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FROM HIS
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CHERI FULLER



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To
Justin Oliver Fuller
and
Christopher Kenton Fuller,

my sons, who've been a blessing to me
throughout their lives
and grown into wonderful, caring, confident men,
and the *best dads* I know.

Love you forever
and like you for always,

Mom

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Mothers and Sons

There is an enduring tenderness in the love of a mother to a son that transcends all other affections of the heart.

—Washington Irving

One morning when our first son, Justin, was barely two, I walked into the kitchen after putting his freshly washed jeans and T-shirts in his chest of drawers and turned to the family room, where he'd been playing just moments before.

He was gone.

“Justin!” I called as I looked around. *I just saw him playing with his big dump truck. How could he disappear like that?*

“Justin! Justin! Where are you? Are you hiding? Where are you, honey?” I searched all over the house, in every closet and cranny, calling his name, looking under beds and behind doors, thinking he was playing hide-and-seek.

Oh, he must have gone to the backyard. My heart raced as I ran outside, but no Justin. After searching the house one more time, I ran to the front door and found it unlocked. *How did he reach the lock?* I wondered as I charged outside, calling his name at the top of my lungs.

I didn't see anyone in the yard or in the street. But finally I looked up and saw our little blond, blue-eyed toddler sitting high on the roof above me, smiling and happy as he could be. That smile of conquest said it all: "I did it!"

Below him was a tall ladder some workmen had left leaning against our house when they went to lunch.

"Stay right there and I'll get you!" I yelled. Clearly, this pint-size boy wasn't nearly as scared as I was. "Mommy, it's okay," he called down, looking poised to explore even higher.

Though high places are not my thing, I climbed up the ladder, put my arm around my little boy, and carried him down to safety. This wasn't his last climbing adventure, and I found out later why he had a bent toward climbing. My mother-in-law told me she often found her firstborn son (my husband and Justin's dad) in the top of twenty-five-foot trees at the park even as a very young boy.

Justin continued to love high places and to be able to climb out of anything (his car seat, for one) and to the highest part of playground equipment. There were a few scary incidents ahead, like when he climbed to our top kitchen cabinets and ate several of my allergy pills just to see what they tasted like. After that, we got the even more secure child-safety locks and bought a tall geodesic dome for (safe) backyard climbing!

The rest of the story: In college, Justin began bouldering and rock climbing in the Colorado mountains and in climbing gyms, and has loved the sport ever since. He has passed down his passion for climbing to his daughter, Caitlin, who is

a competitive rock climber and made it to the U.S. Nationals at the age of eleven. She's fifteen now, and sport climbing is her favorite athletic endeavor.

Justin's roof-climbing adventure was just one early point on the long learning curve called raising boys! Having grown up in the middle of five sisters and a much younger brother, boys were always a bit of a mystery to me. I didn't know much about boy-energy. I was raised in a girl-world of dolls and dancing lessons, tea parties, games, and cute ruffled dresses Mama made for us. When we did pretend play, we donned her high heels and put on her makeup, or pretended to be Florence Nightingale as we played "nurse."

My sons' costumes and pretend play couldn't have been more different. From a young age, Justin and Christopher's favorite costumes were cowboy and army wear, homemade Superman and Batman capes, and boys' hats of all kinds: fireman, worker man, army man—as they called them.

When we visited my mom on her ranch in east Texas, the boys got to don their cowboy gear and ride a pony, go fishing, and tramp around in the woods with their cousins. I learned early on that some boys had *adventure needs* I'd never thought of or experienced. Over and over as they grew, I saw that these precious boys were different from us females and had unique needs, behavior, communication styles, desires, and ways of processing things in the world around them.

Yet oh, how I love my boys! Through every year of their childhood, middle school, and adolescent years, and into adulthood, I've learned more and more about raising sons. Now Justin and Chris are grown men, parents themselves. And with three granddaughters and three grandsons, I'm still coming to a deeper understanding and enjoyment of the marvelous males around me.

Why a Son Needs His Mom

Maternal love is perhaps the most powerful, positive influence on a son's development and life. Don't let anybody convince you that you are irrelevant in your son's life or that you need to separate from him prematurely. If you are the only woman in an all-male family, it can seem like the boys and your husband are a tight group (especially if he is very involved in their lives). You may even think your sons don't need you. But nothing could be further from the truth!

