


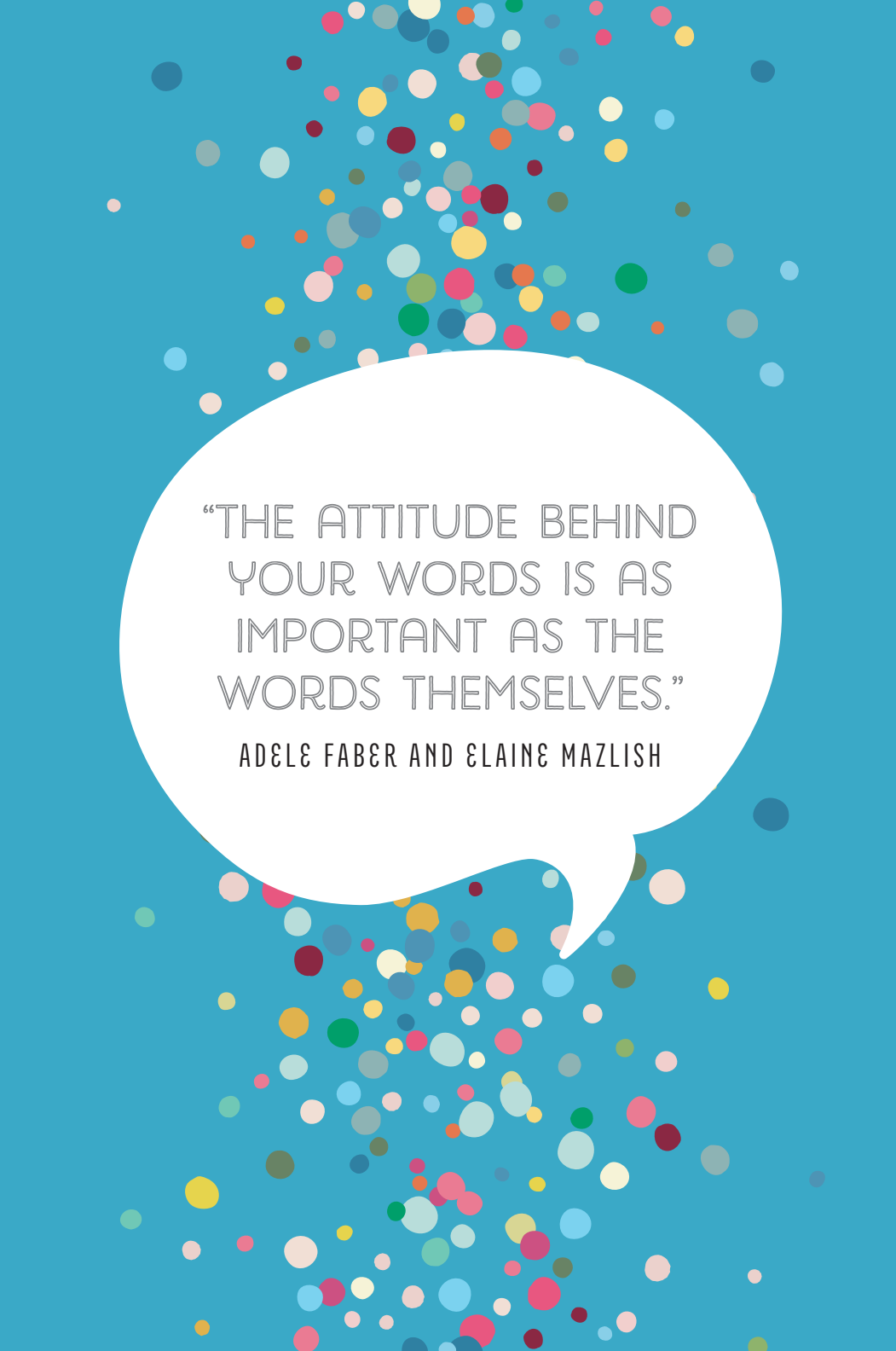
PART I



I TALK / YOU TALK: FROM THE CASUAL TO THE DIFFICULT

You've picked up this book because you want to start conversations with your child that will help define and enhance your relationship. In Part 1, we'll lay the groundwork for these conversations, focusing on the benefits of talking daily. We'll walk you through suggestions for starting meaningful conversations, giving practical tips on where, when, and how.

