

The Awesome Moms Communication Handbook: How To Keep Your Daughter From Slamming the Door

SCHOOL'S IN SESSION

What Is An Awesome Mom?

Why This Book Is Different

By The Time You Finish This Book

I love teenagers, with their flashes of brilliance, their momentary bravado, and the vulnerability that underlies it all. They are magnificent WIPs –Work In Progress — that vacillate between thinking they've got a handle on things, to freaking out over a pimple. Every teenage emotion is magnified. Each negative look within eyeshot feels personal. Suddenly, the plight of the downtrodden must be herald. Instant joy is just a word away. So is immediate devastation.

And most importantly, every gesture of affection you receive from them is heartfelt.

I taught grades 7-12 over three decades armed with a BS in Science, a M.Ed. in supervision, a certification as a Personal Trainer, years of coaching basketball, cross country and cheerleading, and a tenth grade sense of humor. I worked very hard to find solutions to my students' academic problems so they could achieve success in my classroom. Together, the student, parents, and I strategized how to get the students back on track.

Ten years into my teaching career, I became a mom. I soon discovered being a teacher and a mom are not the same thing. When faced with the issues created by my tiny daughter, I needed to shift gears. I was no longer the caring, but objective educator of teens; I was Mommy... and I was in over my head.

Thank goodness she learned to talk.

What Is An Awesome Mom?

It turns out I was an Awesome Mommy, even when I didn't know what I was doing. That's because we Awesome Moms aren't perfect. We are Awesome. We

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never stop trying when it comes to our children. When we don't know how to do it, we find someone who does, or we look it up. We collect stuff (recipes, articles, hand-me-down clothes, toys, books, lists of child-enhancing activities, pets, the neighborhood kids, etc.). That's what Awesome Moms do.

I was an Awesome Mom even on the days when the Tooth Fairy was a no show, or when we sang happy birthday over a lit candle stuck in a Fig Newton because I forgot to pick up the cake, or after the Preschool teacher called us in when our bored Cherub executed somersaults during Circle Time... and when I made (unwelcomed) suggestions on how to restructure Circle Time so it wouldn't be boring.

It wasn't until my daughter hit her tweens that I felt like I had hit my stride. After a little over a decade of trial and error, I graduated from being an Awesome Mommy, to being an Awesome Mom who *finally* knew what she was doing. My daughter had *finally* caught up to my expertise: teens.

Like I said before, being a teacher and being a mom are a bit different. As a science teacher, I had every combination of students you could think of in a single class: shy and boisterous; academically proficient and academically challenged; calm in the eye of the storm and accompanied by anger management issues; anxiety driven and emotionally driven; bullies and bullied; straight, gay and transgender; artsy and mathematical; musical and analytical. Most lived with one parent, some with two, some with grandparents or relatives, some in foster care, and some commuted from state institutions. Some had been with the other kids since kindergarten; some had arrived in town the day before. Some spoke one language (not always English), some spoke two, and a couple spoke three. Some felt entitled, and some felt unworthy. Some were hyper and some were depressed. And some bore burdens no child should be asked to bear.

All of these different personalities and personal situations had to be considered if the students were going to be able to learn. After years in the classroom, I became very good at reading my students, even before class started.

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Sometimes the way they walked in telegraphed, “Leave me alone” or “I’m having a bad morning,” the way they sat down, the way they interacted with other students, the direction they set their eyes—all of it gave me clues as to who needed more from me in the classroom.

And, oh yeah, did I mention I taught them Science?

Over the years, with trial and error, and a million conversations with teens hanging around my desk, I was able to flesh out what was going on with them, and learn how to give more to those who needed it without singling them out. If a strategy worked well with one kid on any particular day, I would try it on another kid later that week.

The cool thing was I could apply the tactics that provided the best results back home. After all, what helped with one teen’s chronic issue could be used to eradicate a new negative behavior surfacing in my own teenage cherub. She was a typical hodgepodge of teenage behavior, like they all were, but I had a much bigger arsenal at my disposal than the average parent.

