



MOMUMENTAL

Adventures in the Messy Art
of Raising a Family

Jennifer Grant

“Wow. Jennifer Grant’s *MOMumental: Adventures in the Messy Art of Raising a Family* is more than a parenting book. It is a love story, a must-read for every mom (and dad!). With gut-wrenching honesty, Grant reminds us that imperfection should be celebrated, not feared, because we find beauty, grace, and redemption in the messiness of real life. A life-changing book that will inspire you to enjoy a calm, connected life with your children, no matter how imperfect.”

Kirk Martin

founder of CelebrateCalm.com and CelebrateADHD.com



“Readers have come to expect humor, warmth, and wisdom from Jennifer Grant. And *MOMumental* does not disappoint. Packed with stories of her successes and failures as a mom, Grant gives moms—and dads—a real treasure in this book: the knowledge that none of us is perfect, and yet each of us is up to the monumental task of building a great family.”

Caryn Dahlstrand Rivadeneira

author of *Grumble Hallelujah* and *Mama’s Got a Fake I.D.*



“Jennifer Grant has done it again. *MOMumental*, marked by Grant’s trademark humor, is a delicious weaving of her insights on parenting and family life. By just a few pages in, I was musing to myself, *Man, she’s the real deal*. Though Grant humbly confesses her faults and foibles, it’s crystal-clear to the rest of us that she’s really got a good handle on this whole parenting business. Read this book. You’ll be glad you did. I was.”

Margot Starbuck

author of *Small Things with Great Love*,
The Girl in the Orange Dress, and *Unsqueezed*



“Jennifer Grant’s new book is as refreshing as a latte or wine break, as forgiving as your best friend, and a lot cheaper than a therapist. By sharing her hard-won personal wisdom and witty, intelligent writing, Grant will make you realize that your kids will be fine—and so will

you. Though her personal faith infuses her philosophy, this book never seems preachy. She provides a great example for all parents trying to raise kids at a healthy distance from the most offensive aspects of popular so-called culture.”

Meg Cox

author of *The Book of New Family Traditions:
How to Create Great Rituals for Holidays & Everyday*



“*MOMumental* did two things I didn’t believe any book could do: Its wit and wisdom so completely enraptured me, I found myself taking notes—both mental and with actual pen and paper—so that I could return to its vast treasure trove of practical and spiritual wisdom and share it with others. Moreover, it elicited such from-the-bottom-of-my-soul laughter and delight that I caused a full-blown scene on the cross-country plane ride where I read it. *MOMumental* is a book about parenting, family, and intentional relationships for readers who normally avoid such fare like an overzealous street evangelist. (Raises hand.) Through the marvelous honesty and infectious humor with which Jennifer recounts her parenting adventures—each of them grounded in deeply inviting and transparently authentic real-world faith—*MOMumental* is a delightful and surprising gift to us all, one that I already have begun pressing into the hands of anyone who crosses my path (beginning with my seatmates and the flight attendants on that ride from Washington, DC to California.) Fasten your seat belts, folks; you’re in for an unforgettable ride. (Oh, and parents: Don’t forget to put your own oxygen masks on *first* before helping those around you. Really.)”

Cathleen Falsani

award-winning journalist and author



“After graduate studies in child development, I was certain of one thing: the only parenting book that I would ever consider giving to a friend would be Bettelheim’s *A Good Enough Parent*. The title says it all. With Jennifer Grant’s new book, *MOMumental*, I could feel confident passing along a companion text. Through her

engaging stories, Grant lets us know how she journeyed from the dream of becoming an exceptional mother to her understanding that parenting is a messy and joyous art. Jennifer Grant does not give us prescriptions or answers. She shares the wisdom about parenting that she developed on this journey.”

Jim Gill

musician, author, and child development specialist



“Once again, Jennifer Grant has written a memoir about parenting and family life that makes you want to sneak into her house and magically become one of her children, for as long as you can get away with it. And not because she is ‘the perfect mother,’ but because she is both candid about her struggles as a mom and yet also inspiring with her dreams and ideals for her family. Grant reminds us that amidst all the craziness and stress of modern-day parenting—no matter how flawed our mothering may sometimes be—we are all more than capable of doing that which is most important for our kids: loving them, connecting with them, being smitten with them. And I know that after you read *MOMumental*, you’ll be smitten with Grant and her wonderful book.”

Helen Lee

author of *The Missional Mom*



“This lovely, honest look at mothering will encourage every woman who has wondered if she has what it takes to succeed at life’s most important calling. Filled with humor, poignant anecdotes, and great advice, *MOMumental* should be on every mom’s shelf.”

Dale Hanson Bourke

author of *Everyday Miracles* and *Embracing Your Second Calling*



“Like a much-needed, laughter-filled conversation with the best of friends, reading *MOMumental* centers me as a mom, reminding me to be content with the blessings of sometimes-messy family life. And it inspires me to ask myself the right questions, to seek

after what's truly meaningful, and to dream the very best dreams for my kids.”

Kelli B. Trujillo

author of *Faith-Filled Moments: Helping Kids See God in Everyday Life* and *The Busy Mom's Guide to Spiritual Survival*



“In *MOMumental*, Jennifer Grant stares down the monster of idealized parenthood, laying bare her own dreams and failures as a mom and ultimately offering up a gentler, more effective model. Any mom living the competitive lifestyle that is modern motherhood will find relief, companionship, and encouragement in this delightful book.”

Lara Krupicka

writer, speaker, and mother



“*MOMumental* is like having a cup of tea with a wise sister. Affirming, funny, and poignant, Jennifer Grant gives us all permission to loosen up, make mistakes, and love our kids like crazy.”

Monica Selby

freelance writer, blogger, and mommy of three



“I love Jennifer Grant. In fact, every mom deserves at least one Jen Grant in her life. She's that friend who offers a healthy perspective, a good laugh, and a good cry—sometimes all at the same time—while she affirms, honors, and celebrates you and your life as a mom. Grant specializes in joy. And her new book is an intelligent, honest, and life-affirming memoir celebrating the unparalleled joys, unending rewards, and monumental challenges of motherhood—the good, the bad, and the wacky making. You will love *MOMumental*!”

Amy Hilbrich Davis

mom of seven, CEO of FamilyLife Success, parent and family engagement expert, creator of the balance MAP

MOMUMENTAL

Adventures in the Messy Art
of Raising a Family

Jennifer Grant



Copyright © 2012 by Jennifer Grant

Published by Worthy Publishing, a division of Worthy Media, Inc., 134 Franklin Road, Suite 200, Brentwood, Tennessee 37027.

