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## *The Roots of Unschooling: The Power of Strong Connections*

I'm Pam Laricchia. I have three children: Joseph is 19, Lissy is 17, and Mikey will be 14 in a couple of weeks. Then of course, there's my lovely hubby, Rocco. We've been unschooling for nine years now. I was, and am, so excited to talk with you guys again this year! I really enjoy taking the time to dig into my unschooling thoughts and trying to make some sense of them. I actually wrote this talk over the last couple of weeks, but my thoughts have been swirling around this topic for months. I love the suppleness and flow of life and how my thoughts began to gel and writing time opened up just when I started looking for it. As always, take what makes sense to you.

Last year I spoke about moving to unschooling. This year I thought I'd move into the realm of more experienced unschooling, as well as discussing some of my thoughts and experiences surrounding unschooling through the teen years. As is my bent, while I was thinking about the topic, I kept asking myself "why", digging deeper. It was from there that the idea of roots grew. Needing to place my thoughts into some context, this led me to visualize unschooling as a tree, one with a long life and lots of branching, with unschooling principles being the ideas that guide the growth of the branches, and thinking of the support we give as parents as the roots. Hence my title: The Roots of Unschooling. The roots are the traits and skills that I've found really help unschooling grow strongly, supporting the tree through the stormy times that life can throw at it.

Paradoxically, if you're new to unschooling, it may be more of a challenge to understand why these roots are so important. You might logically think of growing strong roots as one of the important first steps in the process of nurturing a tree, so why not jump in right there? It's great to be excited, but to really be effective for supporting unschooling, it's key to understand why these roots are important, how they support the principles, and how personal the implementation of them can be: it's not a case of "do this" and "get that". To carry the analogy a bit further, when you first plant a tree, it's recommended you add fertilizer to help the roots take hold and develop strongly. You want a healthy tree so when you plant it, you toss some all-purpose fertilizer into the hole. But maybe you find your tree's not responding as you'd hoped. Turns out your soil was already high in a particular nutrient, say nitrogen, and the additional nitrogen in your fertilizer mix was just too much for the tree to handle—it's succumbing to disease resulting from the overgrowth of bacteria and fungus in the soil. It turns out that the makeup of the soil in your particular spot is an important factor to take into consideration when trying to help your tree grow strong and healthy roots.

Same with a family that is unschooling. You need to understand your own soil, that is, your own family, your spouse and children, and how their personalities and styles of living and learning blossom and interconnect, before you can really understand just how to help your family's unschooling roots grow strong and healthy. That's why a discussion of the roots of unschooling, rather ironically, is a bit more geared to experienced unschoolers in that they'll have some unschooling experience under their belt to see how it applies in their family. If you're newer to unschooling though, don't stress! Let the ideas tumble around with your own personal observations as you learn and understand more about the principles behind unschooling.

So, to the roots! I reserve the right to add more roots as I continue to delve deeper into these ideas, but for now I am envisioning four important, supporting roots. One is curiosity. For unschooling to blossom it's important for parents to maintain or nurture their excitement in exploring the world, in always learning. A key tenet of unschooling is that learning is a lifelong endeavour. Enjoy learning with your kids, bring things into their world that they might find intriguing, invite them into your world as you pursue things that you find

fascinating, connect over things you already have in common. Be interesting, live joyfully, be alert to all the delightful things around you, whether you're at a grocery store, a park, or listening to music in the car, notice and mention the cool connections of life. Without curiosity, exploration is dampened. And without exploration, learning is dampened.

Another root I see as significant is trust. It's important to develop a deep level of trust in one another. This leads to a knack for working together as people, beyond the power structure of parent/child. Working together gives your child an active hand in pursuing their learning, and helps them develop and gain experience in crucial life skills, such as decision-making. This trust needs to grow deep enough that even if you don't see or understand what your child is learning in that particular moment, if they are engaged, you are comfortable that they are learning something important to them, and that's enough.

A third root that I see contribute substantially to unschooling is patience. That is, a willingness to slow down and discuss things with your children. The learning isn't found in the rushing to and fro, the getting to this and that. Take the time to figure out what the moment looks like through your child's eyes so you can truly help them move forward from there. It's also the patience for repetition, for taking the time to be directly involved with them, even for the messes that can accompany the beautiful swirl of learning. And don't forget its partner, persistence: a willingness to doggedly pursue your children's interests, even through repeated phone calls or meetings, early practices, all-day events, or explaining, yet again, that yes, they're available for that appointment during the day.

