

# Tracking Growth

by Kate Buckmeier

My son, Seth, turned thirteen in May, as cases of COVID-19 climbed in Minnesota and we entered the final days of the governor's stay-at-home order. We celebrated with a traditional breakfast-in-bed wake up, my husband's hand-made paper towel birthday signs taped around the house, and the dinner of his choice, Grandma's manicotti, which she dropped off quickly so she wouldn't be tempted to hug. But this social kid, the kid who makes a new friend everywhere he goes, didn't get to be with friends. Any other year, he would share cupcakes on the deck with his neighborhood gang of boys and then we'd plan a special outing with a couple close friends. A day at the ballpark watching the Minnesota Twins has been a hit for my spring birthday boy, but this year we didn't mark the right of passage with any of those things. Just one more in a long list of disappointments he has handled with a maturity that seems unreasonable for his age. A sign of the growth these months have brought to our house.

Each week I look at him and marvel at his height. He seems to grow a half inch every time I look up. I have started pulling out the measuring tape to confirm my astonishment. His head used to fit under my chin during one of his long hugs - he is a hugger - but not anymore. He is close to 5'7" now, so I have to turn my head just a little and feel his nose against my chin. The new basketball shoes he was so excited about on his birthday give his big toes blisters now and I wonder how many of his pants will be too short next month.

I take a picture of him and his dad, a man of average height, after one of their intense games of half court basketball. They stand back-to-back, chests out, shoulders pulled up as I record this time before he quickly passes us all. He regularly measures himself against his older

sister, something she hates, and boasts about becoming the tallest kid in the family. My family is tall, my brother and dad are a few inches over six feet, so I always wondered if he would look them in the eye some day. It seems like a possibility.

We ordered a new bed and rearranged his room over the summer. His old twin bed was a hand-me-down from his sister and he complained about it being too small. I agreed, it was thin and short, yet we'd still find a way to lie side-by-side and read chapter books at bedtime.

For a while, especially around age ten, bedtime was stressful and we weren't sure how we'd get through it. His mind would start to race with fears after we turned out the light and left the door open a crack. We tried a noise machine, a meditation CD, closing the door completely, tracing letters and shapes on his back. Nothing helped. Grudgingly, my husband and I took turns waiting up on the couch in anticipation of him coming down the hall to ask, "Are you sure all the doors are locked? Did you hear that noise? What time are you going to bed? What if I can't get to sleep?" We'd offer reassurance and point him back toward his room, crossing our fingers. But typically he'd repeat the cycle until one of us would follow him down the hall to fluff his nest of pillows and then stretch out beside him, hugging the edge of the mattress, waiting. Finally his steady breathing hinted it was ok to tiptoe out.

Now, he picks out his own chapter book and turns off the light when he's ready. If given the chance, he'd sleep in. Late. Black-out shades and a noisy ceiling fan keep him sheltered from the activity in the rest of the house. Most mornings I open the door and find him sprawled sideways across the queen bed that takes up half the room. The white sheet is puddled on the floor at the end of the bed, the comforter is tangled across his mid-section, and a long leg is hanging off the bed, revealing flannel pj pants that fall inches short of his ankle bone.

Sunday nights can still bring a hit of anxiety. His body not ready to adjust to the earlier bedtime after the late weekend nights, or his mind worried about being the last person up. A few times a month, his head pops around our door frame to let us know he'll be reading just a little bit longer and usually that's all it takes. Still, on those nights, I leave my own light on even after my eyes start to burn, just to be sure.

I never imagined by age thirteen, he would already have created his own little life, complete with a bedroom resembling a college dorm room. Piles of plates, bowls, cups, and empty bottles surround the grey Ikea couch, where he spends his time watching *The Office* reruns while playing *Boom Beach* or checking off a bit of homework. He listens to hours of Youtube reviews on the latest basketball shoes, the best baseball bats, and the coolest cars. Every once in a while I get texts with photos of his favorites and I'm grateful he's still eager to share his world with me. I bite my tongue, resisting a lecture on how material things don't equate happiness. I've mentioned this a few times already and realize if I'm not careful, my critiques could squash his dreams. Instead, I tell myself to focus on all the creativity he is taking in. I love that he is crazy about good design, notices intricate details, and follows his curiosity. And he is a big dreamer, a quality I wish I had fostered in myself.

We used to have strict rules about technology time, forty-five minutes a day, but as the pandemic stretched on, those restrictions laxed. I worry I should set firmer boundaries or maybe create a schedule for his days, but my husband reminds me of all the things our son has already given up. I tell myself a little extra time doing something that brings him relief or escape can't be too bad. I offer myself the same permission as the weight of wanting to be a connected, responsive, intentional parent becomes exhausting during such an uncertain time. A time when the

four of us circle our 1950s Rambler, trading spaces, negotiating needs, sharing meals. Together all the time. I search for ways to recharge or let myself off the hook to avoid my own meltdown.

He's witnessed a few of those meltdowns, me overwhelmed and crying. I wish I could shield his sensitive heart and always put on a brave face, but I know it isn't fair to pretend things are easy and normal. He's too in tune not to notice when anyone is in a mood. He has a tendency to take other people's emotions personally, so I make sure to reassure him I'm ok and this is how people can react when life keeps throwing curveballs.