HELPING PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THE HEART OF GOD

eBook available at www.worthypublishing.com

Audio distributed through Oasis Audio; visit www.oasisaudio.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012934734

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version. © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked CEB are taken from the Common English Bible. © 2011 by Common English Bible, P.O. Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202-0801. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from Holy Bible, New Living Translation, © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Published in association with the literary and marketing firm of C. Grant & Company, Wheaton, IL.

For foreign and subsidiary rights, contact Riggins International Rights Services, Inc.; www.rigginsrights.com

ISBN: 978-1-617950-74-2 (trade paper)

Cover Design and Photography: Grey Matter Group
Interior Design and Typesetting: Kimberly Sagmiller, FudgeCreative

Printed in the United States of America
12 13 14 15 16 17 18 SBI 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my family—
David, Theo, Ian, Isabel, and Mia—
with love,
gratitude,
and big, fledgy yesses.*

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION Velveteen Parenting	1
<i>Adventures in Becoming Real</i>	
CHAPTER 1 Fledge Words and Fairy Dust	19
<i>Adventures in Saying Yes</i>	
CHAPTER 2 The Body Hair Incident	39
<i>Adventures in Accepting Conflict</i>	
CHAPTER 3 Mommy Misdemeanors	55
<i>Adventures in Messing Up</i>	
CHAPTER 4 Escape to Gordon's House	75
<i>Adventures in Friendship</i>	
CHAPTER 5 Behind the Amish	93
<i>Adventures in the Basics</i>	
CHAPTER 6 There's Something about Blue French Fries ...	109
<i>Adventures in Junk Culture</i>	
CHAPTER 7 Overheard at the Wedding Reception	129
<i>Adventures in Eavesdropping</i>	
CHAPTER 8 On the Bwight Side	135
<i>Adventures in Mistaking Kids for Mini-Adults</i>	
CHAPTER 9 Eating Dinner	153
<i>Adventures in Breaking Bread</i>	

CHAPTER 10	Parenting after Orange Alert	169
	<i>Adventures in Living Bravely in a Fearful Time</i>	
CHAPTER 11	Overheard on the Bus	183
	<i>Adventures in Chaperoning Field Trips</i>	
CHAPTER 12	Baleen Whales, Taco Night, and the Cheese Stick Bubbler	189
	<i>Adventures in Creating Family Lore</i>	
CHAPTER 13	The Case of the Missing Clementines	203
	<i>Adventures in Faith and Compassion</i>	
CHAPTER 14	Old Mom, New Tricks	217
	<i>Adventures in Shape-Shifting</i>	
CHAPTER 15	Hide and Seek	231
	<i>Adventures in Being Present</i>	
CONCLUSION	The Dollhouse	237
	<i>Adventures in Letting Go</i>	
Appendix 1:	<i>Five Multiple-Duty Products Busy Moms Shouldn't Be Without</i>	242
Appendix 2:	<i>Signs of Mommy Burnout</i>	249
Appendix 3:	<i>A Prayer to Tear out of This Book</i>	253
Acknowledgments		254
Notes		257

No doubt about it: children are a gift from the LORD.

—Psalm 127:3 CEB

*It is easier to build strong children
than to repair broken men.*

—Frederick Douglass

*Knowing that we can be loved exactly as we are
gives us all the best opportunity for growing into
the healthiest of people.*

—Fred Rogers



INTRODUCTION

Velveteen Parenting *Adventures in Becoming Real*

I always wanted to be a mother.

Scratch that. Let me begin again.

I always wanted to be a *very good mother*—exceptional even.

I pictured myself with a happy houseful of children. We would play games together: kickball, Monopoly, charades. We'd have tea parties and sleepovers and go on epic family vacations we would remember and talk about for the rest of our lives. The Galápagos Islands. Paris. The Great Wall of China. I would appreciate the children, never sighing or moaning about how much work it was or how much it cost to raise them.

And, like you I'm sure, I was intent to bring only what was most positive about my childhood into my own parenting. When we actually become parents, however, we find that the disappointment, sleep deprivation, and the basic demands of—you know—being *adults* tug at the neat seams of our resolve until we find ourselves saying things to our kids that we swore we'd never say. We do the things we promised we'd never do. Caught in a moment of "Go clean your room!" or "How many times have I told you . . ." we hold our heads in our hands like that iconic Munch painting, *The Scream*, and shriek, "That's it! I've officially turned into my mother!" (At that point, either we laugh at ourselves and realize there's nothing wrong with that, or we pick up the phone and call a therapist. Both are perfectly reasonable responses.)



When I was growing up, I wondered whether my parents' divorce prohibited me from eventually creating a marriage that would last. Did a person have to soak up—minute by minute and day by day—the stellar examples of parents in order to create a solid marriage and family as an adult? I would hear myself referred to as a "child of a broken home" as though a damaged building—not two human beings—had somehow brought me into the world. When I heard the phrase, shame washed over me, and I wondered whether tattered relationships were my destiny.

In the years leading up to my parents' divorce, woundedness pulsed through my house at uneven intervals, filling the air with a kind of stale emotional odor, like when the heating system is turned on after a long summer. The vents blow dust and a musty smell through the house, affecting each room.

Everything seemed to be falling apart at home. And according to the evening news, it was no better in the world at large. President Nixon had resigned. Scientists were making babies in test tubes. The mass suicide in Jonestown. Patty Hearst. An oil crisis.

My religious faith confused me too. At church, my least favorite verses in the Bible often loomed over me like dark clouds. The sins of the fathers, the pastors said, would be visited on the children. Not *might be*, but *would be* visited on the sinner's offspring. Every time I heard those verses, I felt jinxed. I certainly didn't want anybody's sins to "visit on" me. Not those of the father I barely knew or of the grandparents I'd never met. I wanted a strong marriage and a big, happy family someday.

(Curse-free, if you please.)



I used to wonder whether other people's families knew something mine didn't. I spied from the bushes as the magician who lived across the street worked with his mourning doves in his garage. I peered into family rooms as neighbors

reclined in their La-Z-Boys in front of *Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island*. I strained to overhear adult conversations at friends' houses while we sat cross-legged on the floor playing with stuffed animals.

When I discovered Louise Fitzhugh's novel *Harriet the Spy*, I felt like I had found a soul mate. Harriet was quirky and curious, and she paid attention to the ordinary details of other people's lives. So I began to write my observations about people in black-and-white composition notebooks the way Harriet did.

Alice's mother keeps a drawer of candy bars in her kitchen. Alice and her brother David don't have to ask before taking one and they never have to eat health food like wheat germ or Tiger's Milk.