The fourth root, the one I'm going to discuss today, is relationships. The development and maintenance of strong connections so that both parents and children are comfortable approaching each other for information and discussion is fundamental to supporting unschooling. Just as the relationship with a teacher can make or break the year for a child in school, as a parent choosing to forgo the educational system, your relationship with your child is crucial to their learning—this is where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. It's where you interact and connect with your child. It's life.

Let's start our discussion with learning. As Anne Ohman once said, "Living is learning is unschooling." Learning is found anywhere. Real learning is learning that is understood and remembered. What helps someone understand something and remember it? Connecting it to something they already understand and remember. Like a puzzle piece slipping into place, a new piece of knowledge that clicks does so because it connects with something else and now the whole picture makes a bit more sense. That sense, that bit deeper understanding, is what helps the learner remember it. Random factoids of information, with no real connection to something they already know or are interested in knowing more about, are soon forgotten. If I visualize the connected bits and pieces of learning that one might do while digging into an interest, in my mind it resembles a web. Not one with an orderly, repetitive pattern, but one unique to the spinner, the learner, one that represents their personal learning and view of the world.

Let's dig into that a bit more. Seeing the many ways things relate to other things allows us to understand them more deeply. For example, reading the Harry Potter books allows us to delve into an interesting fictional world and cheer for a trio of young heroes as they battle against an evil foe. That's cool! But if a child wants to dig deeper it can be a window to the world. They may uncover the world of fan fiction and a connection that leads to learning about literary analysis and/or writing; they may google JK Rowling, visit her website, and in their fascination, create a connection to web programming; they may discover real-life witches and delve into religion; they may follow the making of the films, creating a connection to the analysis and critique of different story-telling forms. There are a myriad of ways that enjoying the Harry Potter books can branch out. And each connection that radiates outward from that "Harry Potter books" point helps better define their understanding of that point. And the points can definitely overlap and connect to each other independently. As they delve deeper into the connections, the books are placed in more and more context, their place in the overall scheme of things is better understood, and their personal view of the world has expanded.

Now let's look at how we can relate that process to learning about people.

There are strong parallels between learning connections and relationship connections at their core; they are about understanding things and understanding people. Seeing the many ways things relate to other things allows us to understand them more deeply. And seeing the many ways we can relate to other people allows

us to understand them more deeply.

Let's look at the learning connections we talked about from a relationship perspective. For example, let's use my eldest son, Joseph, he's the "starting point" in this analogy, as Harry Potter was. Now from the time he was young, I've known he likes video games. That's one relationship connection. Knowing that, I, or anyone else who's interested, can connect and generally converse with him through that topic. But that's pretty superficial. Being with him while he played and enjoying conversations with him about games showed me that he wasn't particularly interested in all video games, but role-playing games in particular—another connection. And soon I discovered that it's not just the role-playing games themselves, but the detailed stories they often tell—another connection. The more connections I make with him, the more I learn about him, and the better I know and understand him. And the better I know him, the stronger I can make these connections by relating to him through those threads: I can talk stories in general with him; I can let him know about that new RPG video game I came across; I can discuss the impact of video games in general in our culture. As I delve deeper and strengthen each of these different connections, the deeper and stronger our relationship becomes. I don't just know him superficially; I see a bigger, more connected view of him as a whole being.

The more connections you build with your child, the better you understand him or her, and the stronger your relationship is. As one connection fades—maybe they are no longer as keenly interested in Harry Potter as they once were—you still have other connections going strong. And you continue to find new ways to connect as they develop new interests. Relationships are almost like living entities, always shifting, with some connections fading as others grow.

Why is a strong relationship important for learning? It's important for supporting both academic and personal learning, and here I'm defining personal learning as that learning a person does relating to living, to character, to growing into the person they want to be. Understanding them deeply and being able to see things through their eyes, from their perspective, helps you best support them as they follow their interests and develop as a person.

Within that relationship trust is paramount. Remember that other root I mentioned?

Why is that? Because asking questions can be like baring your soul—they are a direct line to your thoughts and asking them out loud shows the other person where you're standing, metaphorically. When I ask a question, the person I'm asking knows what I'm thinking and I open myself up to ridicule and judgement. It may not be as big an issue when kids are younger. The majority of their questions are fact-based: they are learning about the world around them. "What is this?" "How do you do that?" You may not know the answer but half the fun is figuring it out together. They trust you to help them find the answer.