Chapter 1 reinforces the basic need for conversation and includes the beginning steps of the project—a guided conversation to get you and your kid talking—and identifies some of your strengths and concerns. Chapter 2 explores the different types of conversations you will have, linking to the topics discussed in depth in Part 2. Chapter 3 helps you establish a habit of talk in your home and addresses common concerns, while Chapter 4 offers valuable conversation starters to get your talks rolling.



“THE ATTITUDE BEHIND
YOUR WORDS IS AS
IMPORTANT AS THE
WORDS THEMSELVES.”

ADELE FABER AND ELAINE MAZLISH

Chapter 1 GETTING TO KNOW YOU

“Can I talk to you?” my daughter asked one evening as I was finishing a work email. I didn’t think much of it and said, “Sure.” Then she said, “In private?” Uh-oh. I could feel my heart beating, hear the throbbing in my ears. What did I do? What did she do? What’s wrong?

While my daughter happily participates in conversations, she rarely initiates them—and this sounded serious. I needed to finish my email but I was having trouble focusing. We went to her room and she sat on her bed and looked at me, eyes wide. We just sat.

Eventually, she shared that she had thought she’d done well on a few tests and assignments but that her scores were not what she wanted. She was disappointed in herself. I sat there, relieved. I care about her grades, but I was ecstatic that *she* cared about her grades. And I was thrilled that she came to me. “Okay,” I responded. “What can I do?” A parent’s natural instinct is to jump in and fix a problem, but I soon realized that I didn’t need to do anything. I just needed to be there with her and help her think through her next steps.

In parenting, the goal is to raise an independent adult, and it’s often hard to keep that in mind when you’re in the midst of it, dealing with an adolescent. We want kids to do their own thing, take risks, and find themselves—however, we would prefer that they do it the way we want. But following parents’ instructions every step of the way is not what growing up is about. While kids will not take

the path we set out for them every time, we can still remain a strong influence in our children's lives. The best way to keep your influence in your child's life is to stay connected.

PUSHING BOUNDARIES

When you think back, how do you remember the experience of growing up? What were your concerns? Whom did you go to for advice or to talk things through? If you went to your parents, why? What solidified your relationship and how did they maintain that trust with you? Do you and your child have a similar trusting relationship? And if you didn't go to your parents, why not? What was the barrier? Have you created a similar barrier with your child? How can you start to break it down?

A child's job as she grows up is to push boundaries and try new things. We should expect kids to make poor choices and do things we'd prefer they not do. Our job is to keep calm and carry on. So when your child acts out, makes a mistake, or gets caught red-handed, it's your job to understand that her behavior is likely not a personal stab at you but rather part of the process of growing up. And while it's your job to help your child see the error of her ways by establishing logical consequences, be sure to talk with her about her decisions and their ramifications. This conversation provides her with context and understanding, and sets her up to make a different decision next time—or to at least better understand her choice and its likely outcome. During conversations about choice-making, acknowledge your child's feelings and perspective—her concerns, anxiety, anger, sadness. What drove her decision?

Teens and tweens often experience strong emotions that they are not prepared to handle in the moment. So acknowledge their feelings and realize that understanding does not mean you have to celebrate the emotion or the decision that resulted from it. Rather, you are showing your child that you are trying to understand where she is coming from.

Acknowledgement doesn't mean you have to refrain from punishing your child if she has transgressed. For example, if your daughter was angry and took the car out after curfew to blow off steam, then she should face the consequences—perhaps she should lose car privileges for a set period of time. But

the consequence comes after you've discussed her feelings, her decisions, and healthy alternatives. The goal is to open a conversation so you can better relate—so you can understand why she reacted as she did and she, in turn, can understand why you are upset by her behavior.

If you develop a habit of conversation, you will maintain influence in your child's life, and she will have the opportunity to see things through your eyes. Sure, she will make up her own mind, but she will have the benefit of your perspective. We all come to conversations with our own unique viewpoint—and so do our kids. You might think you're simply making small talk, but then all of a sudden you're in a full-on debate. Don't assume your child agrees with your political or social views, and don't be surprised when your child argues vociferously about something that doesn't matter all that much to you.

Examine your own hopes, fears, concerns, and motivations so you have insight into your approach. Getting to know ourselves and our kids is the best start to understanding how we deal with conversations. Use the parent-child interview questions later in this chapter to share your views and experiences and to get to know your child. You'll start to notice patterns in your interactions, and you can use those patterns to replicate what works well and to adjust what doesn't. For example, if you tend to approach conversations with an open question and your child responds, continue doing that. And if you start conversations with a strong opinion and your child shuts down quickly, try a gentler tactic.