No one is allowed in Kim's living room and the carpet is vacuumed into straight lines. Kim's mother always dresses nicely, her hair is always done, and she always seems to be standing silently in front of a shiny kitchen sink.

Megan's parents keep to themselves. Their bedroom is on its own side of the house down a long, shadowy hall. It doesn't seem to bother anyone that the house is messy or that the doors stand open.

Every time I walk by, the front yard of Brandon's

house is filled with kids running around. Of the eight of them, some were adopted, some not. Some are white, some not. They like one another.

My parents divorced by the time I was in junior high school. It was around then that I heard myself referred to as a “latchkey kid.” Yes, I had a key on a string around my neck or sometimes waiting for me under the front doormat. And yes, with a mother who had returned to school for her doctorate, I let myself into a quiet house after school every day.

But did I really need *another* maudlin nickname?

As a “latchkey kid from a broken home,” my family fantasies continued. Sometimes when I pictured myself grown up and a mother, I could almost see the adult version of me (as played by, perhaps, *Hart to Hart*’s Stefanie Powers) pulling the door open wide for my kids and meeting them after school with a plate of just-out-of-the-oven Toll House chocolate-chip cookies and glasses of milk. Like the fictional Jennifer Hart, maybe I’d be a journalist with a secret life as a private investigator.

When my Jennifer-Hart-adult-self met the children at the door, the aforementioned cookies would be baked with *real chocolate chips* and accompanied by *store-bought milk*. This was imperative. The chocolate chips in my house at that time were generic and “chocolate-flavored” and seemed brushed with some kind of purplish wax. The grocery store had a whole aisle of generic products, bearing only the most basic descriptions of what was inside the packages. The lone

design on the boxes or cans was a dreary olive green line and black stenciled letters: FLOUR. COLA. BAKING CHIPS. TUNA.

The milk we drank at home was made from a mix that was kept in a giant paper bag next to the water softener in the basement. After a trip to the grocery store with my mom, I'd lug a block of salt down into the basement and drop it into the softener, stepping back to avoid getting splashed, the muscles in my arms stretched long after walking the salt down two flights of stairs from the garage.

"Get some milk while you're down there, okay?" my mom would call from the kitchen, and I'd dip a glass measuring cup into the bag of powder to take up for that night's dinner.

We weren't poor, and we weren't rich. We had a house in a nice neighborhood in one of the most affluent counties in America. The schools were great, there was food on the table, and we had the clothes, books, and toys we needed. But things were very tight.

After my parents' divorce, my father moved to Texas and I didn't see him again until I was in college. "Our father, who art in Texas," my siblings sometimes joked. Back then, Texas was a sanctuary for what some referred to as "dead-beat dads." Texas provided men a safe haven from alimony and child support payments. Maybe these fathers had other reasons for relocating there. Perhaps they were infatuated with the Lone Star State or with cowboys and mechanical bulls. Later, though, it did seem it was likely more than a coincidence that *all* the men I heard of from our town who

had left their families had moved to that same state so far away from our hometown in Illinois. I pictured them sitting together at a saloon, raising their glasses as the wooden doors swung open to reveal another father on the run from his family up north.

Saddled with bills (pun intended) and raising us while going to graduate school, my mother got the bags of powdered milk and other food and household items from a missionary organization in the town just north of where we lived. A child of the Depression, my mom knows how to stretch a dollar and is more interested in the life of the mind than in measuring up to the mythical Joneses. She is much more likely to notice a title on a bookshelf than someone's new kitchen cabinets.

My brother Drew still favors the strawberry Suave, the shampoo of our youth, brought home in bulk from the warehouse along with the milk powder. Four years older than I am, and more my playmate than our older siblings, Drew valiantly drank my milk most days after first creating a diversion to distract our mother.

When I attempted to sip the milk, I would gag. "I can't!" I would whine. "I'm going to throw up."

But we had to drink our milk—strong bones and teeth and all that.

My heroic brother took pity on me and came to my rescue every evening by pointing animatedly out the window at the backyard and shouting, "Oh, look! A rabbit!" or "What kind of bird is that?" Our mother would turn to the window,

and while her back was to us, he'd exchange our glasses—his empty, mine full of the lumpy, ivory-colored liquid.

“Oh, I must have missed it,” my mother would say, disappointed. “What color were its feathers?”

I realize that it wasn't very nice of us to exploit her gullibility. But you know what they say: desperate times call for desperate measures. Drew could be in prison right now for committing a heinous crime and I'd still think he was a saint for drinking glass after glass of that lukewarm powdered milk when we were kids. Even with ice cubes, it was nasty. I knew one thing for sure: when I grew up, my kids would have store-bought milk.

Cold, tasty, and white.

No stirring necessary.



The vision of my eventual family life came into even clearer focus when I worked as a babysitter in high school and college. I noted, with an anthropologist's vigilant and detached gaze, frazzled parents barking at their children before leaving me in charge and then, hours later when they were off having dinner at the country club, the children speaking in those same cutting tones with each other. I saw looks of cold hostility pass between the mothers and fathers of some of the children for whom I babysat. It strengthened my resolve. Such unpleasantness would *not* befall my home when I had children of my own.

There was no need for it. I would be in love with my husband, and he with me. I would model tolerance, good humor, and gentleness for my children, and they would mirror these traits.

I would be like a stone dropped into a pond, my children the ripples, spreading peace and goodwill as they echoed away from me into their own lives. Perhaps, I allowed, they might bicker on *extremely* rare occasions, but only when they were overtired or coming down with the flu. But at those jangly times, I would sashay into the room and know just what to say to calm them and help them reconnect, and they all would be back on track again. I wouldn't spank them, shame them, or even raise my voice toward them. I wouldn't need to—we would be in such sync with one another.

I also wouldn't be imprisoned by convention. As a result, my children would always be fully, joyfully, authentically themselves. I'd let them paint murals on their bedroom walls. I'd allow them to have a dozen different kinds of pets. (*You want a Saint Bernard? Of course! An iguana? Why not? A long-haired Persian cat? How exquisite!*) They'd choose their clothes and how they wanted to wear their hair.

Our home would be an oasis in an uncertain world.

I would break that old "sins of the fathers" curse and would not be burdened by childhood wounds.

I'd blow my sad memories into the wind, like dandelion seeds.



In my early thirties, as the mother of three young children, my Harriet-the-Spy-self remained hyper vigilant, ever on the lookout for examples of happy homes to emulate. While stationed for several hours a day on the sofa with a nursing baby and a clear view of the street, I watched a red van pull in and out of the driveway opposite my own. Six, eight, ten, twelve times a day, I saw my neighbor maneuver her van up the hill, into the garage, and then out again. The garage door went up, the red van pulled in or out, the door went down.

