

A Love Letter to Eleven

By Jill A. Kuhn, Ph.D.

Exactly 11-years ago I began writing this column (including finding excellent guest columnists). The editor at that time, and I, decided I would have my first column come out the summer of 2004. I chose the June 1 deadline as my 2nd child was due towards the end of February, and I guessed I might be hard pressed to make the March 1 deadline. Indeed eleven* took her time coming into this world and was born on Leap Day, 2004. Since then, she has jumped head first into life. As a mom, I have already gone through my oldest being eleven years old and living in that in between place between childhood and adolescence. Even though the age of eleven has some similarities, each of my children have made it their very own.

Eleven is love and light, with an occasional call for showers. When she was a baby, I affectionately nicknamed her, “party girl.” She was happy, loved people, jumped into any activity and loved life. She was riding her bike without training wheels at age three and jumping off a diving board (with water wings), into our trusting arms. She showed no fear and delighted in activity, intensity and excitement. Eleven will sit in my lap and although my arms are around her will wrap them around her even tighter, just as she did when she was little. However, now friends can’t be present for this display of affection. Eleven does invite me to join her friends in being silly, lets me tickle her in front of them and brags of my sense of humor (I know these days are numbered). I had bilateral total knee replacement last year, and since then, eleven has taken my hand to steady me when walking. I don’t need the support now, but I will happily take her hand and not tell her I am fine to walk unassisted. I know these days are limited too. At age four, she would often tell me at naptime that she couldn’t stop telling me how much she loved me. She continues to do so, even though she isn’t trying to avoid naps. She bursts with feelings for her family. This has included writing a beautiful essay to my dad about what an amazing grandfather he is and a book about my mom being a superhero, both for school assignments. She is observant and notices the unique expressions, ways of standing, and hand movements of family, friends and teachers, which she can impersonate with precision and humor. Eleven has a quickly passing storm more often these days. Sometimes this intensity is eleven angrily telling me, “you always” or “you never” and then ten minutes later apologizing with a hug she initiates (and is assertive about making sure I hug her hard enough). If I have hurt her feelings eleven forgives easily and the storm is over.

Eleven is very extraverted, whereas the rest of our family straddles the introvert/extravert line. She wants constant interaction and, true to an extravert, processes most of her thoughts out loud. Once she is home from a friend’s house or a friend has left ours, she immediately tries to sell us on the next social activity. Now that it stays light later and school is out, our doorbell constantly rings and she will stay outside with neighborhood friends until we drag her in. Even though she can chatter for long periods, she does not want us to talk for very long. My spouse is also a psychologist, and although we learned with eleven’s older sister that conversations must be kept on the shorter side, eleven does not want to be talked to or have a “boring” conversation that lasts more than two minutes. Yet she has benefitted from these “solution-focused” conversations and aptly applies them in relating to peers. She will let a friend know when her feelings are hurt, or that it will take time to trust a friend who broke her trust and uses words (much to our delight) like “issues” or “process.” When eleven becomes aware of how she

might have contributed to a problem with a friend, she is quick to suggest that they agree to both work on their role in the conflict and apologize, if necessary. The reality is that she has taught me so much about compassion and forgiveness. I sometimes want to hold a grudge or stay irritated at the offending child. When she overhears these conversations between her dad and me she tells me "I'm fine. It's over."

Eleven has a blindingly beautiful heart and she has found her voice this year. She has always been a leader with her peers in organizing activities or games on the playground. However, this school year she has found her voice in talking back to peers who are mean or tease others peers. Even when her closest friends are the perpetrators to an act of unkindness eleven will casually remark, "well if you won't include them, then I am not playing," or "if you are making fun of them for what they are wearing then you should make fun of me too." Or she will outright tell them they are being unkind and that that is wrong. On Minecraft she has called out other gamers who refer to something as "that's so gay." She will ask, "What is wrong with being gay?" And "have you thought about how that might feel to someone who is gay?" Having been bullied herself as a younger child, she is keenly aware of what it is like when friends become tormentors. When I hear about these events, I tell eleven how proud I am for her standing up for what is right. She doesn't allow these words to go to her head and instead turns this into a compliment towards me. She is grace, caring and compassionate beyond words.

Eleven is a competitive soccer player. Eleven is just plain competitive. She plays goalie for her team. Soccer started out as our sport of choice at age four, but quickly became her passion and choice. This is another place where her zest for life and no-fear way of living shows up. Eleven will offer a friendly hand to players from the other team who fall, even when they angrily bat her away. She will jump into the fray, risking a foot to her throat or a cleat scrapped across her thigh as she takes possession of the ball. She won't cry when she is injured and only after the game, on the way home, will we discover exactly what happened. Bruises are par for the course and badges of honor. The more bruises and scrapes, the more eleven thinks she has demonstrated toughness.

Eleven also carries a lot of medical problems, including a chronic pain condition. Most of the time she finds the silver lining, but some days is discouraged at all she has to endure. It is completely unfair that such a young child should carry such a large load. She knows it is more than many of her peers. We try to be available when she is overwhelmed by pain and/or being different. It would be a heavy, heavy load for a grown up and is just heartbreaking to see her suffer. I would do anything to take it away from her, but all I can do is help her navigate coping, compliance, safety and living her life in spite of the struggles.

As eleven is my second (and last) child, it can sometimes feel like I'm having a lot of parenting lasts, yet these are all firsts to her and I don't want to jump ahead of being fully present in her age and experiences. Eleven was promoted from fifth grade this past week and we are leaving elementary school behind for good. When her sister finished fifth grade, eleven was in kindergarten. We had lots of time. Eleven loves her sister fiercely and wants her approval and attention. As a day old baby she woke up crying and big sister jumped out of bed and said, "she needs her sister." Eleven, who has severe food allergies, had to be given an Epi-pen a couple of months ago. Big sister was still sleeping, but when it came time to give eleven the injection she begged us to get her. Big sister flew out of bed and held eleven's hand and that made everything so much easier to bear.

Age eleven is the bridge between elementary and middle school. The bridge between childhood and adolescence. The bridge between telling us all the details of her day to having her own privacy. The bridge between needing us to take care of and needing us to let go. I worked very hard to grow, change and become the mother my oldest needed as she became a teenager. It was hard fought by both of us, but has had a tremendously positive payoff. The thought of going through this again is daunting, but I am accepting that I will also go through some painful moments in figuring out this unique child and what she needs from me as she continues on the road to independence and spreading her wings. Although admittedly apprehensive at times, I am so privileged to be mom to eleven. Just like with my oldest, she is and continues to become her own fascinating person. It's incredible to see who she is maturing into, and it's an amazing privilege to be eleven's mom and share her journey!

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