Moms make an indelible imprint on the lives of their children. As Dr. William Pollack wrote in *Real Boys*, how mothers “respond to baby boys and young sons—the manner in which [they] cuddle, kiss, and reassure, teach, comfort, and love—not only determines a young boy's capacity for a healthy emotional start in life but deeply affects a boy's characteristic style of behavior and the development of his brain.”¹

If you are a single mother, or your son's dad is absent emotionally or physically, it can seem like a daunting task to raise a boy alone. But there are many great men who were raised by single moms: Alexander Haig, former U.S. Chief of Staff and Secretary of State; Ed Bradley, award-winning news correspondent; Dr. Benjamin Carson, acclaimed surgeon; Barack Obama, President of the United States; and Samuel Jackson, actor, to name a few.

As John and Helen Burns say in their book, *What Dads Need to Know About Daughters/What Moms Need to Know About Sons*:

Unfortunately, sometimes the father role gets so overemphasized that mothers feel helpless and incapable of raising masculine boys without the help of a strong father figure. This notion is an oversimplification; many single mothers have raised stellar young men who are very masculine.²

The reality is there are *many* reasons a son needs his mom. In the early years, she provides safety, love, and nurture—or TLC (tender loving care)—gifts that are vital to his emotional security and even lifelong relationships. Yes, there are other people in a boy's life that influence him, like his father, grandparents, teachers, sisters, brothers, and coaches. Yet the first and strongest influence is his mother.

One of the greatest needs a son has in his first two years is a secure attachment and bond with his mom. According to researcher Elizabeth Carlson,

When a mother reacts reliably and sensitively to her infant's needs, he will form an internal connection to her—what psychologists call “a secure attachment”—that will provide a strong foundation of trust and love on which he can build other relationships.³

A boy needs his mother to make their house a safe, loving place to live. It's a gift to provide our sons a loving refuge and a warm meal, a chance to gather around the table for conversation, even with take-out pizza.

“Some of the most important things for a mother to do are simple and joyous,” Daniel Hast told me. Reflecting on his childhood, the now thirty-two-year-old said,

Seldom do you meet someone who can both cook and bake—but my mom can. She can bake pies, cookies, cakes, all kinds of good things. Just as all mothers do, my mom made mistakes. But I'll take the memories, good fond memories of coming in from school and smelling some fabulous apple pie she was just getting out of the oven.

So many kids I knew got raised on frozen Eggo waffles, so it conveyed love to me that Mom made things from scratch. Little details like that make for a joyous upbringing. There's

something to be said for homemade apple pie, chocolate chip cookies, snickerdoodles, gingersnaps, candied spiced pecans—simple things that make good memories and bring happiness.

No Perfect Moms

I want you to know that I don't approach the sacred subject of raising children as if there is some magic formula or pretend that we can do parenting in a perfect way. The truth is that the perfect mom/perfect child concept is a myth. The only perfect parent is God, and look at the trouble He had with His kids, Adam and Eve. If we aim for perfection, and expect the result of our earnest efforts or parenting formula to be perfect Christian children, we may be very disappointed—not only in ourselves, but in our child and in God.

There is no perfect family, mom, dad, or kids! Parenting is both a challenge and a privilege—whether biological mom or adoptive mom. God doesn't promise an easy ride, but He promises to *always* be with us. You can depend on the Lord's infinite grace to nurture and love your child—because He chose you of all the women in the world to be his mother.

Instead of simple recipes for raising the ideal son, this book offers my experiences and those of other moms, as well as suggestions and insights that I hope will help you understand your son's needs better at different stages in his life. That's a first step to meeting his needs and staying connected.

Being a Mother of Boys

The nineteenth-century nursery rhyme⁴ describes boys as all about “snips and snails and puppy dogs tails,” and it is true,

some little guys *are* fascinated with frogs, slimy slugs, and creepy-crawly creatures.

Boys often like to run, climb, make messes, and occasionally push the envelope on the rules. That's why parenting them is such an adventure—sometimes loud and often active. But there are plenty of boys whose passion is playing piano, singing, or dance; other boys who love to take apart toasters and lawn mowers; and some who will sit and quietly build with Legos, play video games, or be on the computer for hours.