Where could she be going? I'd wonder, captivated.

Its driver, my across-the-street neighbor, was efficient, cheerful, and always in motion. Her dress was casual but pulled together, sort of like an L.L. Bean catalog model. Her children were attractive, polite kids who seemed to be decades older than my own. (Hers were—gasp!—already *all* in school.) As my baby napped, my neighbor's kids clambered around on their play set and threw a baseball in the yard with their father. They were in the gifted program at school and followed their mother's lead to be environmentally conscious and helpful toward those in need in the community.

I picked at the frayed fabric of my sweatpants, and I swooned.

At the time, I was a part-time reporter for a local newspaper and, enamored with my neighbor, I asked her whether she would agree to be interviewed for a feature story on what it meant to be a mother in the year 2000. Gamely, she

agreed. I'd been spying on her for months, noting whatever details of her life I could glean from a distance; but for the story, she gave me access to her house, her schedule, and even the holy of holies, you might say—her massive, wood-paneled refrigerator.

I sat on the edge of my kids' green turtle sandbox in the backyard, writing the story as my children played nearby. My feet were buried and unburied by my toddler son Ian as I scratched away on a yellow legal pad with a marker that likely was a prize in a goody bag or a stumpy pencil taken from the pews at my church. I had long since abandoned my Harriet-the-Spy composition books as well as the pretentious fountain pens and Moleskine journals of my young adulthood.

But here I was, finally a professional journalist, writing from my suburban backyard. If Louisa May Alcott could write her novels with children running around the drawing room, certainly I could write features for the local paper with my bare feet submerged in cool sand.

I nervously awaited the publication of the profile on my neighbor, hoping she would approve of it. But I had nothing to fear—what was published in the paper was a sort of song of praise to the stay-at-home mother and to my neighbor in particular. The headline read “The Right Kind of Busy.”

The week's groceries are unloaded into the refrigerator. Eight plastic jugs of milk form ranks. On the bottom shelf, twenty containers of yogurt stand at

the ready. In the large pullout freezer drawer below, frozen meat and pizzas await. The only aberration from orderly rows and columns is a bowl of half-eaten ice cream, topped with chocolate syrup, a spoon stuck in it like an explorer's flag.

This kitchen, like so many kitchens belonging to school-aged children and their parents, is clearly the family's headquarters. Each person's schedule is noted on the calendar; everyone is assigned a color. Yet, in this meticulous environment, signs—including the ice cream sculpture in the freezer—reveal that real children live a real life here. . . .

Keeping kids in clean soccer uniforms, overseeing their academic progress, volunteering at their schools, delivering them to practice fields, and feeding them in the scant moments between work and school can take a Herculean effort from parents. Knowing that it is a choice—rooted in love for the child—to invest in one's children and their activities seems to help parents remain dedicated and armed with a sense of humor about the demands of their schedules.

And on it went, detailing my neighbor's good sense as well as the ways she was creating a balanced, happy home for her children. In this one person, this one seemingly ordinary neighbor, I'd finally found what I'd been seeking for so many years: the perfect mother making the perfect family.

I wanted to *be* her.

Not surprisingly, for the few years we lived across the street from each other, she was my parenting guru. I asked her advice on everything from treating a child's rash to whether to register my kids for an activity through the park district. I was always running across the road to chat with her as she pulled weeds or started on a walk with her dog. She was infinitely patient with me.

"Be there when they get out of school," she advised. "Then you get the real story of what happened that day before it all goes out of their minds."

Check.

"Pediatricians don't always trust you. They forget that moms spend every waking moment with their kids. You have to insist that you get in for an appointment when you know something's going on."

Got it.

When I confessed to her that I was trying to follow very closely in her footsteps, my neighbor laughed and tried to dissuade me from doing so. She confessed her mistakes to me, told me about the appointments or celebrations she had forgotten, and detailed how she sometimes felt confounded by the needs and personalities of her four children.

I chalked up such admissions to her modesty. My neighbor's house and children seemed perfect to me. She was involved at her church, a committed gardener, and always reaching out to the older people on our block. She was even her sons' Boy Scout den leader. In my mind, she was an ideal mother and had family life "down pat," whatever that

expression meant. She made it all look so easy. You see, back then I was a believer in what author Carla Barnhill calls the “myth of the perfect mother.”¹ Nothing she could say or do dissuaded me from seeing her in this rosy light.



One afternoon, I sat with my four children and her daughter, who was then around ten years old, in my front yard. The ice cream truck had made its way up our street, and in a fit of maternal zeal, I waved it down and bought treats for all the kids within sight. As my (perfect) neighbor’s daughter ate her ice cream, she remarked that her brother—then in high school—was in trouble. *Big trouble*. I don’t remember whether he had missed his curfew or had done poorly on a test, but whatever it was, she said it was a *very big deal*.

“Oh. Teenagers do stuff like that sometimes, don’t they?” I said sagely, as though I had any clue what teenagers did and didn’t do. At the time, I couldn’t imagine my own kids as teens, arriving home late, or being asked to study for tests more academically rigorous than that of reciting the alphabet or tying their shoelaces.

“My mom was so mad she chased him up the stairs with a wooden spoon,” the girl announced as she and the other kids jumped up from the grass to play.

A wooden spoon? I had no idea she has such a flair for the dramatic, I thought. *I bet that got his attention, the rascal!* I was awash in appreciation for my neighbor’s good humor.

Later my neighbor told me about the incident and described the white-hot rage she had felt when she ran after her son. (*Rage? But I thought you were just being silly and theatrical!*) As she confessed her anger, I couldn't believe that she had been brought to such a point with her son. *How could one's own child be that infuriating?* Rage was chaotic and uncontrolled; it made me nervous. Committed as I was to keeping my fantasy alive, I quickly dismissed the idea that she could have experienced such a strong emotion.

Anomaly, I thought with a shrug, and then I complimented her on the lilies in her garden.

I'm sure she could have used a kind word at that moment and would have liked to be seen and accepted as the real-life person she was. But I had shaped her into something else. I had slapped a big label on her that read "Perfect Mom" and the letters were so shiny and appealing, I couldn't see past them to the real person standing in front of me.



