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## A Letter for the Middle School Years

JULY 17, 2023 • WRITTEN BY JEN WILKIN

*Sincerely*

Dear Mom,

My youngest child left middle school a decade ago, but I still recall with clarity the particular joys and challenges of that stage of mothering. My husband has always joked that he peaked in middle school, a time that, for him, was filled with achievements, fun memories, and good friends. My own memories of middle school were of not fitting in, of towering over my classmates, male and female, because of an early growth spurt. I possessed the wrong stature, the wrong clothes, the wrong hair, the wrong figure, and a mouth full of braces to compound my misery. Our kids seemed to navigate those years somewhere between the glory days of their dad and the gawky days of their mom. But it was during this era of parenting that I performed my most memorable parenting fail.

My daughter, Claire, has a July birthday. The summer before she entered middle school, I was scrambling to find gifts to make the day special. Like her mother, her height set her above her classmates. I went to Target to find her a sweet sundress, only to be dismayed by the selection of skimpy dresses in the girls' section. I set my sights on the women's extra-smalls as a clever solution and

headed to the clearance rack because #thrifty. On her birthday, Claire excitedly opened the most adorable yellow, smocked sundress and ran upstairs immediately to try it on. Success.

A few minutes later, she descended the stairs looking like a ray of sunshine, albeit with an oddly wonky hemline. It was then that she asked, “Mom, why does the tag on my dress say ‘Liz Lange Maternity’?”

Yep. Thanks to an unfortunately misplaced clearance item, I bought my daughter a maternity dress for her eleventh birthday. Happy Birthday, honey. Here’s an extra special dress for the first day of middle school. Make good choices!

You can imagine that this story has become a legend in our family. Luckily, we all have a well-developed sense of humor. I needed that sense of humor for the middle school years because they can indeed be a trial for the nerves. As our children begin to move naturally into greater autonomy and less dependence, we can succumb to a thousand creeping fears. What if the lessons of their childhood don’t stick? What if their peers start to have a louder voice in their ears than we do? What if they make mistakes that are unwise—or even dangerous? What if they pull away relationally?

I wish I could tell you that none of these fears are founded. But you’d know I wasn’t being truthful. While fears of this kind may be credible, they don’t have to be controlling. Remember, our job as Christian parents is not to raise safe children but strong children. Yes, we do what we can to protect them in age-appropriate ways, but the longer we raise them, the looser our grip must become on their choices and habits. Middle school heralds the clear turning point where we must let them fail while the consequences for failure are still low and where we must let them succeed on their own steam so they learn to trust their own God-given abilities. All of us learn the way of wisdom by living with the consequences of our decisions. Middle school is a lab for this kind of learning, if we parents can press through our fear to trust in the Lord.

And here’s a very good reason to press through: If there’s one thing children can sense, it’s fear. They know when a parent feels it, and they know when a parent operates from it. Nothing sabotages a child’s ability to grow strong like a parent’s contagious fear. But if we set an example for our kids of repentance in the face of our own mistakes, of laughter in the face of our embarrassments, of courage in

the face of our fears, and of humility in the face of our successes, we lead them in the path of wisdom with more effectiveness than any lecture we might give about what they should or should not do. And when we are quick to receive their confessions with charity, their embarrassments with good humor, their fears with perspective, and their successes with celebration, we invite them toward mature adulthood.

In short, in a world that is decidedly unsafe, we decide to make home a safe place to be a limited human, half-grown and hurtling toward adulthood. This is easier said than done. It requires a great deal of shared time together to build and keep trust, to nurture conversation after conversation, to keep relational channels open. Thus, it requires vigilant review of calendar commitments and a near-fanatical dedication to family dinners. It requires prioritizing time together over time spent apart in an age of parenting that defines success by a child's achievements outside the home. Take it from an empty-nester: You will never look back on your child-rearing years and say, "I wish we had spent more time apart."

These years of awkward in-betweenness will be challenging for both parent and child. You will be tempted to spare your middle schooler every preventable hurt and failure. You will be tempted to avoid conflict or to escalate it as you feel your control slipping away. Remember that the God you trusted with your infant, your toddler, your preschooler, and your elementary student is the same God you can trust with your middle schooler. He was more than enough then, and he is more than enough now. Keep praying—and not just to beg him to meet you in the moment. Thank him for his past provision. Praise him for his ever-present help. Confess to him your fears. And when you have devoted six pages in your prayer journal to these three things, offer him a few final lines of your requests. We ask rightly when we are rightly oriented to the One we ask.



In a world that is decidedly unsafe, our heavenly Parent gives us a safe place to be a limited human parent of a middle school child. Prioritize that prayer space. Make yourself at home there. Take it from an empty-nester: You will never look back on your child-rearing years and say, “I wish I had spent less time in prayer.” More often than not, strong children come from strong parents. Remember the source of your strength. Pray like crazy.

And be kind to yourself when things don’t go quite as planned. On the day that your temper flares, or you over-protect, or you over-schedule, or you lecture instead of listening, remember those mercies that are new every morning. And remember yellow maternity-wear wrapped up in juvenile birthday paper. At least you haven’t done that.

She turned out smashingly, by the way. Strong. Not awkward. Sure of her place in our family, her place in the world. Clear in her calling. It turns out it wasn’t all dependent on me after all. And praise God for that. So much of parenting is trying our best, repenting for our missteps, and trusting the Lord for the rest. Fear of God is the best thing I know to silence fear of this world. We can’t give our kids certainty of circumstance or surety of success, but we can give them a steadfast example of trust in God. And that’s no small thing.

I'm cheering for you!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jen', with a large loop at the end of the 'n'.

Jen Wilkin

### Capturing the Moment:

*Below are a few prompts from the author for activities that might be especially meaningful in this season or memories that she appreciates now, looking back. We hope these serve as a helpful springboard as you prayerfully consider how to “number your days” ([Ps. 90:12](#)) and make the most of the moments God gives:*

**Family Book Club:** Find a book series to read together. Plan a theme-related meal to discuss the book or series together. Ask the kids to come prepared to discuss their favorite scene, character, and insight. Did they see anywhere that the story sounded like one from the Bible?

**Family Dinner:** Commit to dinner three times a week. Share highs and lows of the day, and ask how you can pray for one another. Use one of the nights as an opportunity to read a passage of Scripture and discuss it. Ask them to come prepared with three observations and two questions to discuss.

**Moment of Transcendence:** Plan a trip to the symphony, a museum, or a natural setting that takes your breath away. Before you go, ask the kids to research the composer, artist, or area and learn three interesting facts to share. Go for a meal before your outing and share your learnings. Then enjoy the event together. Afterward, talk about how our view of God changes when we are in the presence of heart-stopping beauty or greatness.

**Family Service Day:** Plan a day to spend serving at a local food pantry, shelter, or other nonprofit that serves the under-served or overlooked. Ask the kids to research the organization before you go. On the car ride over, ask them to share what they know about the mission of the organization. On the car ride home, ask their impressions of what they saw and did. How does serving others (loving our neighbor) change the way we see our own circumstances?



## Jen Wilkin

**Jen Wilkin** is an author and Bible teacher from Dallas, Texas. She has organized and led studies for women in home, church, and parachurch contexts. An advocate for Bible literacy, her passion is to see others become articulate and committed followers of Christ, with a clear understanding of why they believe what they believe, grounded in the Word of God. You can find her at [JenWilkin.net](http://JenWilkin.net).

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