There are many joys in raising boys. “Raising three sons was heaven on earth,” said Lisa, a Dallas mother. “My boys were always ready to go outside and have fun. They loved adventures, camping, and fishing, and I do, too! They forgave easily and let things roll off their backs. Teenage sons—that was more stressful. But I've always loved their affection for me.”

Michelle Garrett of Edmond, Oklahoma, said, “My three boys can make me laugh, they can frustrate me, they sometimes scare me to death, and at other times can make me feel like the best mama around.”

Even though we love our boys so much we'd throw ourselves in front of a bus to save them, many of us have also found raising sons to be a long learning curve filled with joy *and* challenges. One of those is the mixed message we face: Our hearts tell us to hold our sons close and give them lots of love and affection, but the culture around us says that can create “Mama's boys” who won't be able to make it in the real world.

Another confusing aspect of parenting sons is how different they are from girls—right from the start! One mom told me, “After three daughters I hardly knew what to do when my baby boy's pee flew in my face the first time I changed his diaper. Even as a toddler, he's all boy, obsessed with trucks, jets, and army men.”

I had and still have no interest in guns, as many moms have expressed. Although I didn't buy our firstborn play guns, before long he was making them out of sticks and even bananas. I eventually accepted this and let him do his good guy/bad guy action play.

Carol, a mother of a son and a daughter, described raising her son as daunting:

As a mom, you're in charge of raising a human being who acts and thinks and looks *exactly the opposite* of you—in every way there is. You may feel under-qualified from the beginning because you're the opposite sex. I did! You have to prepare yourself for the fact that you're raising a human being who is different from you. It's interesting how boys and girls work and think. I can reason with my daughter because we think alike as females; we track with each other. With our son, I have to approach reasoning and communicating with him in a totally different way.

The theme of *learning* and *challenge* pops up frequently in my conversations with mothers. Raising a boy can even bring us to our knees. “My son was a challenge from the get-go. He challenged every rule, decision, and authority,” says Janet, a San Antonio mom. She continues:

Because of this, I had to learn how to pray. God knew that this child would need a praying mother, and I knew that I desperately needed a God who was and is almighty! I should have named my son Salmon because he was always swimming upstream. Yet he needed that constitution and strength when as a young adult he stepped out in faith to follow God as a pastor and church planter.

What Will You Find in This Book?

To grow into healthy, caring, confident men, boys need their moms. But part of the delicate balance we must understand and

apply is what our son needs at different stages of development. That helps us find the balance between closeness and distance, giving him a strong foundation and yet developing his wings so he can take off someday.

A mother's love doesn't make her son more dependent and timid; it actually makes him stronger and more independent. To borrow William Pollack's words, your love is "tremendously valuable, and it truly helps boys become confident, powerful, successful men."⁵ The place of safety a loving, stable mom provides gives boys the courage to explore and grow. So we'll look at the encouragement, safety, support, comfort, and trust boys gain from their mothers.

I have also included chapters to help you understand your son's unique personality and learning patterns. As you read, you'll learn about the needs of a boy and how those needs change from childhood to adolescence.

Understanding is the beginning of positive influence. A mother's desire to understand her son can equip her with the power to influence his life for good, thereby influencing his family, and his family's family, and all the generations to come.⁶

In addition, you will discover ways to listen and encourage your son, to help him become a confident decision maker, and help him deal with his emotions. We'll look at how moms can build strong character in their sons and how to unlock their potential in school. You'll also find some keys to finding a balance between staying connected but not hovering and controlling as your son grows.

We will also look at ways to cover your sons' lives with prayer. And last, how to take care of ourselves so that we can better parent now as well as when it's time to release them to manhood in a way that their energy isn't drained by worrying about us.

I've interviewed many mothers in different seasons of life who have raised or are raising boys of all ages, and you'll read some of their stories as well as my own. I have also collected thoughts and feedback from guys young and old. By listening to these sons' voices, we will understand their needs more clearly.

As we begin, I want to assure you I certainly wasn't the perfect mom to our sons nor was our experience entirely smooth and problem free. Yet I have learned so much in my years of raising our sons, Justin and Chris. They are truly amazing men, husbands, and fathers we are extremely grateful for and proud of. I'm also excited to share with you what I have learned through being a grandma to three preteen grandsons.

Along the way, you'll find questions in each chapter for you to think about or discuss with your girlfriends, small group, or mom's group.

