BRAIN, CHILD
the magazine for thinking mothers

Backstepping

Robin Schoenthaler, MD
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I have many strong suits; dancing is not one of them. So the day I nail a complicated backstep on my very first try it's hard to tell who is more shocked, my dance instructor or me.

My dance teacher, graceful on the floor and off, asks me if I've been, um, practicing at home.

Now of course I haven't been practicing. I'm a single mom with two kids and a job, and it's everything I can do to get to this one-hour dance class each week. But I blurt out, "Yes, I do a lot of backsteps at home, with my teenager," and then feel embarrassed when she looks impressed.

Because in point of fact, my fourteen-year-old son and I haven't danced together in ten years; the very thought of it makes Kenzie break out in hives. Still, everything I know about backing up and backing away and apparently backing around a dance floor I've learned while parenting a teen.

When my kids were babies, being a mother felt fully frontal—all that feeding and rocking and cooing. Then, gradually, my parenting became more and more about the side-by-side—walking alongside the kids holding hands, crouching beside them at playdates, scrunching up next to them in teeny tiny chairs at pre-K, sitting beside them at movie theaters and soccer games.

Then along came adolescence, and my side-by-side parenting began to wane. I noticed it first at the mall, trailing behind the kids like a geisha. And every day it happens more: I find myself hanging back or stepping backwards, turning to move behind them, letting them go forward, out in front. I'm becoming a parent who pivots, scrambling to get out of the way.

I've watched these kinds of parent/teen backsteps during the confirmations and bar and bat mitzvahs we've attended over the last few years, too. They all seem to include a moment when the child moves front and center and the parents pivot and do a backstep. Our neighborhood church, a Unitarian Universalist congregation outside of Boston, holds its own coming of age service every June for kids finishing middle school. As Kenzie wound down eighth grade and began to prepare for his ceremony, I wondered how the church would present this new phase of his life.

I also wondered how I would make it through the day. I'm not very good at these kinds of ceremonies. I'm a world-class weeper, which mortifies my eleven-year-old son, Cooper, halfway to a coronary (the more-experienced Kenzie has come to some sort of grudging Zen state of surrender about mom's waterworks). Plus I tend to approach these kinds of ceremonies in one of two ways: either endlessly obsess about every aspect of the day to the point of madness, or go on auto-ignore until standing at the local convenience store asking about clip-on ties half an hour before the kid is due to line up.

A couple of months before the ceremony we schedule a family vacation. Just before we leave, all our preparations blow up—quite literally—in our faces. Volcanic ash disrupts travel all over the Eastern seaboard, not to mention a little conclave called The Whole of Western Europe, and my attempts to reschedule flights are flummoxed in the ensuing chaos.

Right as I'm ready to give up entirely and do a staycation week (which will no doubt consist of six days

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of yelling at the boys to quit playing video games and one day of cyber-surrender), Kenzie takes over. During the course of a single afternoon I watch as he gradually crafts a smart set of Amtrak timetables, sorted by direction, departure time, and price. We pack and depart on a sleeper car for Chicago, leaving old airline tickets in their envelopes on the floor.

When we walk into the train station, Kenz strides ahead, managing the luggage while Cooper and I bring up the rear. It sets the tone for much of the trip.

On the train, Kenzie takes a kitty-corner seat in front of Coop and me; he always does this these days. Does he want me watching his back, or does he want me out of sight? Did this happen with our German ancestors on their Kansas-bound immigrant trains—did they sit kitty-corner or on benches side by side? And did my siblings and I do the same with our own beleaguered mom: Did we cling to her skirts, or did we pretend she wasn't there?

Kenzie takes to the streets of Chicago like a native, sidling right in with his newfound loping gait. A few months earlier, I'd started to notice a change in his stride, but when I teased him about it ("Quite the swagger, big guy"), he would smooth his strutting out. Not anymore: Wherever we go, his hips go first, rocking and rambling down the street.

In a clothing store on the Magnificent Mile, Kenz homes in on a black rocker shirt. Once he was a boy who wore all sweats all the time, but sometime during the last year he's become a serious shopper, a clothes hound. At stores I sit outside dressing rooms while he works his way through armloads of shirts. Out of nowhere he has developed his own specific style, and he often knows it when he sees it. There in Chicago, he sees it.

Outrageously priced and über-trendy, the shirt stands in the window and calls his name. Kenz tries it on in the middle of the store and stands with one hip jutted. He meets my eyes in the mirror and after a moment's pause launches into a soliloquy on all the reasons he has to have it, rattling on about the singularity of this shirt, the way it fits his hips and lifestyle, and how it really is a perfect example of his carpe diem way of life.