Like my daughter, most of my students wanted good grades, although, many of them were focused on hiding a secret flaw (real or imagined). If good grades allowed them to fly under the radar, then so be it. But, other students couldn’t seem to figure out how to navigate school, a place that made them feel badly about themselves. Except in my class. They were the ones I worked hardest to prove their worth to them.

Regardless of how they outwardly handled school, without exception all of my students wanted:

- Unconditional love from their parents
- To be accepted
- To be admired
- To feel in control
- Help with unpredictable relationships
- For everything to just get better

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- To replace their fear of failure with a feeling of confidence

I tried every trick in the book to help my students succeed, but I never passed anyone if they didn't deserve it. Not once. One day I was called to the principal's office (yes, teachers get called to the principal's office) because I recorded a second quarter F for a student who was battling cancer. They wanted me to at least pass him because of his situation, which I completely understood. But I knew this young man after having him in my classroom for several months, and that just seemed like the wrong thing to do. So, I gave him an Incomplete, and laid out a plan for him to catch up on his work. He ended up with a B for the year.

On the last day of school, the student stopped by.

"Miss, you know you're the only person who ever gave me an F?"

He was grinning at me as he chorused my predictable response.

"I don't give any grades. You earn them." I smiled back. "You know, I felt really badly about that, but I—"

He held up his hand. "Don't apologize, Miss. All the other teachers were letting me slide by. You were the only teacher who believed I could do it. You made me believe I could do more, so I did."

"Thank you for telling me. You wouldn't believe how many times I wondered if I had done the right thing."

"Oh, you did. I'm going to college next year."

Once the students' personal issues spilled over to their school performance, parents and students would find themselves sitting across from me in a conference,

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By the time they met with me, most parents were already frustrated with their teen. Sound familiar?

Hey, if it were easy, everyone would have a great relationship with their teenage daughters, right? Don't give up hope. I helped those moms, and I can help you.

There were two reason why, in my role as a teacher, I was in a position to guide the parents and students:

- The students knew me, and trusted me to understand where they were coming from.
- Being aware their kids didn't dish it out at school the way they did at home, the parents were relying on me for solutions.

What the parents wanted was very clear:

- Unconditional love from their child
- To be accepted
- To be admired
- To feel in control
- Help with their unpredictable relationship
- For everything to just get better
- To replace their fear of failure with a feeling of confidence

Hmmmm....

Over the years I've met with hundreds of families trying to support their children's efforts in school. Many of them were parenting teens for the first time, and feeling mystified at the abrupt changes in their previously sunny relationship. If you are feeling overwhelmed by a relationship that is slowly creeping towards an inevitable crash, you'll be glad to hear there is light at the end of the teenage tunnel.

According to a Pennsylvania State University study "on the ties between midlife-aged daughters and their elderly mothers. Researcher Karen Fingerman, Ph.D., found that despite conflicts and complicated emotions, the

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mother-daughter bond is so strong that 80 percent to 90 percent of women at midlife report good relationships with their mothers."

I'm guessing you don't want to wait that long for your relationship with your cherub-turned-fiend to improve. You don't have to.

After 30 years of teaching, 18 of which overlapped with raising an incredible daughter (objectively speaking, of course), I can definitely tell you that your daughter doesn't need a perfect mom. She needs the Awesome Mom you already are. I'll be the first to tell you I'm not perfect (my daughter will be the second to tell you). I problem solve, and when I don't get it right, I fix it. I make mistakes just like everyone else, but I try not to make them twice. It takes dedication, time, and practice to be an Awesome Mom. Just ask my daughter.

I'm not a perfect mom.
I'm an Awesome Mom.
You don't have to be perfect to be Awesome.

My mission is to help mothers like you realize the tools you already have inside that will help you develop your own teenage daughters into strong women. As an acclaimed speaker, I have worked with thousands of people through classes and workshops, coaching them towards solutions to make school and everyday life more manageable.

The purpose of this book is to help the moms struggling with strained relations with their teenage daughters, and the mothers who want to learn how to circumvent teen drama before it rears its ugly head. But before us moms can figure out how to solve the problem, we need to understand what is going on in the relationship, how we contribute to the angst, and how we can empower ourselves in a positive way.

