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10 Things I Want My Daughter To Know Before She Turns 10

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Grace is rounding the curve to ten. I am not sure how this is possible. I feel ever more aware of her girlhood and looming adolescence, and of all the things I want her to know, as if I could somehow instill values and beliefs into her, like pressing a penny into soft clay. I know I can't; the best I can do is to keep saying them, keep writing them, keep living them.

Ten things I want my 10-year-old daughter to know:

1. It is not your job to keep the people you love happy. Not me, not Daddy, not your brother, not your friends. I promise, it's not. The hard truth is that you can't, anyway.

2. Your physical fearlessness is a strength. Please continue using your body in the world: run, jump, climb, throw. I love watching you streaking down the soccer field, or swinging proudly along a row of monkey bars, or climbing into the high branches of a tree. There is both health and a sense of mastery in physical activity and challenges.

3. You should never be afraid to share your passions. You are sometimes embarrassed that you still like to play with dolls, for example, and you worry that your friends will make fun of you. Anyone who teases you for what you love to do is not a true friend. This is hard to realize, but essential.

4. It is okay to disagree with me, and others. You are old enough to have a point of view, and I want to hear it. So do those who love you. Don't pick fights for the sake of it, of course, but when you really feel I'm wrong, please say so. You have heard me say that you are right, and you've heard me apologize for my behavior or point of view when I realize they were wrong. Your perspective is both valid and valuable. Don't shy away from

expressing it.

5. You are so very beautiful. Your face now holds the baby you were and the young woman you are rapidly becoming. My eyes and cleft chin and your father's coloring combine into someone unique, someone purely you. I can see the clouds of society's beauty myth hovering, manifest in your own growing self-consciousness. I beg of you not to lose sight with your own beauty, so much of which comes from the fact that your spirit runs so close to the surface.

6. Reading is essential. It is the central leisure-time joy of my life, as you know. I am immensely proud and pleased to see that you seem to share it. That identification you feel with characters, that sense of slipping into another world, of getting lost there in the best possible way? Those never go away. Welcome.

7. You are not me. We are very alike, but you are your own person, entirely, completely, fully. I know this, I promise, even when I lose sight of it. I know that separation from me is one of the fundamental tasks of your adolescence, which I can see glinting over the horizon. I dread it like ice in my stomach, that space, that distance, that essential cleaving, but I want you to know I know how vital it is. I'm going to be here, no matter what, Grace. The red string that ties us together will stretch. I know it will. And once the transition is accomplished there will be a new, even better closeness. I know that too.

8. It is almost never about you. What I mean is that when people act in a way that hurts or makes you feel insecure, it is almost certainly about something happening inside of them, and not about you. I struggle with this one mightily, and I have tried very, very hard never once to tell you you are being "too sensitive" or to "get over it" when you feel hurt. Believe me, I know how feelings can slice your heart, even if your head knows otherwise. But maybe, just maybe, it will help to remember that almost always other people are struggling with their own demons, even if they bump into you by accident.

9. There is no single person who can be your everything. Be very careful about bestowing this power on any one person. I suspect you are trying to fill a gnawing loneliness, and if you are you inherited it from me. That feeling, Woolf's "emptiness about the heart of life," is just part of the deal. Trying to fill that ache with other people (or with anything else, like food, alcohol, numbing behaviors of a zillion sorts you don't even know of yet) is a lost cause, and nobody will be up to the task. You will feel let down, and, worse, that loneliness will be there no matter what. I'm

learning to embrace it, to accept it as part of who I am. I hope to help you do the same.

10. I am trying my best. I know I'm not good enough and not the mother you deserve. I am impatient and fallible and I raise my voice. I am sorry. I love you and your brother more than I love anyone else in the entire world and I always wish I could be better for you. I'll admit I don't always love your behavior, and I'm quick to tell you that. But every single day, I love you with every fiber of my being.