front of me with his eyes glazed over while I went on and on about why he shouldn't hold on to a relationship that was hurting him. I had so many good reasons! I was so wise! I

could see this wouldn't end well! So, why was he not listening to me?

He couldn't hear me because the door to his mind was closed. I was screaming at nothing. He was passing time until he could just get away from me. But when I learned to wait for that opening, I knew there was a small but significant chance he would hear my wisdom.

Playing your cards right with teenagers is pretty much like walking through a field filled with land mines, but it *can* be done. You *can* do this. You may have to fight every instinct in your body (I do this on the regular), and you might even have to rehearse so you are ready for that open-door moment.

Here is where the power of prayer will serve you well. If an open-door moment came on with my kids and I wasn't ready, I would stop and throw up a giant prayer to God that He would give me the words I needed. *Speak through me, please, God. Give me the words to make him believe he is worthy of better. Amen.*

What You Can Do, Part Two

When it is time to speak, you can be mindful with your words. No matter what the situation, the words you use are important. As an educator I have spent years thinking about and experimenting with asking the right question or giving the right nudge and response to get kids to think about a problem or an issue. All that practice paid off as my kids hit the teen years. I worked hard on my language, and over time I learned some key phrases we can count on when we are trying to be good listeners and communicators with our kids.

Here are things you can say to your teens that may open them up:

- Wow!
- Say more about that.

- That sounds so interesting!
- What happened next?
- How did that turn out?
- Do you have any feelings about that?
- What do you think you should do next?
- Do you want some advice about that?
(Judgment call here.)
- I love listening to you!

Responses that may be conversation shutdowns include these:

- I don't think you should have said that.
- I don't think you should have done that.
- I'm so worried now.
- You must be mad/sad/glad/etc. (This is called "assuming their feelings.")
- You really should have done x/y/z instead.
- You are going to need to do x/y/z next.
- We need to talk. (They hate this one; it makes them feel like doom is coming.)
- I'm so disappointed in you.

And if your teenager has gone silent in all the ways, there are still a few things you can do to nudge them forward.

Once again, you might just need to give them time. And if not, we have the blessing and curse that is texting. It is an actual gift in the land of parenting. Our kids will sometimes say

things to us over text that they cannot manage to say aloud. And they are used to texting their friends, so it is like we are working with their native language. You can often use texting to find out the boy they like or to get them to bring you something from the kitchen. I call this a win-win.

Then there will be times when sit-down, drag-out, look-in-the-eyeballs conversations are necessary. We reserve these for times when kids are really in the weeds or we as a family need to deal with an issue. We set the tone for talking and listening, saying as little as necessary to communicate our points, then letting them talk while we listen without judgment or jumping in.

Writing these words is super easy, but if you were in my home this week, you would be saying, "Amy, you really need to work on that, friend. I just watched how you dealt with the whole 'no one is getting up on time this summer or helping with anything' thing, and you were a hot mess." And you would be correct. I strive for this and fail way too often. But I don't stop striving, and my kids try to keep me on point because we talk about talking. I let them know that I am trying to respect their space and their thinking but that I might sometimes fail, and they have the right to ask for what they need from me when it comes to how we communicate and connect with one another.

And know, when the lines of communication are open, you will also hear some hard things from your kids—sometimes things you'll wish you didn't hear. Right under my roof this has happened. I have walked into bedrooms and found crying people who have hugged me and whispered in my ears the things that were on their hearts, and sometimes these things have taken my breath away.

These are their stories to hold close and are not mine to share. So, dear reader, this is where you take my place—but in

your house, not mine—in a teenager’s messy room or on your own bed. You thought you would be sleeping, but instead there was a knock on the door and your arms are now around one of your dear children. Your ears hear their hardest things. Your heart cracks open, and their pain floods your veins.