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In an excerpt of Side by Side: The Revolutionary Mother-Daughter Program for Conflict-Free Communication posted by MSNBC, author Dr. Charles Sophy describes the dynamic mother-daughter relationship:

With all due respect, I often compare the mother-daughter relationship to being on a roller coaster, the big, scary kind that you're able to see from the next town over and whose passengers can be heard shrieking from miles away.

Parts of that ride can certainly be thrilling and crazy fun, much like the way you may feel when you and your daughter are really getting along. There may be other stretches of that same ride that leave you feeling anxious, fearful, or nauseated— much like the way you may feel when you and your daughter are in the midst of an argument.

There's one big difference, though, between these two rides. Unlike the experience at the amusement park, the ride you are on with your daughter will never come to a halt, automatically release its safety bar, and allow you to exit. No matter how scary or intolerable the ride may get with your daughter, there's not even a chance of getting off. This ride is forever.

Why This Book Is Different

There are many wonderful books out there on parenting teens, many written by professionals in other fields (I've included some of my favorites in the **Resources** section) but my unique perspective comes from the culmination of my years as a teacher and as a mom. Therapists, psychologists, social workers, and psychiatrists also work with the teen population, but I'm pretty sure they don't do it with 20+ teens at a time, every day.

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It's a different skill set.

So is parenting.

In hindsight you recognize that moment, when your newborn daughter first locked eyes with you, that was the very first time she communicated you were her Number One Go To Gal. She knew you were Awesome, and completely entrusted her fate to your hands. It was on *your* chest where she fell into a peaceful slumber.

Were you scared and feeling ill-equipped and unprepared? I know I was. But at least we knew more than a newborn, so we dealt with it, didn't we?

Do you feel scared, ill-equipped and unprepared now that your daughter is a challenging teen? If she's your firstborn, I'm sure you do. I, on the other hand, was eagerly waiting for my daughter to finally reach an age I understood: middle school.

My teaching experience makes my approach to mother-daughter confrontations unique. As an educator, I had to analyze who was in my classroom in order to effectively differentiate lessons for individual needs. On the first day of school, I had to figure out how to get 20+ pubescent bodies to do what I said, when I said it, even though they were usually bigger than my five-foot self, and had no prior relationship with me. I needed them to wade through that sea of pheromones and cell phones so they could experience the feeling of success, regardless if the last thing they wanted to be doing at that moment was learning about science. Every word, every action, every raised eyebrow I used was designed to rein in the majority of the group, and coax the outliers to come along for the ride. I was in charge, and they knew it.

The sooner any teacher (that's you) lets the student (that's your daughter) know what kind of teacher you are, the easier it is for the student to behave properly. Each year, I began the first day of school in every class by putting my new students into a seating chart, which they did not like because they wanted to sit next to their friends (which I did not like). This action was important for two reasons:

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- It established who was in control (me).
- While they worked on their first assignment, I could get about the business of memorizing their names and faces.

That first simple tussle of wills established my authority. I was requiring them to follow the rules I had set up, even though they had no idea who I was. This process both told them who I was, and how I was going to conduct myself.

At the end of the first class, the fact that I could point to each one of them individually and get their names right (I studied!) demonstrated they mattered to me. It also let them know I was paying attention to them, so they had better not try anything.

And as long as I didn't surprise them by suddenly shifting my parameters, they trusted their expectations of me, and therefore trusted me, because they could predict:

- how I was going to act
- how I was going to treat them
- how I was going to respond to them

Your relationship with your daughter has to work the same way. She needs to be able to predict your reactions and your behaviors. Before she can trust you with her innermost feelings and fears, there has to be a foundation in your everyday lives that says, "This is our typical, normal routine." It's a baseline that establishes trust between both of you, making it safe for her to confide in you.