TACKLING THE PROJECT

If you want to be an influencer in your child's life, you need to invite your child in and listen to him. We can't just tell our kids our values, we need to illustrate where our values come from and share the stories that fostered those values. In establishing a strong bond with your children, you increase the chance of them coming to you with the good, the bad, and the ugly. You want them to celebrate their wins with you and share their funny experiences, but you also want them to come to you when the going gets rough.

When we are in the midst of a discussion, especially a heated or emotional one, we can overthink and overreact—or we may underthink our response, suggesting we are not as invested in the topic at hand. While you're trying to balance overthinking

and underthinking your next decision, your tweens and teens are defining themselves in every moment, also overthinking and underthinking their decisions.

At the same time, adolescents are trying to hold steady in the face of all the emotional and physical changes they are experiencing, as well as handle intense peer pressure. Kids are constantly balancing the desire to stick out and to fit in, both at the same time. This can feel like an impossible task, so do your best to empathize with your tween or teen, and understand how emotionally loaded some of his responses may be.

PARENT-CHILD Q&A

Find time with your child and let him know why you want to sit down together. You can say something along the following lines: "I'm reading a book about conversations and how important it is to have them with your kids. It's a project with a few activities to get us talking. I am so excited to start having more conversations with you and really learning more about who you are. In the first activity you can ask me lots of questions, and I will ask you questions as well. My hope is that it will be fun and we will both learn a lot." Then share the book with your child and the directions for the first part of the parent-child interview. Take notes as the two of you talk, and then debrief together.

Directions for child: Find time with your parent so you can learn more about him or her. Understanding your parents as people helps you see where they are coming from and why they think and feel as they do. Choose five to ten questions from the list that follows, then ask your own follow-up questions if you have any. Take note of what interests you. After getting answers to the questions you've chosen, take a break and return to the list later or on a new day. When you have finished interviewing your parent, let him or her interview you. Share with your parent(s) what you learned about them, and, after they interview you, talk about what you learned about yourself.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR PARENT(S):

What is your earliest memory? What was your childhood like?

What were you good at in school?

What were your weaknesses?

Did you participate in activities or clubs? What were they?

Do you still do any of the activities that you did when you were my age?

What would you say your current hobbies or interests are?

Who lived in your home when you were my age?

Did you feel the rules were fair or unfair in your home when you were my age?

What person were you closest to when you were my age?

What kind of jobs have you had in the past? How did you get them?

What do you find most difficult about your life?

What do you find most enjoyable about your life?

What would you consider your greatest strengths?

What would you consider your greatest weaknesses or challenges?

If you had three wishes granted what would they be?

What do you daydream about?

What persons, ideas, or forces have been most useful or influential to you in the past?

When are you happy?

What would you like to do more of?

What would you like to do less of?

What do you want to change about yourself?

Directions for parent: Now it's time for you to interview your child. After asking five to ten questions, take a break and return to the list later or on a new day. Come up with your own follow-up questions if you have any as you go through

the interview, and take note of what interests you. Feel free to do this over a few days if you want to get through the whole list. Share with your child what you learned about him/her, and talk about what you learned about yourself.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR CHILD:

- What is your favorite thing in your life? What gives you joy?
- What is the most frustrating thing in your life right now? What is your greatest challenge?
- What is your favorite/least favorite subject in school? Why?
- Overall, do you like school?
- How are your relationships with your teachers?
- What are your relationships with your classmates like? Describe someone you like, and tell me why. Describe someone you don't like and say why.
- Do you get into arguments or fights with other kids? How do the fights usually start and end?
- Do you have a girlfriend or boyfriend?
- Do you ever get into trouble in school?
- Do you worry about school?
- If you could change one thing about school, what would it be? How could you make this happen?
- What is your earliest memory?
- Are the rules in our home fair or unfair? Why?
- Who understands you best?
- Who do you best identify with at home? What are some things you have learned from this person?

If you could change something in our home, what would it be? What are some ways to make this happen?

If you were to describe yourself to a someone who did not know you well, what would you say?

What would you like to do in the future? What are your plans to achieve these goals?

What makes you happy/mad/sad/scared?

What do you worry about?

How do you feel most of the time?