But as they get older, questions and discussions start to veer more and more into the social, moral, and philosophical realm. "Why does X do Y?" And to ask deep and personal questions of someone, you really need to trust them, trust that they won't belittle your thoughts and ideas, trust they won't try to control you to fit their agenda through their answers, even subtly.

If communication and connection fails time after time, eventually they won't attempt it anymore. This is true for any relationship: adult to child, adult to adult, child to child. But when a relationship is strong and connected, both participants are reasonably comfortable asking questions, and answering them.

That doesn't mean the conversations themselves are necessarily "comfortable", there are some rather uncomfortable topics out there to be discussed, but that both people are willing and trust each other enough to engage in a truthful conversation. And each honest and supportive conversation creates another connection or deepens an existing one. A strong relationship has minimal barriers to communication that hinder learning. Not only learning in an academic sense, but personally and socially as well. LIVING IS LEARNING.

Imagine yourself as a parent of an unschooling teen and ask yourself a couple questions. Do you share your life experiences with them in hopes that they will avoid making those same choices that you now see as mistakes? Do you expect your child to always make choices you agree with? To always make choices you understand? Are you expecting unschooling to make your child "perfect"? It's hard to answer "yes" to

any of those questions when they are phrased that way, isn't it? But as they get older, as the consequences of their choices become more long-lasting, it can be so easy to fall back on rules and guilt or shame to try to control another person.

But that eats away at the trust and connections, at the relationship you have built with your child over the years. Mainstream parenting says that's the parental consequence of being a strong parent. That it is a necessary part of being a "good" parent. That it is inevitable in the teen years that the relationship will suffer, but that they'll understand and be grateful when they get older.

But it isn't inevitable. When my kids were young, my goal with unschooling was to live a full and interesting life with them in a stimulating and supportive learning environment where they could follow their interests and learn to their hearts content—both academically and socially. Learn about living in the world. Younger unschoolers are learning about themselves, how their brains process information and emotions, how their personality acts and reacts, in essence, how they fit into the world as their bright and shiny selves.

That hasn't changed now that they're older. Their interests have grown and changed, the kinds of things they are learning have changed, but my original goal hasn't. As they grow into teens they are often intelligent, mature, knowledgeable, and lots of fun to be around, but this learning doesn't stop. They continue learning in new places and situations, with new people and with new responsibilities. Still learning how they fit into the world as their bright and shiny teen selves. And the best learning happens when we have a strong and connected relationship.

As I mentioned earlier, with teens, questions and conversations more often centre around topics of a more ambiguous nature, less defined as right/wrong, more focused on becoming the person they want to be. That's an important bit: "the person they want to be". As a parent, your part of the trust deal is to trust them while they figure out the kind of person they want to be. With your love and support, your trust and connection, you are a key piece in this process. But give them the space to figure out how your thoughts, ideas, and values fit in with their developing views, don't try to force your code wholly in there by virtue of being their parent. I mean, you can try, we see examples of that all around us—well, luckily, not this week! But you know what I mean. Mainstream examples abound of parents trying to instil their belief and value system into their children.

And if the child isn't receptive, if the parent's beliefs don't connect to the person the child is or is looking to become, and the parents are insistent, they often resort to rules and consequences, which do nothing but tear into the relationship and create a downward spiral that is hard to stop.

You probably know the communication preferences of your children, whether they like to process things by talking them through with you, or they like to think things through on their own and share that with you when they're ready. As they get older though, you may find them sharing less of the processing with you. Part of growing up is challenging themselves to handle things on their own, wanting to take on more responsibilities. And that's where your trust again comes into play. You still gotta trust them! Giving them the time and space to try figure things out on their own is such an important part of the learning experience, whether learning about things or about life. Don't take it personally, don't take it as a sure sign of drifting apart. Just be sure you're keeping the lines of communication open, the relationship strong, and the trust level high so that they are comfortable coming to you at any point in a situation.

If and when they do come to talk, remember, just because stuff has happened before this point doesn't mean they were specifically hiding it from you, it is not an admission of "guilt" by any means; it means they've reached a point where they want some help, some feedback, or just a sympathetic ear. Remember, even as they do things on their own, it's more comfortable for them, knowing that you're there to support them, if even just in spirit.