Whether you have a baby boy or a preschooler, an elementary- or middle-school-age boy, or your son has charged into adolescence or college and career, I'm glad you have joined me and other moms on this journey.

Questions to Ponder, Journal, or Discuss

1. What has been your experience so far with mothering sons? How would you describe what it's like to raise a boy?
2. What is one of your son's needs that you have found ways to meet?
3. What have been your biggest challenges so far in mothering your son?

4. What differences from you (or your daughters or sisters) do you see in your son—physically, mentally, or emotionally? How do you respond to these?

5. What do you have the most anxiety about in raising a boy?

2

A Mom Who Encourages

Gentle words are a tree of life.

—Proverbs 15:4 NLT

Our neighbor Evan, a six-foot-tall high school soccer player, and I were talking one day in the front yard about a car accident he'd just had. "My mom is my greatest encourager," he told me. "I talk to my dad about sports a lot, but when I really need encouragement, it's my mom I go to."

After the wreck, he told his mom how sorry he was and how bad he felt about damaging the car. Evan told me if she had said negative things like, "Why weren't you being smarter?" or "I told you so," it would have brought him down more because he already felt horrible about the accident. Instead, she told Evan there were so many worse things that could have happened. She agreed it was his fault, but instead of piling on more guilt, she was just glad he was safe.

Evan's mom is also an encourager when his team loses or he doesn't perform well. She highlights a positive thing he did instead of wrong moves or kicks he missed in the match. Her encouragement also extends beyond sports, Evan said.

Although most of my friends and high school classmates drink and smoke, I don't. I'd be so much more stressed if my mom was negative, and there'd be much more of a temptation. Whether it's about girls, soccer, problems, or my academics, she's always open to talking with me about things that matter. I know I can always go to her to discuss things and leave encouraged.

Every day we have the opportunity to either encourage our sons or discourage them. The natural tendency is to point out things they are doing wrong. Although said with good intentions to bring improvement or motivate, the opposite results. A continual barrage of critical words only discourages a boy's motivation and derails the loving relationship we hope to build.

Why? Because people, especially children and teens, tend to recoil from those who criticize them. They move toward those who encourage them and away from those who discourage them.

Throughout the years of raising Justin and Christopher, I found it helped to "focus on the donut instead of the hole" when we talked. For example, focusing on the donut means highlighting your son's efforts in a game rather than whether their team won or lost. It means blessing him with praise for making progress instead of pointing out deficiencies (the hole). If your son shows you his artwork, avoid saying, "That's really good, but you know you could do better." It produces great frustration, especially in younger kids.

This kind of negative approach focuses on the "hole"—what our sons are not doing well or how they're falling short. Without

our realizing it, our negative, critical words deflate rather than lift up and inspire.

Praising Kids

Across the board, research shows that when kids are praised for their intelligence and told how smart they are (“You made an A+ without studying. You’re a genius!”), they avoid risks in order to keep looking smart. Parents with good intentions are trying to build their kids’ self-esteem. But making them feel smarter doesn’t help them fulfill their potential. Kids often show a drop in effort and interest in what they’re learning and are more inclined to lie about their scores so they can keep up the appearance of being “smart.” When these students run into harder problems, they assume *I must not be good at this* and stop trying. Just what we don’t want our sons to do—give up!

However, studies show that when students are praised for their effort (“You got eight right; you must have worked very hard for that score”), they are actually energized by difficult questions. When they face a challenging task, they think it means they should try harder and are motivated to learn new things. In a key study, effort-praised students saw significant improvement at school, made the best scores, and were less likely to lie about their marks.¹

You can apply this effort-praising principle to your son by saying things like “You worked hard and finished your book report even though it was a 200-page book. I like that,” or “Good work going after the science fair prize,” or “I appreciate how you stuck in there, playing your hardest all season even though your team was in last place.” Letting boys know that *effort and hard work is a key ingredient* in all pursuits in life is an important message.

Boys need to know that ordinary kids who put forth extraordinary effort can accomplish great things. That helps them meet challenges head-on and be willing to double their efforts when they reach more difficult work. Helping your son see that mistakes give him helpful information to learn from, and that he is *not dumb* when he does make a mistake, will give him courage to persevere.

We also need to encourage our sons' dreams. Daniel told me how his mother encouraged him and his brother: "When I'd said, 'I want to grow up to be an astronaut, fighter pilot, etc.' she didn't respond, 'Oh, that's crazy.' She was always very supportive of us and our dreams."