His passion (for a shirt!) is irresistible. I end up fronting him the money. I am not a money-fronter (a family motto admonishes that "this is a home, not a credit union"), but I front him the money.

At the cashier's desk he slides in front of me to chat with the salesclerk about some heavy metal lyrics. Standing behind him I see, as if for the first time, how the soft baby circles of his boy body are evolving into teenage triangles—the base of his neck, the muscles in his calves, the torso tapering more every week.

He wears the shirt out of the store. He doesn't take it off for three straight days. His arms disappear in the sleeves, the shirt tail bounces with his strut. Every time I see this skinny guy swimming in a big black shirt it takes me a long minute to realize who he is.

He's still wearing the shirt when we land at the trendy Graham Elliot restaurant our last night in Chicago. It's got a "bistronomic" menu—haute-cuisine casual bistro food, Kenz informs me breezily, having heard all about it on Top Chef. He orders a never-heard-of-it-before dish. Even before he starts to chew I see his eyes turn inward. He begins to groan with pleasure, and I think for a minute that he is going to swoon right under the table.

The waiter lights up when he sees Kenzie's response. They chat back and forth about ingredients, spices,

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cooking techniques. When he realizes that Kenz is both a budding cook and a Top Chef fan, he escorts us into the kitchen (the kitchen!). The chefs gather round to chat with my son; they encircle him. I start to talk a bit about the meal, but then I realize this is all about Kenz and these young chefs; they are there to talk to him.

The head chef—who is wearing a beret in the middle of this high-intensity, high-end restaurant kitchen and is therefore dazzling to us all—appears out of nowhere and steps into the circle to talk to my son.

The light in the kitchen streams down on the tableau—the thirty-something, bereted head chef, the rocker-shirted, hundred-pound teen, the circled tribe of sous chefs. For maybe the first time ever, I consciously step backwards; I want to be in no one's sightlines. The chef, astonishingly generous, invites Kenzie back for a day of cooking the next time we're in town. "Help you learn what it's like," he offers. "Come on back, work alongside us," he treats him like a man. He looks him straight in the eye and talks about the unwritten script that is his future.

Kenz floats out of the kitchen. By the time he hits the sidewalk he looks about three inches taller: shoulder blades nearly touching, hips trim and rocking, eyes clear and gazing far ahead. After a pause my boy murmurs, "I can't believe how long he talked to me," and the rest of the walk he is silent.

The next afternoon we take the sleeper car back to Boston. Kenz and Coop sleep curled up in the bunks above me; I listen to their steady dreamy breathing from below. Within an hour of our arrival home Kenzie signs up for cooking classes.

Throughout the spring, out of nowhere, he takes over the kitchen. I sit and watch him cook, flinging energy and salt. While he reads his recipes he tosses utensils in the air, flipping the serving forks over and over, then the spoons, sometimes his pie pans. He learns to whisk, and I watch his forearm muscles, every day more defined. He takes to striding outside to yank long stalks of herbs straight from the garden. He tosses half the plant, unwashed and uncut, into his dishes. We find twigs in everything we eat. At least once a week he says to me, "See how my thyme flies," and I obligingly groan, and then smile and turn away.

Meanwhile, the upcoming coming of age ceremony looms. Our assignments for the ceremony are deceptively simple. Each teen is to write a five-minute speech, and each parent is to present a symbolic object that conveys their hopes and dreams for that child. I begin to speculate about what gift I will offer to Kenzie and what hopes and dreams I want to define.

In May our church holds a special service honoring high school seniors. In prior years I had watched "Senior Ceremonies" with scant attention, soothed by the usual magical thinking that my own kids would "never be that old."

Now, only two weeks away from Kenzie's eighth-grade ceremony, I walk right into an emotional pluckfest. The most enervating, chest-clutching, and groping-blindly-for-the-Kleenex moment takes place when the minister cups her hands around the cheeks of each high school senior and says to them: "Aren't you just something? So now off you go, dear one. Off you go."

I honestly don't recall ever seeing anyone outside of a French film touch an eighteen-year-old's cheek with that kind of tenderness. I begin sobbing, an EmoMom mess, impervious to Cooper's hissing, "Please don't sniff so loud!"

