



# The Ultimate Project

LYNDA MACFARLAND

## LYNDA AND ERIN, A MOTHER-DAUGHTER REFLECTION

I spent time with my daughter and her family recently and, as she prepares to leave her twenties behind, I marvel at the woman, mother, and the wife she has become.

As an Army brat who is now raising her own Army brats, I can recall so easily her years at home, and those of her younger brother, as well. Before we knew it or were ready, her father and I were sending her off to college. And then four years later, her brother was off to school. That is almost a decade ago now, which startles me. Life really is short.

I think back fondly on our time when the children were at home. There were lots of challenges, but also lots of laughs. We enjoyed each others' company and did a lot of things together as a family both in and outside our home. From the time they were old enough to join soccer teams or ballet classes, we were always looking for ways to be with them while letting them move out, little by little, into the world. It is, after all, the parents' job to equip their children for adulthood. It's hard to think about that when they are babies, toddlers, or in grade school. But it starts to become more real as they become adolescents. Conversely, it seems easier to play with, talk to, and generally interact with your children when they are under, say, the age of 10 or 11 than it is when they are 12 years or older.

I'm not sure why sometimes parents start to communicate less with their children as they move into adolescence. Maybe it's because their children want to discuss more difficult or complicated topics. You don't get to always be silly with a 13-year old, although they are enough of a little kid still to enjoy some silliness, I assure you!

I think one of the most important factors in maintaining strong

communication with your adolescent children is just to embrace the culture. If you start having discussions with them about anything – stuff you see on TV, or on the internet, popular memes, music on their iPods or phones, movies, books – there will be less awkwardness as they mature.

Embracing the culture does not mean you have to let them see, hear, or read anything they want. There must always

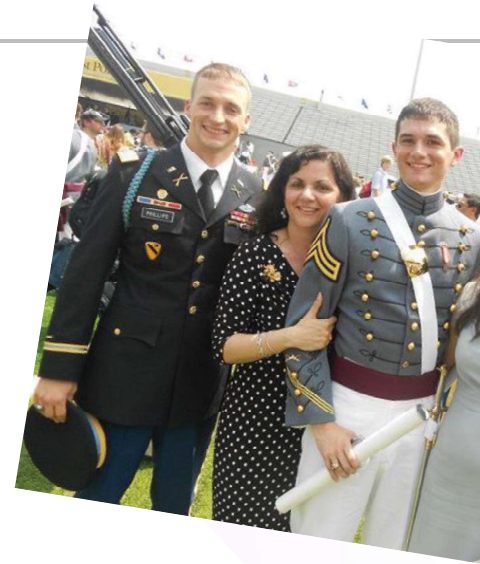
be boundaries, but it is important to remember that young people want to be taken seriously and thought of as adult long before they actually reach adulthood.

## You as a parent 1

There are challenges for parents in navigating how much is enough or what is 'over the line,' but there have to be, whatever a parents decides is acceptable for their children, reasons for those boundaries. It's helpful if a parent can articulate the reasons why some things are unacceptable at a particular time in a child's life. Everyone, young or old, always reacts better to a situation when they know the 'why' of it.

"Because I said so" is rarely the best response for your child's question.

As a parent you have to be on your toes because children will find the strangest things to ask you about, and that includes when you give them the rules of the house. Now, that is not a guarantee they will magically begin to do what you have requested, but you have shown them that you think enough of them to explain the reasons behind your rules. And it doesn't mean that they won't be in trouble for disobeying your wishes. The type of





are finished. We are helping to build the foundation of their lives that we then continue to assist them in building until the time when they can lift the bricks and apply the mortar themselves.

If we love unconditionally, but not thoughtlessly, our children will know that we

have rules and we are rearing them within certain rules, because of that love for them. Yes, we want them to be happy, but we also want them to be safe. And we want them to make others happy and to want to do so. A pleasant, law abiding, polite, thoughtful adult does not just appear one day; he or she is cultivated with care, effort, time, and yes, love by a caring parent or parents.

Treating an adolescent in an adult manner, which includes answering their questions and not ignoring

punishment for ignoring a rule must be known in advance by all parties, as well. And keep in mind that punishment can and should include consequences for their infractions. Parents need to decide before an incident what will the consequences for that action be. You and the child should both know before they begin and the parent should immediately implement that consequence for the offense.

