

A Letter to My Son

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There have been so many things for you to learn.

I remember when you were born. As I looked at you closely for the first time, feeding eagerly at my breast and having no way of knowing the struggles ahead, I questioned my ability to guide you. The knowledge and structure I knew I must give to you would not come like the milk, which so voluntarily and miraculously came into my body to nourish you. How fine it would be to feed into you wisdom and compassion as easily as I was feeding into you milk.

The dreams and goals I had for you those many years ago have not really changed so very much: to find fulfillment in work and joy in play; to discover the fine line between independence and the need of a shoulder to lean on; to be aware of the rights of all people; to be gentle and full of humor. Some of those dreams are already coming true.

But who could have told me then of the things I would learn from you.

You offered me a chance to develop patience when I discovered you finger painting on the wall with the contents of a dirty diaper; when you cut off the dog's whiskers because, "Mom, she looked too much like a cat;" and when

learning to read, you could never recognize the word "that" in your reading lesson (why couldn't the word have been something hard like "friendly" or "neighbor?"). I learned that spankings were usually a result of my own impatience and frayed nerves. I found other ways to guide, and I learned that preventive measures saved so many tears and worries.

You developed my communication skills and sense of reasoning when you asked, "Do people ever cry after they die and are put in the ground?" or "Do blind people know what red is like?" Sometimes answering your simple questions solidified my own insights. How glad I am that I took the time to look and think beyond the superficial simplicity of your questions—profound and touching on life itself is what they were.

I still remember how nervous I was when I hauled out the biology book to give you the facts of life. No, it wasn't nervousness related to embarrassment. It was just that I wanted so much to do it right, so that you would know about love—and responsibility—and the wrongness of a double standard—all this in addition to the necessary physical facts.

The book fell open and displayed a woman's breasts, and I explained that I had nursed both you and your brother in this way. You, in great seriousness, wanted to know which one was his and which one was yours—like his blue cup and your yellow one. A great question with a need for a great answer: "You used both and so did he." What a look of disgust crossed your face: "I thought you were suppose to be sanitary with babies."

You gave me the chance to mature by accepting responsibility, for you were probably the greatest responsibility I have ever have. Producing an emotionally, mentally and physically well child is a complex operation because so much of it simply cannot be delegated. The decisions were mine for better or worse, and some days there were so many decisions to make.

When I did delegate responsibility, there was responsibility of delegating the responsibility to responsible people. All the way from the dentist and the doctor to the people who would guide your mind (be it a care provider, a teacher or even a playmate—and the latter category, I have found, is a great mind-guider), I needed to use judgment.

Simple decisions (or are they so simple?) like which television programs you should watch or what books you should read needed to be made. Was the time right for a tricycle? Should you have a dog? Was a pogo stick too dangerous? Was it O.K. to ride your bike all the way across town? Should you have your own car? Maybe the decisions I made helped you grow. Certainly making those decisions helped me grow.

You have taught me humility. It is very hard to look at a five-year old and say, "I'm sorry." I've had to learn I'm not perfect and even a big adult like me has had to eat words.

I remember the time the mother next door said you had bitten her child's stomach—and would I please look at that welt. I looked, and I saw the angry, red set of teeth marks. I launched into you—what a naughty thing you had done. In the midst of my tirade, the little voice directly above the wounded tummy informed us all that he meant the boy in the house next door on the other side—he didn't mean you. I had to look at you, with tears running down your cheeks, and tell you how very, very sorry I was.

You know more than me in a lot of ways now. I can't help you with your homework in at least two subjects because I either never did know anything about them or I have forgotten. I must be careful what I say or I eat my words. I could have sworn that Charleston was the capitol of South Carolina.

You constantly have and do keep alive in me the wonder of love. Never had I felt the melting inside of me that I experienced each time I touched your chest at night to reassure myself that you were breathing. How strongly my defense mechanisms swung into gear when anything threatened you. How agonizing it was to realize that defensive mothers must sometimes step aside.

When I was ill and had to stay in bed, how well I remember that hacked-up salad, drowning in Italian dressing, you carried in with pride and love. Or the day I was grumpy and yelled and ranted at you. I remember how you put your lips on my cheek and whispered in my ear, "It's been a bad day for you."

I remember the pride (and secret fear) I felt when you stood and recited your first part in an assembly, when you played your first trombone solo, when I drove you in our old station wagon to pick up your first date.

How I hurt for you when I recognized the badly disguised signs of a rejected first love. Most vividly I remember how we cried together in each other's arms when I had to tell you your dog Perky had been killed—all this was a part of the love that was the greatest blessing you brought to me.

I hope I've done right by you, my love. You've given me the world.