Encouraging words may seem small and even inconsequential, but they plant seeds of good character, promise, and blessing in your son's life.

While preschool boys need buckets of encouragement, that need changes when they get to elementary school, where the need for *achievement* is key. At that stage, they need to start knowing what they are good at and not good at. Later in this chapter I'll talk more about how to encourage older boys, but for now, know to praise generously where it's real and give realistic feedback in areas of weakness.²

Unconditional Love: "Just Because You're You"

A few years ago my daughter, Ali, started saying to her boys before bed, "You're doing such a great job of being five" (or whatever age they were). She did this both for the boys' sake, to affirm and allow them to be who they were right then, and for her sake as their mother, to stay focused on the present, to worry less about what they weren't doing, and to focus on what they *were doing incredibly well*—being who they were for

the age they were. In these nightly, loving words, the boys felt accepted not for performance but for being the little guys they were at the time.

During Noah's tenth year, Ali began to see the impact of her words. "It really makes a difference," she told me. "I've had some special moments with Noah in a very pivotal year. He's getting more independent and he's thinking more on his own. It feels different and I could take offense, but when I tell him he's doing such a great job of being ten, it refocuses my energy on encouraging and affirming his process of growth instead of grieving that he's getting older or taking his growing independence the wrong way."

This practice of simple encouragement also happens at bedtime, when the boys hug their mom and might feel open enough to talk about some things with her.

I'm learning boys put a lot of pressure on themselves that we as moms don't realize. How quickly we can multiply their feelings of not measuring up by saying something like "be respectful" over and over. For Noah, that's interpreted that he's not being respectful to people; yet he really wants to be even when he occasionally has human moments that we all do.³

Another way to encourage boys of elementary- and middle-school age is to share stories of athletes and others who overcame major obstacles to achieve their dreams. Rarely were the Olympic athletes winners at age five or six; their parents weren't stunned by their latent ability. Often they struggled with health issues or school problems, were told they couldn't compete, or faced other obstacles.

Many professional athletes have triumphed after cancer or disease: South African sprinter Oscar Pistorius, who represented his country in the 2012 Olympics, had both legs

amputated when he was eleven months old. Red Sox third baseman Mike Lowell, Olympic swimmer Eric Shanteau, Olympic gold medal figure skater Scott Hamilton, and NFL punter Josh Bidwell are other role models whose stories are valuable to share with your son because they show it's not just about ability. It's not just what you're naturally good at. Achieving anything worthwhile is really about hard work and determination, triumphing over adversities, working toward a goal, and not giving up.

It's important to celebrate and praise our boys who are gifted in ways beyond athletic or physical pursuits: those who are inventive, creative, and innovative thinkers, poets, and tinkers. In *Raising Cain*, child psychologists Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson advise,

We need to teach boys that there are many ways to become a man; that there are many ways to be brave, to be a good father, to be loving and strong and successful. . . . We need to praise the artist and the entertainer, the missionary and the athlete, the soldier and the male nurse, the store owner and the round-the-world sailor, the teacher and the CEO. There are many ways to make a contribution in this life.⁴

Encouraging Adolescent Boys

For boys ages thirteen forward, it's a little more challenging to encourage them because they have an increasing need for *autonomy*. Most teenagers don't like being helped, told what to do, or sometimes even encouraged by their mothers. Adolescent boys have days when they are prickly or out of sorts. In their perspective, our words can sound like a "knower" (Mom) informing the "one who doesn't know" (her son). Sometimes even your loving statements may be rejected because they don't

like the sound of being told who or what they are, even if it's positive or encouraging.

Ken Wilgus, a Dallas psychologist who has counseled hundreds of adolescents and parents, told me he usually advises parents of teenagers to make their encouraging statements in “smaller” terms. Ken said making an encouragement smaller is done two ways: First, comment on specific events or actions, not global characterizations (e.g., “It really helps me when you're on time and ready like this”). And second, personalize the comment. It's easier for a teenage boy to swallow “I don't know about anyone else, but *to me* you seemed to give it your all through the whole football game,” rather than something like “You were the best one on the field! You're going to be an NFL player someday.”