Consistency and predictability in discipline for children is key. You as a parent must be as good as your word. Otherwise, children do learn that they can get away with things when the promised consequence does not occur. That can eventually erode the respect for the parent as s/he begins to be perceived by the child as someone who cannot be trusted. Of course trust is crucial in any relationship but parents need to be respected not just because of their role in the family, but because respect for authority in society begins

at home. Parents are the first authority figures in our children's lives. Are we fair? Are we patient? Do we respect our children as fellow human beings; with dignity they deserve? Do we teach them by example what respect for authority is in the world and explain to them why it matters? We need to do these things if we want our children to be productive, content members of our society, and contributors to it, one glorious day.

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With any project, there should be an end goal in mind. Our children are the ultimate project. And they are ones that we don't expect to ever see the end result of, if we are lucky. May we all be long gone before our 'projects'

them, explaining why we do things in the ways we do, or why they should not do certain things are ways we normally treat adults. Our adolescent children deserve that same courtesy.

*more >>>*



Genuine compliments for things they've done well, or even just authentically attempted, add to the adult we are working to build. Help when things aren't going well, asking how you can help – these things will also be welcome by a young teen and then an older teen.

Who wouldn't like to know that their family, the people they live with and who love them more than anything, are going to pick them up when they fall, hug them when they need it, hold on to them when they are sad, tired, or hurt? And also let go so the young, loved person can pick themselves up one day, but always assure them that we will be there when they need to return to us. It might be a pep talk or maybe a shoulder to cry on, but we can be a support to our adolescents. Sometimes it's sought after advice, or maybe being silent so they can talk to us as they work out a problem. Maybe we ask a question they haven't considered and let them ruminate over that for a bit. Or perhaps we ask open ended questions that shows we respect their opinions.

### *My children are amazing.*

Who doesn't feel that way about their kids? I hope we all can say that because we love them. And with that love for them, we want them to be the best people they can be. We get to assist with that. What an amazing opportunity, what a daunting task! But it's worth it. We get to be part of the ultimate project. For my husband and me it was quite the ride and we are grateful for every minute of it. Even the mistakes – theirs and ours. It's made us all who we are today.



## Open Lines

ERIN M. PHILLIPS

### *First of all, let me begin with a warning:*

nothing I am about to say is likely to earn your kid any cool points. If you told any of my high school classmates I was writing an article with my mom about how important it is for kids to talk to their parents, the most common reaction after, "Who?" would be the understanding smile and closed-eyed nod of total non-surprise. Let me issue a second warning: keeping open lines of communication with my parents left me with such positive attitudes toward military life that I ended up marrying a soldier. So, if you want to raise a cool teen with no future military affiliations, read no further. But if you're interested in raising a reasonably well-adjusted adult who is open to caring for you in your old age, then I may be able to help.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I think the thing I found most helpful growing up in a military family was that we were kept well-informed in an age-appropriate way. I see it now in military spouses, and I think the same thing holds true for military kids; the family members who best understand the nature of their service member's work tend to be the happiest family members. We usually knew our dad's unit, his job, the broad strokes of what that meant in the grand scheme of the way the Army works, and where we as his children fit in. Specifically, when we were stationed in Europe, my brother and I were made to understand that we were acting not only as ambassadors for our family, but for our country. It was a big responsibility, but it showed trust and confidence in us, and so I think my brother and I were happy to comply.

### *...the thing I found most helpful growing up in a military family was that we were kept well-informed in an age-appropriate way.*

That same trust and confidence displayed by our parents in other facets of life meant that while we were given quite a bit of latitude as we got older, we knew we could come to our parents with our questions, concerns, and feelings. To me, it seemed almost counterintuitive to keep important things from my parents, since my anxieties, questions, and opinions were always taken seriously and addressed. You wouldn't keep really serious symptoms from your doctor, would you?

Parents don't need to be their kids' best friends. Frankly, my kids are still pretty small, so I can't fathom why any parent would want to be their kids' best friend. Our priorities are just too different, and probably will be for at least the next fifteen years or so. But you can treat your kids like people, and give their feelings and opinions the same respect and consideration you would give those of an adult. That doesn't mean treating them like adults, or burdening them with your own concerns, obviously, but a kid who feels listened to on a daily basis will be more likely to come to you to talk.