There's one thing I wanted to mention here. If your teen, or adult child for that matter, comes to talk to you about a situation that has already progressed past your comfort zone, take a couple minutes, or more, whatever you need, to regroup before moving forward with them. But the key is to move forward from that point with them. Listen openly. Ask non-judgemental questions to help you understand the situation as much as possible, to figure out their perspective and to understand what they are hoping to get from you. Commiseration? Discussion? Direction? What are they looking for? Figure that out together.

As the tension is released and the situation is discussed further, definitely point out if and where you likely would have recommended a different course of action. Even though it's in the past now, that's all learning and experience they can use when making choices in the future. But try not give in to the temptation to step in and take over. It's important to work through these situations together. That's how they really learn about themselves, truly understand how they got into the situation, and analyze it, now with your help, to find a path forward. Or else what they learn is only how you would react in these situations. That is, unless they specifically ask you to take over for them— and at that point, still be sure to explain your thought processes and choices moving forward. Another reason it's important to work together is that as parents, we aren't perfect either. But that's the point of working together, each of us doing our best in the moment, being open to other ways to move forward if the current stuff isn't working. We are all learning every day, about ourselves, about each other, about the world we live in.

If you find your teen isn't talking to you and things seem to be going awry, there is likely an interesting reason. If it's becoming widespread, you may not like the reason, but it'll be there. A couple weeks ago Vicky Bennison, an unschooling friend of mine with teens, hit the nail on the head with this gem, part of a wonderful mini-rant against a mainstream parenting facebook meme going around: "I have never had to hunt you down like a bloodhound, because you have always told me where you were going, and if you didn't I would question what in my own behavior caused you to change yours."

Our own behaviour is always the place to start. That is what's under our control. If you think they are specifically hiding stuff from you because they don't trust you, don't trust your reaction, then work on the relationship; build that trust again, build that connection stronger.

Tied into our own behaviour is our perspective, how we see things. That is the place from which we act. I was going to share a couple days around our home and frame them both negatively and positively side-by-side as an example of how you can choose to view the situations unfolding around you. But I just couldn't do it. I couldn't even write down the negative framing because it's content is patently false. I refuse to frame my kids' behaviour in a negative way because they are consciously making a choice as to their behaviour in each moment. What they do is what they've chosen to do. Seeing it negatively is seeing their choices based only on how they affect me, assigning motivations to them as if they are specifically trying to piss me off. But their behaviour isn't about me at all. I know they aren't choosing to do something with the express purpose of getting a reaction out of me—that's the relationship we've developed over the years. Their behaviour is a result of the choices they make for themselves, for their own reasons. The only question to ask is "why".

One answer may be that they don't realize how their action may have affected me, or others around them, and I can certainly share that bit of information with them for next time—upsetting me is not a goal in-and-of-itself for them. But not anticipating that their action might distress me is a far cry from acting on purpose to upset me. And that's the difference between a positive and negative perspective when interpreting the behaviour of others. In fact, I do my best to infer positive intent, or at least certainly neutral, when interacting with everyone. The world isn't out to get me.

As an aside, to me, this is a key component of the Shine list: the perspective of finding the learning and motivations behind our children's actions without assuming negative intent. That may be part of the reason why sometimes people interpret the shiny stories I and others share as us not ever having sticky issues to deal with. No. It's not that somehow our lives are easier. It's not that our issues are any less dramatic than others', it's more that I don't decide that just because we are facing a challenge, somehow I or my child or unschooling has "failed". I don't assume negative intent and then need to blame that outcome on something or someone. Because my goal with unschooling is for my kids to learn and develop into the person they want to become, there really is no way to fail—it's living. There is no advantage to blame, there is only learning and growth as a person. And it's from this perspective where these challenging moments allow unschooling to truly shine because it guides us to be our best selves in each moment and work through the situations together, and we're all more strongly connected for it in the end. Again, during these times trust and strong relationships are so important to give both the parent and child room to process and share and figure things out together.

If an issue does arise, confrontation, unless it's an immediate and serious health concern, may well

backfire, so consider it carefully. It's risky business. If they have been avoiding the conversation with you, they aren't likely ready to talk. You can certainly ask around the topic, but forcing a conversation may seem judgemental to them and starting the conversation from an adversarial standpoint makes it even more challenging. In the meantime, while working on your connection, let them know you're around if they'd like to talk. But there is no need to do that explicitly by telling them that flat out. If they aren't feeling trusting of you, a statement like that can feel critical to a person, as in, "I know you have something on your mind and you're wrong to not talk to me about it."