Third, be real and genuine. Don't slather on excessive praise or be grandiose. That creates praise junkies who depend on other people's affirmation and praise to keep going. Mike, a twenty-something coach, told me,

I needed honest words of encouragement from my mother, especially when I was a teenager, but what I got were obligatory comments like a checklist: “How was practice? I'm sure you did awesome,” with no eye contact, no listening to my answer. In fact, I'd done a poor job that day and I knew I wasn't awesome. She also used too many words. She hounded me too much about practice, homework, games, whatever, so I tuned her out. What a son needs most from his mom is physical and verbal affirmation. But most of all for her to be real and honest.

And if your son has a bad game and you both know it, don't tell him you're so proud of him. “Don't be a mother who always says, ‘Good job,’ if he didn't do a good job . . . because he's going to see straight through that,” said one young man. “Just

say, ‘Hey, I’m sorry you guys lost, but I noticed you never gave up,’ or ‘You know, today wasn’t your day . . . you’re not going to win every game.’ That helps them learn to deal with failure, which every boy and man needs to do.”

Two simple words—“I noticed”—can also infuse encouragement in a subtle way: “I noticed you got everything done for your science project without any help.” “I noticed you’ve been setting out your clothes and athletic stuff the night before. Good organization.” “I noticed how kind you were to your sister.”

A Picture Is Worth 1,000 Words

There is another way to encourage sons that doesn’t use spoken words. Alison grew up with two older brothers, and when she had two sons of her own, she realized that being around boys all her life gave her a priceless education: Words often fail with boys, especially in medium to large doses. For example, from the first day of kindergarten to the last day of third and fourth grades, her boys would jump in the car after a long school day with one thing on their minds—*food*. The last thing on their mind: *talking*. She learned early that questions were not welcome until food was nestled nicely in their stomachs.

One day she stumbled upon a set of pictures with short quotes. When she read the hopeful stories behind the pictures on a website, she was amazed by the amount of encouragement they offered to buoy a person through life’s challenges. At the time she was in the throes of postpartum depression and didn’t know how she was going to encourage her precious little boys to be all they were created to be when she was so terribly down herself.

When the posters arrived in the mail, she tacked them up in her sons’ rooms, in the living room, and in the hallway. For

almost a decade now the boys have walked by the visible yet not imposing photographs: someone overcoming an obstacle, an ordinary person achieving something extraordinary. Posters mounted on walls in a house have spoken a thousand words, making her goal of encouraging her sons more doable and the need to lecture nearly obsolete. And day by day, with each glance they take, courage and hope are strengthened in the boys' hearts.

One of the most impacting posters reads "Team Hoyt," and under it is a photograph of a father pushing his adult son in a specially designed wheelchair across a finish line. She told her boys the story about the Hoyts, how she saw them run the Oklahoma Memorial Marathon years before and the indelible impact of the father's devotion—pushing his son not only through that race but over 1,000 marathons and triathlons. This and other stories are now wedged in their memories, reinforced through the visual reminders. As Noah and Luke, now ten and eleven, have grown in understanding about what devotion means, as well as overcoming adversity and working together, they have begun to internalize these values.

"I find as the boys get older, words and long-winded attempts at encouraging them to press on during challenging moments—whether encountering a bully at school or giving 110 percent in soccer practice in the summer heat—roll off their backs," Alison told me. "I can see their eyes glaze over if I reach maximum word capacity for what they're able to ingest at one time. It's like an involuntary eye roll creeps into our conversation!"

Instead of taking it personally, she's adapted a way of encouraging the boys along their unique and constantly changing paths. She paints short quotes with art borders and frames them to encourage the boys when they are facing something new or challenging. They speak more than mere words can express.

This mom doesn't know if she's impacting her sons the way she hopes by pasting paper to walls and chalkboard paint. But she sees her boys' eyes land on them occasionally, watches as they pause for a quick read, a quiet *hmmm*, or a simple head tilt before blazing out the door to shoot hoops. Sometimes they say, "Hey, good one, Mom" when they see a new quote posted on the whiteboard. And every once in a while she even gets the thrill of walking into a room surprised to find a boy's handwritten treasure of his own, like "'Every wall is a door.' —Ralph Waldo Emerson," which Luke had posted on his bedroom wall recently.

A Man's Need for Encouragement

As our boys grow into young men and adults, they don't outgrow their basic need for support. You might get some eye rolling, or your son might not tell you he needs encouraging words, but do it anyway. Even when our sons move across the country or have their own families, we can still be a source of encouragement.

