

Five Things I Learned While Writing

After the Speech, When Teens Get Real

A lot of teens think I'd be a cool mom. My teen isn't one of them.

I'm not sure exactly how many times I hear someone from my teen audience say, "I think you'd be a cool mom," but I can tell you it's enough times to make me believe that I just might be a cool mom. I always smile, say "thanks", and wish like crazy that my son could hear these other teens affirming my value. They like me. They think I'm cool. When I tell him that other teens actually like me, he just shrugs. He could care less—until he's mad at me. Then, he lets me know in no uncertain terms that those teens who think I'm cool have absolutely no idea what they are talking about, and if they actually had to live with me, they would never, ever think or say that I am cool. He's probably right. I have to admit that I'm not that cool to live with. I'm much cooler during my 45 minutes on a stage. Living with someone is completely different than an afternoon in the spotlight, and my son knows all facets of me. Most teens think that other moms are much cooler than their own mom. That's just the way it is.

A lot of teens are excited to read my book. My teen isn't one of them.

Every time the subject of my book comes up, teens are very interested to learn more about it. What's it about? When and where can I buy one? I've even asked a few teens to preview a chapter or two to ensure that I'm on the right track. While the stories in my book are true, I want to know that the material is of interest to my audience. Many teens volunteer to be chapter critics and eagerly provide me with feedback. I can't even get my son to look at ideas for the cover. When I remind him that he should care because any proceeds from this book will go towards his college fund, he just says, "It's your book, do what you want." Nice. The teen I am most invested in could care less about the book that is being dedicated to him. At these times, I question my mothering skills. Why do other teens get excited about what I'm doing, but my own son could care less? I don't know the answer, but I do know that I will drive myself crazy worrying why he doesn't care. Or I could just leave him alone and get the feedback I need from the teens who are interested. It's not the outcome I want, but it saves my son and me from wasting a lot of time and energy.

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A lot of teens live in heartbreaking situations. My teen isn't one of them.

My son doesn't live in Utopia, but I know his home life isn't as difficult as the traumatic stories I hear from many teens on a regular basis. When I share these stories with friends, I'm always asked questions like, "Are these at-risk kids? Do they go to public or private schools? Were you in the inner city today?" NO. These are every day teens from every community. It doesn't matter if they are teens in prestigious private schools or less affluent students from inner city public schools. There are teens who live in heartbreaking situations with parents who don't care, aren't available, and don't receive any of the clues that the teen is desperately trying to send. My teen has lived through some situations that I never thought he would have to, but he does know without a doubt that he has two parents who love him unconditionally. He also knows that he has a very caring extended family, including grandparents who would drop everything to be there for him; aunts and uncles and cousins who love and support him; and parents of his closest friends who would (and have) helped him at a moment's notice. Every adolescent needs a support circle, and many teens don't have this during their critical growing up years.

A lot of teens won't consider telling their parents anything about their life. My teen isn't one of them.

If there is one thing I am sure of, it's this—my teen talks to me. He tells me what is going on with his friends, and he tells me what is going on in his life. I'm not naive enough to believe that he tells me everything. Honestly, I don't want him to tell me everything. But I am happy that he feels free to talk to me. It happens when I least expect it—when we are driving somewhere; after he's shown me one more YouTube video that he finds hysterical and I'm counting the seconds until it's over; or at the most random moments. Sometimes, I'm floored with the information I learn. Sometimes, I'm sad. Sometimes, I'm not really paying attention until there's one particular comment that makes me yank my head up and ask, "What did you just say?" That's when I realize again how important it is for me to be present and listen. I realize that too many times I take for granted this relationship and the freedom in which he feels he can talk to me. I also remember that the most important conversations rarely begin with, "Mom, I'm going to tell you something important, so I need you to listen to me." Nope. The really important conversations begin with my son just talking. And I need to be present to hear his words. Too many teens feel disconnected from their parents. Too many teens feel like their parents are just there to be obeyed; no relationship beyond authoritarian leadership is available. I'm not sure why this happens, but too often it does. Teens are craving attention and relationships and they want healthy connections with adults. Shouldn't the conversations and relationships between parent and child be a number one priority?

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A lot of teens are in trouble. My teen won't be one of them.

I wrote 15 chapters in this book. There are many more that I could have shared, and I still might in a future book. But I wanted to release this book now because I think the issues are relevant, and I believe this book is a great resource for teens and those who help teens. I realized a long, long time ago when I first starting working with teens that I couldn't help all of them. But I can create tools to help teens. It's exhausting work, and it's hard to reach every teen who sits in the audience. I fail many times. This business keeps me humble because as many times as I have received standing ovations, I've also left the stage feeling dejected and knowing that I didn't do very well. What I do know is that as much as I love my work, if I ever see my son in trouble, I will quit working with the thousands of teens across the world, and I will concentrate on him. There is no one in this world who matters to me more than my son. If I am a success with other teens but fail with my own son, then I have not served anyone well. I am a mom first. I am a speaker second. Parents need to work with their teens first. It's not the teacher's responsibility, it's not the school's responsibility, and it's not job of the youth group or the community center. A parent is the ultimate guide for the child. The school and community are part of the support system. Your child should be your number one.

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