Now, years later, after being broken in by time and exasperation and days when I want to run after my own kids with a wooden spoon, I no longer look to others or to myself to be ideal mothers. Now, like the Velveteen Rabbit, I've become, well, more *Real*. My fur's been rubbed off. My heart has stretched and expanded. The shine is gone. Now I can say with confidence that much as we may long to do so, we cannot create perfect homes and families. No

matter how spiritually deep, deliberate, or disciplined we aspire to be, we can't completely escape the unpleasant parts of ourselves. We can't gather up all of our childhood memories, injuries, and longings like a heap of dirty laundry and load them into the washing machine to make every wrinkle and stain disappear. Whatever you call it—original sin, human nature, or just life—a vein of brokenness runs through every one of us. We must acknowledge the darker parts of ourselves, confess our mistakes and bad choices, accept forgiveness, and give ourselves the chance to start again. Over and over and over again.

These days, instead of focusing on creating a conflict-free home, raising picture-perfect kids, and being an ideal mother—comprised of equal parts June Cleaver, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Angelina Jolie—I have embraced a more realistic view of what I can and cannot do as a parent. This reality-based “Velveteen parenting” includes, but is not limited to, the following general guidelines:

- I choose my battles. Although I don't like it when my kids draw on their hands, chew the erasers off of their pencils, or overuse the word *like*, I try to overlook these misdemeanors.
- I know it's not even worth trying to puzzle out what is “the right kind of busy.”
- I keep my eyes open and look with a critical—and often delighted—eye at what my culture is dishing up to my children and me. I try to teach my kids to

do the same and to appreciate that which is true and good.

- I remind myself that children are not little adults but are uniquely suited to grow, learn, and enjoy life in ways that many of us adults don't remember how to do anymore.
- I ask questions such as, *What do I want our family to be like? What are our individual gifts and perspectives? What connects us as a family and brings us joy?*
- I make certain things priorities in our family life—that we treat each other with respect as much as possible, that we eat together whenever possible, and that we attend church together as much as we can.

And I'm not ashamed that everyone from my kids' teachers to my friends to the children themselves knows how smitten I am with them. That I'm besotted and madly head-over-heels in love with my children underlies all of the precepts above, and I hope as they grow up and go out into the world, that big love will be a protection to them. I also pray that the way they have experienced love from my husband and me in their childhoods will affect the way they experience the reality of God's love throughout their lives.



If you picked up this book in hopes of reading a parenting manual with a definitive solution to the very best way to raise children, I'm afraid you'll be let down. In these pages, I don't advocate that you become a Tiger Mother, BFF Mom, Helicopter Mom, or Earth Mama to your kids. I don't know the best way to potty-train a toddler, to get children to prefer broccoli over caramel corn, or to ensure that teenagers don't engage in risky behavior such as driving too fast or sassing their parents. I don't know how to make the middle school years or algebra homework as rewarding to children as an afternoon at the beach. What I do know is that family matters and it is a constant source of joy, grace, and, yes, moments of real exasperation in my life.

This book, then, is just stories about family life and how I've come to appreciate the mess of it. I am grateful for my own happy, idiosyncratic, and imperfect family and the culture we are creating together.

I'm doing my best to raise strong children, not broken adults.

I wish all of this for you too.



CHAPTER 1

Fledge Words and Fairy Dust *Adventures in Saying Yes*

A woman I admire once told me her parenting philosophy. Although my oldest child was only three at the time, I filed her words away in my mind and knew someday I'd return to them. The way I understood it, she and her husband began raising kids with a high proportion of “no”s, but increased the “yes”es each year. She said the job of parenting entailed letting out the rope, giving kids more freedom and room to roam as they grew.

She kept very close to her children when they were babies and toddlers. She had high standards for their behavior as they moved through school. Little by little, however, she and her husband made setting expectations a family affair,

and their children were given more autonomy. By the time they were in high school, her children were independent and almost completely responsible for the consequences of their choices. The parents still had authority over the children and there were well-established household rules, but increasingly my friend and her husband allowed their kids to take risks, to make their own goals and decisions, and to set the course for their lives.

Po Bronson, child development expert and coauthor with Ashley Merryman of *Nurture Shock*, would likely nod at this approach to parenting. In his article “How Not to Helicopter” he writes, “Teens need opportunities to take good risks. . . . They need part of their life to feel real, not just a dress rehearsal for college. They will mature more quickly if these elements are in their life.”¹

Now my friend’s three children are adults and, from what I have observed, they are connected, vital, and healthy people. They seem to enjoy their parents. They all graduated from college, and two are happily married.

I like the idea that as kids grow in wisdom and maturity, they will hear “yes” more often.

I have turned my wise friend’s words over in my mind countless times over the years, visualizing myself literally releasing a skein of rope, foot by foot, as my children grow older. Now that my oldest child is in high school, I give him ample room to make his own decisions and to live with the consequences. I bite my tongue during finals week when he says he needs a break from studying and wants to go out

with friends. I no longer keep close track of whether he's practicing his cello or how he's spending his money. I don't insist that he goes to summer camp or on church mission trips. I don't slip into his room when he's showering after a soccer game and drop his dirty uniform down the chute so it will be ready for the next game or tuck laundered gym clothes into his backpack. These things are his responsibilities now. If he goes to school having left an English paper in the printer or to soccer practice without his cleats, he'll be the one affected.

There are house rules he must follow and he knows his parents' values and expectations, but most of the decisions in his life are his to make. When he asks, we talk at length about what his father and I see as benefits or potential pitfalls of saying yes or no in a certain situation, but—the vast majority of the time—we leave decisions to him. In having the opportunity to make real decisions, my son matures and gains independence, and I catch glimpses of the adult he is becoming.



Yes.

James Joyce's striking novel *Ulysses* ends with it. That last unpunctuated chapter begins with the word and it abundantly appears throughout Molly's soliloquy. The book ends with her recollection of her husband Bloom's proposal: "and his heart was going like mad and yes I said

yes I will Yes.” After forty-some pages without the sentence ending, that final, capitalized “Yes” and the period that follows it make you catch your breath.

Yes.

E.E. Cummings’ exceedingly punctuated work frolicked with it. He begins one poem with the words “yes is a pleasant country.” The first stanza of another of his poems, “i thank You God for most this amazing,” reads

*i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes²*

Yes declares, “Of course! So be it!” It is a fundamental word for all sorts of creation. Friendships, marriages, transformations, treaties, inventions, art. Even saying the word *yes* guides our mouths into the shaping of a smile.

Yes, as my wonderful college English professor and priest, the late Reverend Dr. Joseph McClatchy said, is a “fledge word.” Fledge words, he said, reach up toward heaven, seemingly taking wing to the Most High. The upward reaching of the letter Y, Father McClatchy pointed out, makes our spirits rejoice and stretch toward God.