Instead, show it through your actions. Be available whenever they want to chat, about anything. Their tv show, their game, their friends ... the safer topics, where your connections are still relatively strong. Be sure to drop what you're doing and give them your full attention. Show them that you care about what they have to say. And be extra careful not to say anything that could be construed as demeaning. It's time to go that extra mile to fill the trust jar, not waste even small withdrawals on thoughtless comments. You want to make it clear to them through your actions that they can feel safe talking to you, about anything.

The challenges parents have with teens often surround the "lines" we draw around certain activities; the understandable worry we hold as our teens get involved in more adult activities with more serious consequences. I gave the Harry Potter example earlier and I know most of us are pretty comfortable seeing the many different directions learning can take when a child dives into an interest, the web of connections made as they explore a topic. So I thought I'd take a moment to explore the learning that might swirl around a more teen-related topic, like drinking.

It's a hot topic, not only with adults in areas like drinking and driving and addiction, but also with teen drinking and the stereotypes that surround it. Think of your knee-jerk reaction, likely having to do with teens getting wasted and making bad, or unsafe, decisions. But drinking is a socially acceptable adult activity that is shared across class lines. And as our children grow into adulthood, it's reasonable that they might want to explore it. As with all learning, it's about where they are coming from as they learn.

Think about it from a teen's perspective. If they live in an environment with strict rules against drinking, to explore the topic they will have to rebel against their parents' wishes. This is an alienating position to be forced to take and means there are no openings for conversations with their parents because they have to hide their exploration. Or maybe their home is not actively strict, the parents accept that teen drinking happens, but in their effort to not appear to be complicit, the topic is banned and discussion is basically off-limits. Again, the teen is left to explore on their own, though in this case they can probably call for a ride in an emergency situation. Of course, there are always the families where the parents just don't really care to be involved much at all.

What kind of learning is happening in these situations? The kids are interested, they want to explore the topic, but the only experience being shared and learned from here is the direct experience of the teen, and maybe their immediate peers. That's pretty limited. You might add in the conflicting advertising they've been exposed to over the years: the heart-wrenching ads depicting the drastic consequences of drinking and driving, versus the "your life will be awesome like this when you drink" ads of the beer and liquor companies. All with seeds of truth but spun to the extreme ends of the spectrum in an ever-spiralling attempt to shout over each other. Fear versus fun. And that fear, while they know it rationally to be true, feels very disconnected from their everyday lives. "That won't happen to me." That's why fear isn't a good motivator—people don't want to live in fear. It can be overwhelming and they tend to ignore it rather than try to incorporate it into their daily lives.

But what might it look like in a family where no topic is taboo? In these families, all sorts of things might come up in connection with drinking alcohol. Chances are the teens have probably already tried and/or enjoyed some drinks along with their parents over the years as their curiosity was piqued—champagne on New Year's, wine with celebratory dinners, a cold beer on a hot summer afternoon. Or maybe alcohol just hasn't been part of the family's lifestyle, but the topic is not taboo either. If and when teens are interested in exploring it, sharing your experiences will help them learn more about it. There are so many facets that might come up, from the range of physical and emotional effects of alcohol, to various motivations for drinking, to the risks of drinking and driving, to the idea of alcohol as a "social lubricant", to the more factual side of things like how it's made, the history, the social conventions surrounding it, the nitty gritty of how the body processes it and so on. There's also the topic of teen drinking itself and its place in society as a

symbol of rebellion against parental rules, and its misuse as a means to escape an unhappy life, as well as the topics of addiction and alcoholism, related genetics, and ways to watch your drinking patterns. Better to give your teen good, honest information so they can use it to make choices they are comfortable with.

Alcohol has had a profound effect on some lives, and it can be really hard to work through those fears to support the learning of the next generation. I don't mean working through them with a goal of getting past and ignoring them, but to be able to share your experience with your teen without being overwhelmed by those fears. Fear gets in the way of understanding, of real learning. And understanding is a much better place from which to make choices.

From the teen's perspective, which family would feel most supportive of you as a growing and learning person? From the parent's perspective, in which family do you think you would have the more significant input in the teen's learning about alcohol? If as a parent you choose to draw a line around any topic, you are in effect saying you don't want to be involved with their learning on that topic, if they choose to explore it. Remember, at the end of the day, unless you literally chain them up, you can't control another person's actions. They are going to make their own choices; they are going to explore things that they find interesting, things they come across in life.