Studies demonstrate this need. After two years of extensive research with hundreds of men, Patrick Morley discovered that men's second greatest need, besides companionship, is for *support*. They described this need with words such as *more understanding, encouragement, appreciation, respect, affirmation, acceptance, significance, purpose, fulfillment*. It sounds like what they're saying is "Help me out here . . . I need some encouragement!"⁵

Whether it's on their birthdays, Father's Day, or other occasions, I like to encourage our adult sons by writing a short note in a card, such as "I respect you for the devoted father and husband you are" or "I love how you put your family first and take care of them so well." I write how much I admire a recent accomplishment or tell them what a blessing they are to me.

On Mother's Day I've sent them cards saying, "I'm so thankful I've gotten to be your mom!"

Interestingly, Justin, our oldest, told me recently he's soaked in more of this encouragement as a grown-up:

Mom, I remember seasons where you were real encouraging about school in areas where I struggled like math or Spanish, or struggled with comparing myself with Chris's performance. It's been a lifelong habit of yours to encourage all three of your children.

But your encouragement in my adult years is easier for me to remember in a way. I appreciate your words more because it's hard to internalize much as a teenager; it rolls off your back. Your words have stuck more and felt more real because you have a perspective on my role as a father, husband, and provider, because you're talking with me and encouraging me, adult to adult.

Calling out positives is what you do. It doesn't have to be something big, with serious overtones, or especially profound. It can be as simple as calling out a specific quality. That's what your encouragement always sounds like to me: calling out positives. Reminding me that I'm capable, or working hard, that I'm loving my kids well, that you're proud of who I am. It means a lot.

"I Believe in You"

Although they need affirmation that we believe in them, encouraging our adult sons can be like walking a fine line. It takes wisdom *not* to tell them what they should do but support them while they're trying to figure it out—especially when they seem to be floundering or frustrated.

When Alice's adult son's job ended, he told her he wanted to look for a new, more fulfilling line of work. The trouble was he didn't know what kind of work that would be and now he

was unemployed. He'd never been interested in climbing the corporate ladder and doesn't define success in annual income. He just made broad statements like "I want to do something that will benefit other people."

Alice recognized that as a young adult of thirty-one, her son was grappling with his own significance—looking for a way to make a difference in the world. Several weeks went by and he became discouraged at his inability to determine what kind of work would meet his need for income and his desire to contribute to people.

Rather than offering advice, Alice asked questions, such as, "If money were no object, what would you do with your time?" and "What do you care most about?" As he wrestled with the answers, she assured him that she knew he'd figure it out, that she believed in him and knew he had a lot to offer.

A few more weeks went by as her son explored his options. Then one day he announced that he had enrolled in a nutritional coaching school and taken a job at a local health food store. Her Mama heart rejoiced at the news, especially when he smiled and said, "Mom, thanks for your encouragement and for giving me the space to find my way. I don't know what I would have done without your coaching."

Let me encourage you not to wait to offer kind words until your sons are older, more successful, make top grades, or behave better. Avoid taking it personally if your encouraging words aren't appreciated. And don't let a critical spirit cloud or damage your relationship with your son. It's tempting, especially if you're a perfectionist or have super-high expectations of his performance, or you wait until he's done something spectacular to comment on it. Focus on the hidden gifts you see within him that may not be in bloom yet and accept your son right where he is. Be full of grace and enjoy being your son's cheerleader in the

race of life. I've found by personal experience that a mother's genuine words of encouragement are very powerful and have far-reaching effects.

Even in the toddler days, I never saw our sons—or daughter, for that matter—as just sniffling, messy, silly kids. From an early age, I saw them as the young people and then adults they were going to be someday. This helped me value and respect our children and thus encourage them as individuals with God-given gifts and strengths, full of potential, no matter what the obstacles might be ahead of them. I'm so grateful to be their mom!

Questions to Ponder, Journal, or Discuss

1. How does your son best hear and receive encouraging words from you?
2. When is a time you felt rejected or not listened to when you were trying to support or affirm him?
3. What did you learn from this chapter that you could apply to your parenting right now?
4. What builds your son's sense of self-worth?
5. Considering how to “focus on the donut instead of the hole,” what consists of your son's “donut”—what he's giving effort toward, his skills or strengths, something he's made progress in?