The usual definition of the word *fledge* is to be capable of, or to have the feathers required, for flying. When a bird is “fledged,” it can take flight. Fledge words reach up toward heaven, causing our hearts to soar when we speak them.

(Yes, Father McClatchy was delightfully eccentric.)

When my husband and I were engaged, almost twenty-five years ago, we hurried to Father McClatchy's office high in an old gothic building on our college campus that once was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Because he was a favorite professor and a priest at our church, David and I wanted him to be one of the first people to know of our engagement.

We knocked at the door.

"Yes? Come in! Come in!" Father McClatchy called.

I like to think that we were both pet students of his, but to be honest, I believe David was his real favorite. After all, it was David who more than once received grades of A++++ on his English papers. (Until I saw my boyfriend's grades, I was buoyed with pride when I received the occasional A+. I forgave David and decided to marry him anyway, the show-off.)

"Father," David began on that December afternoon, "there's something we want to share with you."

"Wait! Wait! Don't say a word!" Father McClatchy shouted, anticipating our news. "Not another word!"

A trim and spritely man with a neat beard and glasses, he jumped up from his desk, jogged around it, and busied himself at his stereo console. He chose an album and slipped it from its cardboard sleeve. (Remember record albums?) He then carefully set it on the turntable, lowered the needle, and as the music began, said, "Okay. Now. I want you to be *waltzing* when you say it."

As the music of Johann Strauss—I don't remember which piece but something along the lines of "The Blue Danube" or *Die Fledermaus*—filled the room, David and I did our best impression of a waltz and Father McClatchy sat on the edge of his desk and clapped his hands excitedly.

"*Now* tell me!" he shouted over the music.

"Father McClatchy!" David yelled. "We're engaged!"

"Hallelujah!" our professor cried. He shaped his arms goalpost style to suggest a capital *H* before wrapping us in his embrace. "Hallelujah! H! Fledge letter! Fledge word!"

What a superb way to begin a life together.

Yes. It *is* a pleasant country.

But then there's *no*. No is the lines in your datebook, the hands of the clock, the entries in your check register. No is a door closing, a disapproving shake of the head, a frown. Of course, No's not all bad. Not at all. No keeps us from hurting ourselves, No protects us, and No draws boundaries around cherished parts of our lives. It's not a fledge word, however. That's for sure.

When my eldest child was an infant, I heard Harvard child psychiatrist Robert Coles interviewed on the radio. He said that parents should start saying no to children at about nine months old. No saves them from running into the road and being hit by a car, putting their fingers in electrical outlets, or thinking it's acceptable to yank on the dog's tail.

No, Coles explained, gives children a message that bolsters their independence and self-esteem. It lets them

know that someone more capable and bigger than they are is looking out for them. They want and need that sense of protection—desperately.

Isn't that why kids test our resolve and resist our authority?

"Are you in charge? Are you?" they ask. "Because believe it or not, I'm not really sure what I'm doing most of the time."

Well, as you know, they never ever actually come out and say that. They whine and cry and shout "Mine!" or "Everyone's allowed to go except me!" or "You're so unfair!" But, as Coles pointed out, children need the loving protection of their parents' No. I took Coles' words to heart and, from very young ages, my children have heard the word often.



But *No* can be damaging too.

Weeks after we waltzed in our English professor's office, David received a very different response to our engagement in the form of a letter sent through the campus mail.

"You're not going to believe this," he said, flipping the envelope onto my lap. We were sitting in the lobby of my dorm and, as he began paging through a magazine, I opened the letter. It was written by a woman my husband had known when he was growing up, another professor at the college. She implored him to call off our wedding plans.

My eyes stung as they grazed over her words: “dysfunctional family,” “too special for her,” “no chance for a successful marriage.” Reading it, childhood fears about my inability to have a happy, stable marriage and family as an adult flew at me. It was the “sins of the fathers” argument, hurled at me in tidy cursive. I handed the letter back to David. He crumpled it and tossed it into the metal trashcan beside him.

“Go figure, right?” he said, before noticing my tears. “What? You’re not going to take that seriously, are you?”

I was silent.

“It’s just lies,” he said, unperturbed.

Since that day, I’ve come to know the tone with which he spoke those words. David has a grudge-free and measured response to people he deems unreasonable—he shrugs them off. (I still have my learner’s permit in this practice, and too often the Nos of my critics swirl around in my mind, knocking me off-balance.)

“Jen, she doesn’t even know you. Or who we are together,” David said. “Now forget it, and let’s go get dinner.”



At our wedding a few months later, with my bridesmaids wearing floral Laura Ashley dresses and my veil attached to a pink rose headband I nicknamed “The Hedge,” Father McClatchy stood with David and me at the front of the church to join our lives together. In the service, a dear friend read “the love chapter” from the Bible. “Love suffers long

and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4–7). I don’t care how predictable it may be to read that passage at weddings; I think it’s an excellent way to send two people into marriage. The couple hearing those words, as was true for David and me, will likely have no idea of how excruciatingly difficult it will be to be patient, to be kind, and, yes, even to *endure* each other through certain parts of life. But starting a marriage together cloaked in those words seems a strong protection, and even a sort of road map, for the journey ahead.

As David and I retreated down the aisle after being proclaimed husband and wife, two of our friends who had served as ushers in the wedding stood up in the balcony above us, removed their tuxedo jackets and turned around. On the back of their shirts, written in black electrical tape, was the word *YES*.

A quarter century after saying those big, fledgy yesses to each other on our wedding day, David and I continue to say yes to each other. Since they came into our lives, we love, endure, and believe in our children too, saying yes to them when we can. Ours has been as happy a marriage as any I know, by which I mean we have struggled through parched, desert places, enjoyed stunning moments of joy, and have learned over time to be loving partners to each

other. Sometimes I experience an almost adolescent crush on him. (Have his eyes always been so blue? And those strong features? He brings Christopher Plummer's Captain von Trapp to mind, minus the whistle and cranky demeanor. But still . . . aye, aye Captain!) He looks over at me at those moments and I feel myself blush. Other days, the way he butters his toast so meticulously makes me want to scream. And why does he have to smash the garbage down in the kitchen trashcan so hard that the next day, when it's overflowing and I attempt to pull the bag out, I end up with a torn bag and garbage all over the floor? Of course, he has his teeny-tiny moments of annoyance with me too. I'll admit that, among other things, I'm not always the most careful person in the entire United States of America when I load the dishwasher and, for the most part, reading instruction booklets is anathema to me.

"This doesn't work!" I'll declare with the petulance of an overtired five-year-old.

"Did you read the instructions?" David asks.