But they have trusted you, and you are there. And then we *know* what we know. Even if we cannot say it aloud, we know. It is so hard. But it is also so good. They have chosen to tell us and to let us be right there in their stories. That is the gift. We cannot run from the beautiful, brutal moments. Instead, we remind ourselves we are one of our child’s best guides on this journey, and we stay with them in love and grace for all the minutes. When we are connected to our kids, we get the honor of helping them with their hardest things.

What Happened for Us

I was driving down the road listening to the *SmartLess* podcast, chuckling along with Jason, Will, and Sean and innocently thinking about what I was going to make for dinner. We were on our way to a routine doctor appointment, and my child was on his phone as per usual. Out of the blue he set his phone down and started talking. He asked a direct question about a significant thing I had been unaware of only seconds before, and I froze. I had to make a quick 180-degree turn in my mind because suddenly the door swung wide open.

This kid took me up on the whole “you can tell me anything” thing. It was time to address a giant issue. Time to say a prayer and remember I was so lucky that he was talking. In these moments, God has given me so many good words I never would have thought of on my own. I now recommend clinical-strength deodorant because you never know when a big moment that will make you sweat is going to come.

We had a great ten-minute conversation. Regrettably, I kept trying to rekindle it over the next few weeks until he asked, “Are you going to keep bringing this up forever?” I got the picture.

“Absolutely not. I am so sorry. But I do reserve the right to check in on this like maybe once a month. Fair?”

He rolled his eyes but also answered, “Fair.” They want and need us to check in and be interested—just not all the time. And only on their terms. *Got it.*

So, while the moments your kids want you are now fewer and farther between, they still pack enough of a punch to exhaust you just like the constant “Mom, look at me” moments did. Good times.

The Good News

The most powerful tools we have in these hard times are at our fingertips at a moment’s notice: love and prayer. We can share with God what is on our hearts. We need to sit in the quiet and listen and lean into God’s whispers. We have to do so much listening. But when I have really listened to my heart, God has provided me with things to say that had to come from Him, because I knew they were better than anything I ever could have come up with. As words have come out of my mouth, I knew God was behind me. He loves our kids even more than we do. He wants to help us help them. We just have to stop and breathe and listen.

There have been times when one of my kids was so lost and so scared. And I was so lost and so scared. As we know, that is not our best parenting place. These are the moments when we must lean on God, the divine parent. He understands with a love that surpasses anything our humanness can conceive of. He has given me the words and the courage to lead my chil-

dren out of the darkness, as He takes my hand and leads me out as well. He wants to help us through the little things, but man, does He come through with the big ones too. And I'm pretty sure He crawls up on my bed and holds me in His arms so I can tell Him all my own problems while also holding my now-tall baby who is telling me hers. What a gift.

You will truly be right there in it with them. In all the ways. And I believe that God has given us these children for just this reason: to be their champions through all of it. *All* of it. We can do it. I will make it, and you will too.

Long Story Short

- They need you as much as they did when they were small, even if they are not always talking.
- Give them space when they need it. Yes, you have to.
- Be ready when they do come to you; give some thought to what you might say or do so you can choose your words carefully.
- Use technology when words are hard. GIFs work in a pinch.
- Respect their privacy, and try not to stalk their technology.
- Pray for the right words; let God speak to your heart so you can speak to theirs.

Dear God,

Please draw our kids close to us. Give us the words we need to continue to teach them all that we can. Help me keep my mouth shut when I need to and to really and truly listen to what they have to say, hearing their thoughts in my mind and in my heart. Give me strength when I do not agree with what they are saying, and help me give them space to make their own choices and mistakes. Help me know when it is time to give them stricter guardrails and how to balance this with keeping them open to coming to me with their issues.

Let me step into Your footsteps, thinking about how You parent us with all the love. Let me find all the ways to help them hear me, and let me refrain from losing my mind when they just do not see the wisdom I am offering. (I have such wisdom, don't I, Lord?)

Anyway, keep me from fear, and let the fruits of my labor be found in kids who love to come home and tell me all the things, even the hard ones—even when they are old and gray and I am older and grayer. I want to love them for all time.

Amen.