If you want to best support their learning, at all ages, be open and involved. To that end, a strong relationship helps you to understand them as best you can, and provide support that helps them make choices that move them toward being the person they want to be, from where they are in this moment.

Barring extenuating circumstances, teens don't want to make choices that hurt themselves in the end. But we are bombarded with images of teens making "bad" choices. How might that happen?

It's all in the perspective from which they show up. At the karate dojo, all the kids show up for the same class; they all seem similar, they all start lined up, ready to bow in. It's not until you see them in action that you can begin to differentiate between them.

There's a wide range of motivations and perspectives. There are those that are there because a doctor recommended it based on an ADHD diagnosis; others because their parents want them to get some exercise; some are there tonight because their parent insisted, even though they didn't feel like coming; and a handful are there because they fully chose to be. After they bow in they all behave according to their perspective, motivations, and personality. Our actions show who we are.

Same with teens showing up at a party: that act in itself doesn't define them as "troublemakers" or "wild" or "rebels". But through what motivations are they acting? Are they there to escape controlling parents, their biggest motivation being to get out of their house? Is their goal to get drunk, act crazy, and finally get some attention this week? To drink enough to forget the pressure they feel in the rest of their life because they know no other ways to handle it? To have a couple drinks and relax and chat with their friends? To let loose and dance? To work up the courage to chat with that girl they like? So many perspectives. Not all are stereotypical teen partiers. In fact, when you look at them individually, maybe none are. They all have their stories. They are a collection of their experiences, perspectives, and personalities. Placing them in a box and judging them will not help any of them grow into the person they want to be.

In situations such as these, what often distinguishes an unschooling teen from their peers is simply the perspective and motivation with which they show up. That informs their actions from that point on.

One big difference is that most mainstream teens don't yet have a lot of experience analyzing situations and making choices—up to this point, their parents have likely been telling them what to do. Now they find themselves on their own in new situations and without the decision-making tools to make some reasonable assumptions and extrapolations. Not only that, they are also faced with competing motivations. They don't explicitly plan on ending up in a tight spot, but maybe their wish to escape the control of their parents is even stronger. That's really hard stuff to sort through on your own. They can end up making choices based more on going against someone else, rather than for themselves. Conversely, an unschooling teen won't likely attempt things far out of their comfort zone because they don't feel controlled by others so there is no growing drive to escape. With freedom, they grow into these situations and choices when they feel ready to challenge themselves, at a wide range of ages. Though it's not necessarily when you feel ready to let them

go. And of course, there will be choices made that, in the end, they wouldn't make again—some call them mistakes. I believe Kelly Lovejoy calls them "learning-takes" because they definitely learn a lot from those experiences as well.

That's why having the patience and trust to support your unschooling child in analyzing situations and making choices as they grow up is so important—that skill is wonderful to have in their toolbox, not only as teens, but as adults too.

So, where does that bring us? Especially if you have younger kids, my point is not to overwhelm you! Remember, you will grow as a parent as your child grows. When your child is seven, don't challenge yourself to be the parent of a seventeen year-old! Today, just feel good knowing that you will grow along with them, that your relationship will grow along with both of you. Be open to things, to exploring life with your child at EVERY age.

Remember when you first came across unschooling, you probably heard or read of some "crazy" things those unschoolers did that you were pretty sure you wouldn't ever be comfortable doing. Then you learned more about the principles behind unschooling, and you learned even more by watching and being with your child. And now you're doing those things! Remember that learning and growing process of yours when your children get older. Realize that right now you probably do have lines in your mind about who your child will grow up to be, things you think they should or shouldn't do. Realize that as you, your child, and your relationship grow, those lines are probably going to shift, or dissolve altogether. Just realize it, no more. Think "Wow. It'll be so fun to discover the parent I'll be when I have teens." You don't need to work through it all today. But also realize that it won't be as hard as you likely imagine right now that it will be, because you'll have spent those years between now and then learning more and more about your children as people. Things they want, or don't want, to do in the future will most likely develop over time, and will be connected back to other things and ideas. There really won't be too many big surprises. Relax.

But my advice for now is to not get too attached to your lines!

Continue to grow with your child, enjoy being challenged around your edges—from taking that extra outing this week because your child wants to go, to making that overnight trip to another country to see a show, to considering that your child may be moving out to explore life's adventures a lot earlier than you expected.

If you stay open and supportive, if your relationship is strong and connected, if instead of seeing lines your child may not cross, you instead just see your CHILD, you will enjoy travelling through life together.

And remember to have fun!!