Without waiting for an answer, he fishes around in the bottom of the shipping box for the booklet and gathers the heap of components to the juicer, vacuum cleaner, or whatever new appliance has made its way into our home.

"Let me give it a try," he says. "With the *instructions* this time."

Between infatuation and petty irritation, of course, is the way we experience each other *most of the time*. We are supportive friends and partners in parenting. We are prone

to tease each other for our eccentricities, eager for excuses to go out to dinner together, and always happy to open our home to our friends. Needless to say, after twenty-five years, I feel extremely fortunate to be married to David.

Every day of our lives, in some way, shape, or form, we say yes to each other.

We say yes to our children too. I want my children to always hear loud and clear the Yes of our love for them and to be confident, hopeful, and whole. When life hands them the kind of hissing, mortifying No contained in that letter to David so long ago, I want my children to be able to crumple it up, toss it into the garbage can, and move on. In a perfect world, their parents' love would protect them and somehow serve as a shield from mean-spirited people or other disappointments life will certainly deliver. But I know it's not a perfect world. Each of my children will have crushing blows to navigate, no matter how well I manage to nurture, love, and guide them.

So I say yes to them when I can.

Yes, you can ride the mechanical horse at the front of the grocery store until I can't find any more quarters in the bottom of my purse.

Yes, we can go on a walk, play Uno, or color together.

Yes, you can stay up late on a summer night, have a friend sleep over, and skip practicing your viola today.

Yes, you should try out for that.

Yes, I'll take you and your friend to that concert.

Yes, you are old enough, brave enough, and smart enough.

Yes, yes, yes.

It's tricky to walk that tightrope between Yes and No, to know when to reach our hands up and exclaim that fledgling word *Yes* or when to direct our hands toward the ground in an angular *No*. As parents, we're faced with that decision countless times a day. *Yes*, you can watch that *Bob the Builder* video. *No*, you can't have a cookie. *Yes*, you can go to the football game with your friends. *No*, you can't have money for that.

Yes, No, Yes, No.

A friend tells me her parenting philosophy is to say to her kids, "Just let the word *no* echo through your heads." She's kidding, of course, but isn't it tempting sometimes to go that route? Parenting is trickier than that, and as we falter along that high-wire act, awkwardly holding whatever we use as our balancing poles, an audience gathers and people begin to point. If we lean too far toward Yes, we're labeled as permissive. When we veer the other direction, we're control freaks or Helicopter Moms. But those labels aren't really accurate, are they? Aren't all of us some combination of all of these as we muddle along as parents?

For example, if you'd seen me as a young mother of three at the grocery store, my four-year-old walking alongside me, my two-year-old sitting in the cart facing me, and the baby in her carrier, maybe you'd have thought me an Earth Mama, wearing a groovy sling and filling the cart with organic sweet potatoes, recycled paper towels, and soy milk. You would have seen the dark circles under my eyes

and might have even been one of the countless people who smiled at me and said, “You’ve got your hands full.”

My children, obediently trotting with me into the store, would likely have appealed to you. “What *nice* children,” you might have said, smiling at my slightly disheveled but competent-enough mommy self.

But what if you’d heard me lean in to my eldest and whisper, as we entered the store, the same thing I said to him *every single time* we went grocery shopping back then?

“Theo. *Remember*. If you walk along with Mommy and have good behavior, you can pick a new Hot Wheels car when we check out.” (If you don’t believe me, take a look at the bin of cars in our basement; it worked like a charm.) And what about when my two-year-old, halfway through the store, pointed at a box of graham crackers and, before he even fussed, I had it open, handing him a cracker when I’d not yet even paid? Was I failing to teach him delayed gratification? Would he forever be warped by having his desires met so easily? He’ll probably be living in the basement when he’s thirty, right? Calling upstairs to demand that I bring him a Pop Tart and fresh batteries for the remote.

Even worse, what about when, on the drive home from the grocery store, you had heard my boys begin chanting “Taco Bell! Taco Bell! Taco Bell”? What if you’d seen me turn the car around and pull into the drive-through line, ordering kid meals for them and nachos *bel grande* for myself? (What can I say? I had a mad craving for nachos *bel*

grande whenever I was nursing a baby.) Adios, Earth Mama! As I exited the drive-through, I was now Fast-Food-Eating, Permissive, Consumeristic Mom, icily turning a blind eye to the environmental impact of single-use products such as taco wrappers, tinfoil, and junky plastic toys.

The point is, in a culture when we are quick to judge and label others—much as we despise being judged ourselves—we parents experience a lot of anxiety about raising kids. Sadly, we add to it by judging other mothers who are fumbling along just like we are. Worse, mothers these days are expected to do so much. While our counterparts in generations past felt that parenting was primarily about keeping children healthy (that is, *alive and breathing*) so the young ones could, I don't know, be strong enough to help bring in the harvest, milk the cows, and chop firewood, we now feel responsible for everything from helping our children excel at cartwheels and chemistry to preventing them from experiencing disappointment, regret, or failure of any kind. We also feel pressure—regardless of their academic aptitude—to push our children toward wowing their teachers with their smarts. Exposing them to Mandarin Chinese from toddlerhood is also a good idea given the global economy they will someday shape. Additionally, they should be self-possessed, able to laugh at their foibles, physically fit and attractive, and—if you're a person of faith—they should have vital spiritual lives.

Got all that?

We take a deep breath and do our best, trying to balance

Yes and No and learning as we go. But whenever we turn around, someone is poised to judge us, point out our mistakes, and tell us what kind of (bad or ridiculous) mother we are.

Send in store-bought cookies for your kid's birthday treat? You're a Slacker Mom. (You probably don't even know who your kid's teacher is.) Green Mamas dress their kids as wind turbines on Halloween and give out dried figs, bundled in wax paper. A Stage Mom—or, as I recently heard this type of mother called, a *momateur*—lives out her unrealized dreams by pushing her children into the limelight. Helicopter Moms hover, micromanaging their children's lives. The list goes on, blithely turning often well-intentioned moms into caricatures and diminishing all of us.

And who consistently fits the description of one of these types of moms, anyway? Most of us start the day as one thing—Crafty Mom, for instance, with the watercolors and cheery children's music playing—and soon morph in and out of three other types by ten in the morning. Slacker, Martyr, and Epic-Fail Mom, perhaps? I know on any given day, I'm a combination of many types, usually before lunch. Or when they were younger, even before breakfast.