If you don't establish the rules and the settings with your daughter the way I did with my classroom, your relationship will be like that uncomfortable schoolroom where the teacher doesn't have control. The students do not respect her, and continuously try to see what they can get away with. Her efforts to regain control are more punitive than disciplinary, the former being accompanied by anger. Anger is the universal symbol of loss of control, so any gains it produces are fleeting

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at best. Why? Because they are not real. They are just temporary attempts to avoid punishment.

That's the same situation you'll experience if you don't establish your authority and your rules, set your limits, and enforce them in your home. Without that, your daughter won't know:

- how you are going to act
- how you are going to treat her
- how you are going to respond to her

I just gave you a perfect metaphor for the importance of having control of your relationship with your child. The sooner any teacher (that's you) establishes her authority and lets the student (that's your daughter) know what kind of teacher she's going to be, the easier everything will be.

When I walk into a brand new classroom, I know exactly what to do and what to say, but that came with experience. I'm an Awesome Teacher, but I had a learning curve, just like you will. I was fortunate (?) to have the majority of my blunders occur at the beginning of my career. Of course they were to be expected because I was young and inexperienced, but my first bungle was a humdinger.

It was the first time I was given full control of my inner city classroom during my student teaching in Boston. There were only about ten minutes of class left, but I was determined to make the most of them. I began by employing a teaching strategy I had learned in college, which said having all the students seated together would give me more control as opposed to having them spread out.

Everyone knows how important it is to have the control, so my first act was to consolidate a couple of students in the back to the few open seats in the middle.

However, a large boy in the second to the last row declined to move. "If the ones behind me move up, this will become the last row, so I don't need to move." He was right, but I perceived his logic as usurping my authority. Fearful of looking weak, I marched over to him and ordered him to move his seat.

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"Forget this shit." He lunged to his feet and headed for the door.

Without thinking, I scooted around him to stop him from leaving. He loomed over me as I stood in the doorway with my hands planted on the doorframe.

"Am I going to have to hit you?" he growled.

My eyes widened as shock and alarm coursed through me. I lowered my hands in surprise. "You... you would hit me?" I gasped.

He threw his hands up and took a step back. "What the f—"

The bell rang. Feeling stunned, I stepped out of the doorway. He pushed by me and disappeared into the throng of students changing class.

A hand patted me on the shoulder. "You coulda taken him, Miss," snickered a boy about my height.

The girl behind him smacked the back of his head. "Shut up, boy! Miss, you *never* get in between anger and the door, you hear me? I thought he was going to kill you."

Their fear for me registered. I strove to calm them. "No, no. He wasn't going to hurt me. He was just a little mad."

"No, Miss," said another girl. "You don't know him. He's bad news."

Surely they were mistaken. The boy had sat quietly in the classroom for the past six weeks.

Later that day I learned my students were right. The angry, frustrated boy had stormed out of my classroom and into his next class, where he punched the male teacher in the face. I don't know what transpired between them, but because this was the boy's third infraction, he was permanently expelled from school. I felt awful. I knew that punch belonged to me.

That night I called home. "Daddy," I wailed into the phone.

My father, a school administrator in Hartford, listened quietly as I told him the story, prompting me for a detail here and there. Then, ever the consummate educator, he asked me, "What did you do to cause that to happen?"

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"What?" Indignation shoved my tears aside. "What did *I* do? He's the one who threw the punch!"

My father didn't react emotionally. He simply repeated, "What did you do to cause that to happen?"

"Are you saying it's my fault?" which is what I had been thinking. "He's the one with the anger problem."

I received another calm, "What did you do to cause that to happen?"

I huffed and I puffed through a few more rounds of, "What did you do to cause that to happen?" until I reached a calm objective place. "I publically confronted him in front of his peers. The only choice I gave him was to back down."

"What else?"

I was in the zone now, so there was no emotion as I paused to think. "I invalidated him by rejecting his perfectly good solution."

"And..."

"I embarrassed him."

"Why would he be embarrassed?"

"Because he was so big and I'm so little."

"Anything else?"

"Even if he had followed my orders after I got up in his face, I would have left him humiliated and diminished. I wouldn't have accomplished anything at all by winning that power struggle."