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Watching those catch-your-breath-gorgeous seniors bask in the heat and light of their transitions, it dawns on me what I want to talk about at Kenzie's coming of age ceremony: his moment in the heat and light of the restaurant kitchen in Chicago—the first time I watched him carry on a man-to-man conversation outside of our own family circle, the first time I saw him radiant with the potential of his wide-open future, the first time I consciously made myself step back out of his way.

I decide my "gift" should be the restaurant's eponymous shirt. I can't buy it online, but in searching for it I locate the head chef's e-mail address, and I instantly write him a gushing e-mail fan letter. I tell this near-total stranger everything about my son, the restaurant, their food, our church, the ceremony, the kitchen, the light; I believe I also mention his beret, perhaps more than once.

Throughout the e-mail I try to tell him about what it means to see a young son grow taller in a high-end, crowded commercial kitchen, and what it feels like to deliberately move backwards and witness it all.

The moment I press "send," I am embarrassed. This poor young chef, working night and day, trying to do some nice kitchen tour PR, and what is his reward? A middle-aged mom gushing about some kid he can barely remember. I figure e-mail silence will reign, not so much a guarded silence as a sniffing "weirdo e-mail" non-reply.

But his response pops up in my inbox almost immediately, sweet and touched and self-reflective. He promises to send the T-shirt posthaste. I write back and thank him (for stepping up, for writing back, for not putting my e-mail into the folder marked "fan letter, subtype: geezer") and settle back to wait. Of course, geezer that I am, I don't remember to give him our home address until forty-eight hours before the ceremony at which point it becomes a nail-biting FedEx race to the finish.

In the end, the T-shirt arrives safely, as does the appointed day. The kids line up outside the church, skinny, eye-rolling, all dressed up. My boy wears his rocker shirt and truly looks divine. Each boy-child and girl-woman walks up to the lectern and speaks with a clear voice while the congregation listens with sweetness and intent. After they finish, we parents walk behind them, newly stationed in the back.

Each parent steps forward to present his or her gift. One set of parents gives a toolbox, another a Dr. Who action figure. Two different sets of parents choose fedoras for their boys, both exactly the same type, both for different reasons. One mom gives her daughter a prism, a single dad shares a chin-up bar, a couple gives their rangy boy a pie labeled pi.

When my turn comes, I step up beside my Kenzie, in front of hundreds of people, in front of him. I look into the eyes of my rocker-shirted, soft-eyed, skinny-guy son and am rendered essentially mute. Finally my words spill out, contorted, jumbled, the story twists around. I have less than a minute to speak, but I want to tell it all, the train tracks, the dance steps, the rocker shirt, the restaurant, the kitchen, the head chef, the fork flipping, the twigs in our food. I keep repeating the word beret.

I look into my son's eyes, his gorgeous eyes, glowing part tolerance, part embarrassment, part bone marrow intuition that this is all worth it, part smart-guy grinning at predictable mom ("of course she's crying, DUH"). I start to sense our new order together. I feel the alignment begin to rotate, and I feel him shifting, too.

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From here on out, it's going to be mostly about that backstep. If he gets a fever, yes, I will step forward. In the car alone we will sit abreast, and with his brother we'll sit in a circle.

But when he talks to friends I will stand back; and on school trips he will sit behind me, melding into kin group. And when there is a woman—like the girl who pressed her thigh into his during the ceremony's line-up, don't think I didn't see that, you little trollop—when there is a woman, there will be no backness back enough. I will not even be a shadow in the room.

We look out on it together, and then I give him the restaurant's T-shirt, nervous for a moment that he outgrew it just last week. But it's fine, and he loves it. We have a quick air hug, and then my mama-babble is over and so is my mama-lead. It's done.

All I have to do now is what I have to do for the rest of my life: back up and back away. So, I do, I do it, I turn and I pivot. I walk away from him and his rocker shirt, from him and his friends clutching their new gifts, from him and his gorgeous eyes and his smart-guy grin. I go stand in my new place just behind him, while he moves forward, carrying the T-shirt, becoming a silhouette in the light.

Author's Note: Kenzie still fits in the Graham Elliot T-shirt, just barely, and it's now got a lot of cooking stains on the front. The rocker shirt from Chicago looks like it will fit for at least another year or so. Cooper's coming of age ceremony take place in less than two years. I've already bought some Kleenex.

This piece is dedicated to Kim Foglia, a fantastic teacher, parent, mentor and friend. Her tragically short life, as well as her premature death from pancreatic cancer, was full of lessons and gifts. On the same day that this essay was officially accepted for publication, I also received word that Kim had, just prior to her death, transferred her "lifetime subscription" to Brain, Child to me. She died two weeks later. She is deeply missed.