When children are very young, some days seem to go on forever, don't they? The telltale chatter on the baby monitor at five in the morning lets you know your day has started. Several hours and multiple temper tantrums, sticky kisses, dirty diapers, picture books, and time-outs later, you look beseechingly at the clock but find it's not even

noon. By five in the afternoon, you've fallen asleep twice while reading with your child, drunk two pots of coffee, and walked furrows into the wood floors while comforting your infant.

I was recently on the phone with a friend who has two young children. It was about six in the evening and she sounded spent.

"Long day?" I asked, although I knew the answer.

"Her new thing is spreading 'fairy dust,'" my friend said.

"That's sweet—"

"'Fairy dust' is whatever's left at the bottom of the cracker box or bag of pretzels. She runs through the house scattering it."

"Oh," I said.

"Yeah," she said with a sigh. "And now we have ants."

I know my friend felt the day would never end.



When my children were very young, I often instituted a game of "Hospital" with them in a desperate ploy to close my eyes for a few moments. "Okay, you're the doctors and nurses and Mommy's the patient. I'll lie here and you can make me all better," I'd say, collapsing onto the sofa. I'd pull a blanket over myself as my young kids busied themselves for five or ten minutes with the toy stethoscope, syringe, and bandages. (Word to the wise—this game can buy a much-needed power nap for parents of preschoolers.) I

remember sitting up from the game, covered in Hello Kitty and Batman Band-Aids, having deeply traveled into REM sleep and vivid dreams. I woke up feeling like a new woman.

“Mommy’s all better! Thank you, doctors!”

Now, with my kids’ ages all in the double digits, I’m no longer in such desperate need for a few moments of rest. For a chunk of the day, the house is quiet. My days go by quickly and, as I repeatedly tell my friends with younger children, it *is* easier. Those long and wearying hands-on days are saved for times when one or more of us is sick.

I find the interpersonal challenges, the chauffeuring, the monitoring of academic and social growth, and the rest of the tasks associated with parenting tweens and teens easier than those *fill the sippy cup and crawl under the table to wipe up the food she’s flung from her highchair* days. Of course, there was much to love when my kids were very young. The snuggles and kisses. The dance contests and the fun we had singing together in the car. Reading books together, hour after hour. The way my babies’ faces, on seeing my approach, would break into huge smiles as if I was the most welcome sight in the world. I loved feeling little hands reach up and grasp my own. I was delighted by their funny observations and knock-knock-joke marathons.

But, still, I found it exhausting to be “on” all the time. I was too often catapulted into worry. “Will she survive her toddlerhood, given her propensity for hurling herself off the furniture?” “Will he be a perfectionist, never satisfied with his efforts?”

And even though they're older, I still cuddle with my kids. My daughters hold my hands as we walk along the sidewalk or through parking lots. My sons still let me give them kisses and squeezes. But instead of having to lecture them about not using invisible ink on their penmanship homework or advising them of the dangers of licking the chain-link fence at the dog park, we can talk about ideas, current events, music, and books. I love it.

Not all mothers prefer parenting older kids, of course. We all have different resources, gifts, and experiences with our children. But for me, parenting kids who can, say, take care of their own fecal matter and be trusted to cross the street safely feels easier. And all of those yesses and nos of early, relationship-building parenting seem to have brought rewards of real, authentic connection between my children and me.

Are my kids ever sassy or unreasonable? Yes. Do I ever have to ground them, take away their cell phones, or forbid them from going on Facebook until their math grades improve? Yes, of course. Do I ever think, *Who in the world is this person and why is he glaring at me?* Yes, yes. But in this imperfect world, my kids and I generally live in peace. We trust and enjoy each other. They confide in me about their friends, hopes, and failings. My heart often does a little somersault when they get home at the end of the school day.

And thanks to chore lists, I rarely have to do my most dreaded household tasks, such as pairing socks, vacuuming the stairs, or filling the dog's food bowl. When my four

children were very little, it never occurred to me that someday they would not only shower by themselves but be capable of serving themselves a bowl of cereal. Now they are actually pitching in to the running of our household. I'm grateful. (Hey, kids, quit your complaining. It's not like you have to milk the cows at four in the morning—or, for that matter, drink powered milk!)

"It does get better," I tell my friend with the fairy-dust-spreading daughter. "I promise."



All of a sudden, I'm aware that the clock is ticking and my remaining time with children at home is short. Instead of watching the clock and wishing the days away, things sneak up on me. My son's first girlfriend. (*Wait? Girlfriend? Do we have a policy on this?*) Puberty! (*Honey, you need to teach him how to shave!*) The fact that my oldest is two years away from college. (*College? But didn't he just learn to ride his two-wheeler?*) Before long my children will be responsible to make *all their own* choices about the people with whom they build relationships and about who they want to be in this world. They will have to decide when to say no and when to lift their hands in a big, fledgy yes.

It can be daunting to think about, but moms wiser than me offer hope.

A friend of mine, Virginia, is mother to one child. Virginia's daughter is now an adult; she has graduated

from college and lives in a different state than her parents. Virginia and I recently talked about how our perception of time shifts midway through parenting our kids. That is, time seems to drag on when we are caring for the needs of babies and young children, but then—*poof!*—suddenly the children are in middle school. We notice the hair on our sons' upper lips. Our daughters start wearing clothes from the juniors' department. *When did that baby fat disappear, leaving us with these tall, lean kids? When did the stuffed animals disappear from their beds? Where did the past few years go?* It all feels like a blur.

We begin to look with a more deliberate gaze at how we want these last years to go with our children at home. What do we want them to remember? Are there vacations, traditions, or anything else that we want to embrace in a big Yes? What have we left out, failed to share with them, missed?

"I used to worry," my friend Virginia said. "I used to think that the clock strikes twelve when they turn eighteen and then it's over. But it's not like that at all. I love this new time in our relationship. We are as close as we ever were. I shouldn't have worried."

I drink in her words.

Playwright Jean Anouilh wrote in his drama *Antigone*, "To say yes, you have to sweat and roll up your sleeves and plunge both hands into life up to the elbows."

That sounds a lot like family life to me, with all its challenges, perspiration, and promise.



CHAPTER 2

The Body Hair Incident *Adventures in Accepting Conflict*

My longsuffering neighbor must have heaved a great sigh of relief when my family and I moved away and she was no longer the object of a young mom's focused attention. She could take her dog on a walk in peace without seeing a shadow pass behind the window across the street, the red front door open, and my sudden appearance on the front porch.

"Oh, hi! Got a minute?" I used to call.

Now, a decade later, *I'm* the one driving a van, pulling in and out of my garage multiple times a day. My kids are the big kids now, the kids at whom—when they amble through the park and nostalgically climb up on a rope bridge on