Complete these sentences:

The most important thing about me is...

The most important thing in my life is...

The best thing in my life is...

The worst thing in my life is...

My greatest strengths are...

My greatest difficulties or challenges are...

I daydream about...

If I had three wishes granted I would ask for:

1.

2.

3.

If I could change one thing about myself, it would be...

HOW YOU RESPONDED

You and your child should both take some time to reflect on what you talked about in your interview by responding to the following prompts:

Have you learned anything new about yourself?

Have you learned anything new about your child/parent?

What were your favorite questions to answer?

What were the most interesting things you learned about your child/parent?

Was there any part of the interview that felt awkward or challenging? If so, what was it, and why do you think you felt that way?

What were you excited to share?

What did you resist sharing?

Share these answers with each other and think about new questions to ask about the other person's answers. These questions are merely springboards to deep-level conversations and continued sharing.

Parents: Don't be afraid to be vulnerable with your answers and reveal things that are important, embarrassing, or sensitive. You are modeling for your child how to develop a bond with another person. This is an important skill to develop and replicate in any long-term relationship. You are helping your child learn how to create a strong foundation for a relationship.

As you review the way you responded to the interview, consider your own conversational strengths and challenges. Think as well about the right environment for your conversations. Take a moment to consider:

- When is a good time to talk with your child (time of day, before/after eating, during another activity, etc.)?

WHO CAN YOU TRUST?

Begin a conversation about the characteristics of trust and the actions of trustworthy people. Ask your child what makes somebody a person she can trust. Jot down your child's thoughts in list form. After reviewing her answers, write your own list, then talk with her about the two lists. Can she identify people she trusts? Why does she trust them?

Make sure your child knows that if she has doubts about a person's trustworthiness, she shouldn't ignore her gut instinct. She can, and should, come to you. Those doubts could be about a friend, a teacher, a coach, or another adult.

If there are marks of trustworthiness you look for that are not on her list, ask her if you can add them to her list. To get you started, here are some descriptors you might consider including:

Empathetic—does the person empathize with you? Do they take time to feel what you are feeling?

Good listener—does the person truly listen to what you have to say?

Honest—has this person ever lied to you?

Responsible—does this person honor commitments?

Open—does this person share personal stories?

Strong character—does this person have good relationships with friends and family? Does this person follow through on promises he or she makes?

Compassionate—do you feel this person truly understands you? Does this person care about you?

- Are there environmental supports that help create a sanctuary for talking and sharing (such as blankets, soft lighting, a quiet space with no TV in the background, etc.)?
- What factors make it hard to talk with your child (approaching a difficult subject, disclosing personal information, learning new things about your child, facing disappointments, etc.)?
- What do you do well when you talk with your child (make eye contact, listen, move the conversation along, open up, etc.)?

HOW YOU REACT

It's important to know the way you are likely to react in different situations. Of course, each situation is unique, but identifying your typical reactions can help you have better conversations. For example, if you tend to respond impulsively, you might work on developing some phrases to fall back on, like, "My knee-jerk reaction is... But give me some time to consider"—and make an effort to think through your responses more. Alternatively, if you lean toward processing your thoughts and your child appears to be looking for a more immediate response, you might work on ways to respond that buy you time to think things through. Also, knowing how your child is likely to react will help you time conversations and tailor your responses for true engagement rather than just talking at one another.

Are you calm and even-tempered most of the time? A relaxed approach can help you ease into conversation. If you find you are quiet during conversations or are too mild-mannered, work on modeling vulnerability and openness. By using the conversation starters and prompts in Part 2 of this book and opening up to your child, you create a framework that he can apply in his own life to create meaningful connections with others. Research shows that these deep connections create lasting happiness in our lives, and this is the legacy we all want to leave our children.

A subdued reaction or consistently laissez-faire attitude can signal to your child that you are not concerned or that the topic at hand is not as important to you as he might want it to be.

Do you tend to get anxious easily or are you quick-tempered? This can mean you are passionate and care very deeply, which your child likely picks up on. But an outsized reaction on your part can also trigger arguments or stifle conversation. If you worry about this or find it happening, realize that you need time and space to process the conversation, ideally before you engage.

Sometimes you don't have the luxury of taking a time out or finding a quiet spot. In those cases, look within yourself and talk through your mood as best you can. Remember to take breaks if you feel overwhelmed or emotional.