This summer, Seth walked in as my husband and I struggled over the decision to sign him up for a local basketball camp offering short indoor practices. He watched me wipe away tears and voice my frustration over the energy involved in any decision - every decision these days! Every choice, big or small, seems masked in uncertainty, risk, and tension. Everything vague and up for interpretation. I like clarity and control. I like to know what to expect, especially when it comes to my kids. I've been pushed to stretch and grow over these long months, whether I like it or not.

When my daughter was thirteen, we belonged to a mother-daughter group. Six moms and six daughters met monthly, rotating houses to share a meal and support each other through the ups and downs of puberty. No topic was off-limits and while my daughter grumbled at some of the activities, the group made it easier to talk about how it feels to become a teenager. I can only hope my daughter learned as much about herself as I did during those two years, but, I have no support system built like this for Seth and I. No mother-son group. I check with my sister and there is the occasional conversation with one of the other moms as we stand at the ballpark, but Seth seems a little outside the norm for a kid his age. He likes to talk, even to other parents,

and isn't afraid to tell me what's going on. I know I don't always hear the whole story, but I'm grateful he's willing to talk. And I'm hopeful that even if I don't have the answers, at least he can come to me with questions. We will have to learn together.

I leave him be most of the day. Checking in to see if he has eaten, asking about his plans. His only real responsibilities besides his homework are to clean up the mess he creates on the floor, put away his clean clothes, and mow the lawn once a week. I increased his pay under the condition he sweeps the grass off the sidewalk and the curb. I often have to remind him of those extra steps and sometimes it takes days for him to finish the job. I wonder if I am spoiling him and know it wouldn't hurt to have him contribute more to our little family, but for now, during this time, I let it be.

I've let other things go as the months tick by. Early on, I boycotted eating family dinners at the table. Instead, the four of us perch around the coffee table, on the front step, or out on the deck. I'm not sure I understood, back in late March, how much we would need these simple shake-ups to usual routines. I did have an inkling our already strained patience would most likely break sitting across from each other day after day, all of our less desirable table manners, like Seth clearing food from his braces with his finger, magnified. I have come to appreciate any change that allows us to stay connected but with lighter expectations.

But, dinner conversation is anything but light most evenings, as the kids want to share the latest news or talk through their concerns. Seth is on social media now, another change over the pandemic, and typically reads breaking news before I do. He used to leave the table early, as the talk turned more serious, but now he is just as informed as his older sister. We discuss social justice, health care, privilege, and politics. I notice less eye-rolls from my daughter as he offers

thoughtful arguments. She is passionate about politics, devouring podcasts the way most teens consume junk food, so she can be quick to correct him or offer a short “lesson” on something he doesn’t quite get. I wish he could’ve stayed naive to the realities of our world a little longer, but I’m grateful we work out our opinions, questions, and feelings together, learning from each other. I know he’ll be better equipped to recognize and stand up for the things he believes in.

I hear the door close multiple times a day as he goes out to shoot hoops with his headphones on. His basketball skills are improving and he is proud of his initiative. His wiry arms are starting to curve with small muscles from the push-ups he does when he’s bored. Some days he takes our dog for a walk. Other days he takes off on his bike, headed downtown to meet a couple friends for lunch outside in the city square. His grey mask and hand sanitizer are tucked into the pouch on his bike. His knobby knees are hard to miss as he coasts down the lane on the red bike I never imagined he’d outgrow so quickly.

Most nights he gets ready for bed at the same time my husband and I do. We prod him to get going, then end up waiting while he spends too long in the bathroom. We lie in bed reading, waiting for our turn in the bathroom we share. Eventually the door opens and he crouches down at the foot of our bed to give the dog a quick rub-down and kiss before climbing in bed between us. It’s a tight squeeze but with his arms wrapped around both of us, he kisses our cheeks and tells us how much he loves us. I get a small whiff of his Fiji-scented deodorant before he heads off to bed.

Last night while lying between us, he looked up and asked, “Do you think some night you could tell me a sleep story like you used to and rub my back, maybe draw a picture on it?”

I stopped reading, turned my head to check the bedside clock and told him, “Only if you go to bed earlier.”

He grumbled, gave another squeeze, and headed off to his room, calling, “I love you.” I was left staring at the ceiling, chiding myself for my brusqueness. I could have told him yes on the spot. That I miss our old routines too. But I was tired and thinking only of how I still had to muster the energy to pull myself out of the warm covers to wash my face and brush my teeth. I was forgetting how few and far between these moments are and how quickly things change.

Tonight I’ll hang out until he’s heated up his lavender rice bag and tucked himself in and then sneak in and ask him to scootch over. We’ll lie shoulder to shoulder, our bodies almost the same length, as I read a chapter in Harry Potter and then switch off the bedside light. I’ll have him turn over so I can trace racetracks around his smooth back while crafting a story about a boy placing a birthday wish inside a balloon, filling it with helium, almost to bursting, and letting it go to float higher and higher across a sky of cottony clouds. My voice will soften as I describe the clouds and ask him to imagine resting on one, totally relaxed. I’ll stretch the tale until I can’t keep from yawning, then give his back a gentle pat, and roll off the bed. But, before I get to the door, I’ll hear his nightly sign-off, “I love you.” And I’ll cherish this little bit of steadiness in the midst of all the change.