



By Margaret Evans, Editor

This month marks a somewhat terrifying milestone in the life of my family. In a couple of weeks, our daughter will be a teenager. It's been coming on for a while now – the eye rolling, the constant texting, the bikini-clad beach walking – but I've been in denial.

Even now, as her 13th birthday swirls toward the shore of my fragile psyche like a Category 5 hurricane, I'm still not sure how this happened to nice people like us.

Nor am I sure why, despite our child's all-too-imminent adulthood, the task of cleaning out her bedroom shelves recently fell to good ol' Mom. Nevertheless, there I was last Saturday, standing before what I now think of nostalgically as "the Wall of Childhood," wondering where to begin. We needed to get rid of old stuff – lots and lots of old stuff – to make room for the new stuff piled on every surface in her little room. We hadn't addressed this situation in years – not in any serious way – so much of that new stuff was actually pretty old.

Like the reality of having a teenager, I'd been putting off this job for ages – not just because I hate to clean, but because I hate to cry. Wait, strike that. I *love* to cry. Just not when I'm sad. And getting rid of stuffed animals, Play-Doh, and princess costumes to make way for curling irons, cosmetic kits, and a zillion smelly lotions seemed like the very definition of "sad" to me.

I looked around at the purple walls – lavender, actually – remembering how Jeff painted over the celadon-green when we re-decorated the room for Amelia's 8th birthday. The plush turquoise bedspread and sheer, sparkly curtains came later – 11, maybe? – when she decided she was too grown up for flowers and butterflies. Now she says she's too grown up for sparkles, so new curtains are, again, on my list.

The Justin Bieber poster over her desk would have to come down soon, I figured. She's a One Direction girl now. How I shuddered when that poster went up! – I still don't know what "Swaggy" means – but now I'd grown kind of attached. JB gets himself in a lot of trouble lately, and those One-D boys are awfully cute, but I'm a loyal woman. Set in my ways. Thirteen, on the other hand, is the epitome of fickle.

I surveyed the chalkboard/easel in the corner, the one my mom gave Amelia for Christmas years ago. It was taller than she was back then, and she couldn't stay away from it. Drawing pictures, writing notes ("I love you, Mommy!"), making lists. Now, more often than not, it's a place to pile coats and jackets. We could use that space for something else, I supposed. Like a coat rack.

But back to the Wall of Childhood, with its colorful canvas boxes full of Barbies and crayons and microscopic Polly Pocket shoes . . . its square receptacles stuffed with coloring books and Webkinz (Webkinzes?) and potholder looms. There was her old abacus on the top shelf, with its bright wooden beads. Ah, the memories... "One, two, three... red, blue, green..."

"Amelia, you probably want to keep this, huh?" I asked. "You've had it forever – I think it was a gift from Nona – and it's so cute."

"Mom, I haven't touched that thing in years. In fact, I don't remember *ever* touching that thing."

Gulp. / remembered. But this was about making space. If she could let go, I certainly could. Into the Goodwill bag it went . . . along with her Cabbage Patch Doll (Christmas 2007), her Sleeping Beauty Doll (Birthday 2004), and an assortment of stuffed animals, all with backstories that clearly meant more to me than they did her.

But what about the American Girl dolls? Oh, how she'd adored them! *Begged* for them. From ages 6 to 9 she could talk of little else. Over time, we collected four of the history dolls – each with clothes, accessories, and books telling their stories. There was her first, Ruthie, from the Depression Era . . . and Rebecca, a turn-of-the-century Russian-Jewish immigrant . . . Who were the other two, again? I couldn't remember. (I couldn't

*believe*

I couldn't remember.) There they sat, lined up in a row on the third shelf, their vacant stares daring me to toss them in the Goodwill bag.

Nope. Sorry. I had to draw the line somewhere. After a brief conference with my own American Girl, who was now on the living room couch staring vacantly at her iPhone, I moved them to the top shelf and squished them together into cozy, space-saving proximity.

As I continued my grueling work, I amused myself by imagining the American Girl history doll for 2014. Some little girl of the far-off future might be the lucky recipient of "Amelia" – a doll with long, flat-ironed hair, dressed in short-shorts and Jack Rogers sandals, with a blasé scowl on her face and a miniature smart phone attached to her plastic hand.

My friend Nancy and I just threw a 13th birthday party for our daughters. (Bella and Amelia have been like sisters since they were three and their birthdays are just a month apart.) As we spied on the 15-or-so girls mingling on Nancy's back deck from our designated cage in the kitchen, we were struck by the sheer omnipresence of the smart phone. Here were a bunch of friends, hanging out on a beautiful Cat Island evening – the sunset gilding the marsh and the tide coming in and the breeze ruffling the palmettoes – and while they seemed to be enjoying each other's company, they all had phones in their hands. And at any given moment throughout the night, at least half of them were looking at those phones. And not looking at each other.

I really don't know what this new social dynamic means for the future . . . if anything. Some say smart phones have become an impediment to easy, authentic communication between young people, and they may be right. I *will* share this anecdote: The girls had originally intended to invite boys to their party, but at the last minute, decided not to. When I asked why, Amelia replied, "They're annoying. All they do is stand around."

Really? I vividly remember my first boy/girl party – I was about Amelia's age – and the boys were *not* just standing around. The party was in somebody's basement. When I descended the stairs into that dusky room, I saw kids slow dancing ("Stairway to Heaven," I think?), and on the sofa, in the corner, there was a couple making out. *Kids my age. Making out.* I still remember the frightening, exhilarating shock of that sight. There in that basement, in that charged split second, something changed irrevocably for me. And I wasn't quite ready for that change. I may be making this up – it's all hazy now – but the 13-year-old girl of my memory went to bed clutching her teddy bear that night.

It's a brave and baffling new world, to be sure, but some things never change. If my American girl's ever-present smart phone is postponing her basement awakening – even for a little while – that's a technology upgrade this mom can embrace.

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