Think before speaking and check any need you have to control the situation. It is important to have a space for your child to unwind and come undone at times, and this is an uncontrolled reaction. It's important that your child knows he can come to you and trust you. If you overreact or judge quickly, you may unwittingly signal for the child to stop the conversation before it gets out of control. Know yourself, and if you tend to overreact, or if certain situations trigger a strong reaction or anxiety, identify your tendency and work on it when you're feeling in control.

How quick are you to offer an opinion or judgment? Sometimes advice can be helpful, but it can also stifle your child. Avoid offering your thoughts right off the bat (don't worry, you can and should offer your opinion once you've heard your child out). Most importantly, listen. You can't know what your child is thinking, but you can listen to what he tells you and try to interpret as best you can. Ask clarifying questions. Once you're engaged in conversation, your child might even ask for your opinion. If you do feel the urge to share and can't stop yourself, be sure to frame it as your opinion and say that you simply feel compelled to share it.

HOW YOU LEARN

Understanding the way you and your child learn will help you engage in conversations more fully. Are you able to simply sit and listen, or do you prefer to be active, walking, knitting, or cooking? Do you ask questions when you're confused or just gloss over things you don't understand?

Knowing your learning strengths and challenges will help you identify areas to focus on in your conversation. For example, I am not an auditory learner and I can gloss over things I don't understand or that don't interest me. That's something for me to recognize when talking with my kids, so I make an effort to focus and catch myself when I drift.

As I was driving my daughter to her skating lesson one day, she began talking about some fan fiction she was reading. While I love that she was reading, I had no interest in the fan fiction, let alone the complicated story she was relaying. I tried to pay attention but my mind wandered. She must have been talking for fifteen minutes before I realized she was talking about ships, and that boats had nothing whatsoever to do with what she had been describing. So I stopped her to clarify, only to learn that “ships” are “relationships” between two superheroes. The conversation that ensued was hysterical, as we talked about what would happen if these two superheroes got together, or what about those two.... That led to a conversation about personalities and what works well for relationships. If I hadn't made the effort to tune in, I would have missed this opportunity to talk at length about relationships with my daughter. And now we often refer to that conversation to lighten the mood when we're talking about serious relationships.

Understanding your own tendencies and mindset allows you to see where you shut down opportunities and where you are open to new experiences. What is your mindset like with regard to parenting? Do you focus on limitations when your child experiences a setback? Or do you try to find the area for growth and learning?

Psychologist Carol Dweck defined the terms “growth mindset” and “fixed mindset.” A growth mindset is the belief that effort and learning can lead to talent and skill. A fixed mindset is the belief that talent and skill are innate. People with a growth mindset tend to persevere through disappointment and frustration because they believe they can achieve a goal even when it doesn't come naturally or right away. They worry less about never being able to “get it” and focus more on what they need to do to improve. People with fixed mindsets lean toward giving up or cheating to get ahead. People can express different

mindsets at different times and in different facets, and growth mindsets need to be developed.

Supporting a growth mindset for your child will help her develop resilience and persistence. One of the biggest features of the growth mindset is praising effort rather than the outcome. As your child answers questions you ask, you may think she is not staying on topic or answering your question fully. Focus not on the content but on the process and the journey of getting to know each other better. It is normal for children to get off topic, talk tangentially, and respond emotionally to questions—and these are all good things. The idea behind the interviews, conversation starters, and prompts is to use them as a template to build your own “house of conversation”—so don't worry about sticking to the script. Remember, while these talks may feel like an emotional risk for you and may feel unnatural at first, they are also an emotional risk for your child, so be extra supportive, kind, and accepting.

HOW YOU ENGAGE

Understand that learning to have productive conversations is a process, and the way you feel about the conversation will vary with the topic, your mood, and your perspective. Having good conversations with your child is about knowing how to approach and engage—it's not about ending every conversation without conflict. Clashing opinions, the challenge of understanding each other, and the messiness of dealing with each other's feelings are all a part of the process. Enjoy that process with the knowledge that you will not always enjoy the conversation.

Take the opportunity to talk with your children when they are having a good day, but also when they are having a bad one. Whether they are hurt emotionally or physically, relate their pain to a broader life experience. Talk about times when you faced a similar challenge, and help them make a connection to you; tell them about a time when you were hurt, when you failed, or when you were frustrated. What did you do?

Life can throw a mess of challenges your way, and it's great to talk about what you've done in the past to face them, using the lessons you learned to help your

WHEN SOMEONE BREAKS YOUR CHILD'S TRUST

Every day, kids find out that someone said something behind their back. All too often these days, the nastiness is posted online for many more to see. How do you cope when that happens?

Get clarity. If you heard about the incident from your child, ask him for the details. If you heard about it from someone else or noticed the activity on your child's social media account, follow up with your child for details. Don't assume this is a bigger deal than it is.

Assess how upset your child is. If he appears to be shrugging it off, follow his lead. If he seems upset about the incident or wants to address it, help him do that, using the following suggestions.

Discuss options. Talk with your child about his options. He could report the incident, approach the person/people who posted the offensive comment, identify other people to hang out with, or ignore it. Ask your child what results he wants to come out of this incident. Does he want it to go away, to tell the other person off, or to establish boundaries with the person? Whatever your child's choice, role play what he will say or do, and offer to accompany him if appropriate.

Lean on support. Identify someone in your community who you and your child trust that can help to remedy the situation. This could include a school counselor or administrator, a therapist, your pediatrician, or a social worker. Depending on the level of exposure, consider filing an official report with the school or police department.

Continue to check in. Check in regularly and also be sensitive to changes in his mood, behavior, friends, sleep, and eating, in case something changes.

Talk about trust. Open up a conversation about what it means to trust someone. Did your child trust the person who made the offence? What signs did your child see or miss? What can he look for in his relationships to identify people he can truly trust?

child face challenges in the here and now. Sometimes, families adopt a motto or philosophy to live by, and these family mottos can come in handy when confronting daily crises. One family I worked with used as their motto the expression, "Everybody has to try." This way, while you may not get "it" right (whatever "it" is), you have to try. My father-in-law would say, "Some days you eat the bear, and some days the bear eats you." While I've never found that to be helpful in solving a problem, it is somewhat comforting in that it helps to acknowledge my kids' feelings on a less-than-perfect day.

STORIES THAT BIND US

As humans, we are all vulnerable, and acknowledging that rather than hiding it can help us unlock the door to engagement with our children. Telling your own childhood stories helps you enter into the conversation, and this approach is generally more successful than asking direct questions that may be met with one-word answers. Your children are more interested in your personal stories than you might think—especially the embarrassing and colorful ones.

Think for a moment about Hollywood and the most compelling stories told on the big screen. These are not all rainbows and unicorns—they are about big personalities who overcome big obstacles in one way or another. Share your most captivating stories, the ones where you triumphed or failed in a dramatic

way. You may be surprised to learn that your kids will actually think more highly of you when you share your vulnerable moments, and they will begin to see themselves in your stories. They will be interested hearing about your resilience, perseverance, failures, and heartbreak.

Our brains are expertly built to understand and hold stories in long-term memory. Stories incite emotion, not logic. And emotion, especially in tweens and teens, drives behavior. Stories inspire people to take action and change behavior, and the most powerful ones you can tell your children are your own hard-earned stories. Your kids actually do want to get to know you.

Learning how you overcame obstacles and developed grit will help your child see that he is not alone in his struggles. The difficult things we have overcome helped us build resilience, and sharing those tough moments and our strength with our children will help them build a framework for their own resilience.

CONNECTING AND RECONNECTING

If you already have a strong connection with your child, *The Parenting Project* will help you continue and bolster it. If you once had a close connection and feel that you are losing it as your child hits the tween or teen years, now is the time to rekindle that relationship. Your tween or teen is likely discovering a new part of himself as he grows up, and you can get to know that new dimension of your child through conversation.

If you have never felt a strong connection with your child, don't spare a moment in getting meaningful conversation going. Read through this book and highlight questions you would like to ask your child. Beginning with lighter subjects may be best for some kids; however, you may get a stronger response if you start with the dangerous or uncomfortable topics first. It really depends on the personality of your child and the relationship you currently have.

If something came between you and your tween or teen, your best bet is to deal with that situation head-on as you begin this project. *The Parenting Project* requires trust, honesty, and openness, so work on building those elements back into your relationship. Don't waste time feeling ashamed that the relationship isn't perfect—no one's is—and kudos to you for paying attention to your child's

emotional health. Stay focused in the present and keep digging to find out more about your child and how he operates in the world. Using the activities and conversation starters, you'll be embarking on a journey into conversation that will help you build a profound relationship with your child.