"Exactly." I heard the pride in his voice, but I knew what was coming next. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to talk to the principal and that teacher he hit and explain my part in what happened. Maybe he can just be suspended instead of expelled." A wave of mortification and dread filled me as I pictured my confession.

"What else?"

"And of course I'll tell my cooperating teacher." My face was feeling hot just thinking about it.

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"And..."

"And?" I searched through my emotions for my logic and found the answer. "I have to talk to my class about what happened and take responsibility for my actions. That's how they'll learn to take responsibility for theirs."

I vowed never to put another child into that position ever again, and I never have. I've marched them out into the hall plenty of times to discipline them, but I never again made the mistake of trying to win in front of their friends.

This was a very painful lesson for me, but I didn't give up. I was scared to go back into that classroom, but I did. I learned from my mistake... and all the mistakes I made over the next few years, and I rarely repeated a mistake.

I went into a lot of detail with this story because of all the takeaways I gained from that one incident. *Everything* I learned that day applies to mother-daughter relationships. Here is what you should take away from the story (in no particular order).

1. It's *hard* to admit you've made a mistake, especially when your flight, fight or freeze response is going at full speed. But you owe it to your daughter to do so. And admitting you were wrong gives you back your power. Pretending you were right weakens it because you know the truth.
2. Stick to the rules you set, but listen when she has another idea. It doesn't hurt to consider it since ultimately it might not conflict with the limit you set.
3. If you don't consider her side, you will lose her. It's disrespectful and makes her feel diminished. That doesn't mean she gets her way. It means you listen to her, and weigh it against what you believe, but your decision is final.
4. Don't publicly scold her. She needs to be able to trust you have her back, and public humiliation will destroy that trust. Take her to the side and tell her why her behavior was inappropriate, and what the consequences are. If she disrespects you in public, in a calm voice tell her that behavior is not acceptable and you are all returning home until she can behave in public. If you treat her

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appropriately in public, it's your right to expect that in return. If you let her get away with it, she will do it again. Just ask the next toddler you hear screaming in the grocery store until she gets her way.

5. When you make a mistake, swallow your pride and go back and fix it. Follow the same rules that eliminate guilt:

- a. Make sure the situation cannot worsen.
- b. See what you can do to fix things
- c. Apologize to her for your error.
- d. Then forgive yourself.

6. Offering two alternatives keeps her from being backed into a corner. It also gives her a way to say yes to you without feeling like she is giving in.

7. No matter how bad it gets, always leave a way for her to return back to the nest. Her teenage brain can't always process the right decision while her emotions are firing. She will say and do things that won't make any sense to her a year from now. Let her be the erratic teenager that she is. There is a lot going on in that brain of hers, compounded by fluctuating hormones (more on that later). You're the Awesome Mom. You're also an adult who has been through everything that she is going through, so keep that in mind.

8. Everyone loses when you and your daughter fight. If she wins the fight, you are diminished as you relinquish some of your power. If you win the fight, you will have beaten down your daughter. Nobody wins either way.

9. Pay attention to what is going on with a clear head. The boy in that Boston high school had not been challenging me. In a way, he had been collaborating. If I hadn't been so worried about how I appeared to the other students, I would have realized that. (Or maybe not. At 21 years old, my forebrain was just beginning to catch up with my teenage brain, so anything was possible.

10. Model the behavior you want her to embrace. When I talked to my class the next day, half of them were in awe because I had stood up to someone twice my size, and the other half were mad I had put myself in harm's way (which,

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by the way, indirectly puts them in harm's way). Their emotional teenage brains couldn't wrap around my message right then, but they still heard it. For the rest of the semester they shared stories of people who admitted they were wrong about something. Usually it was from a TV show, but occasionally it had something to do with them. You never know when a moment is going to turn into a life lesson.

Do you see how I took a terrible situation and managed to pull a few pearls of wisdom from it? You may even see some additional life lessons in this story. With practice, you can learn to view everything as a learning experience.

You now have a new advantage: I'm going to walk you through a refresher course on being an Awesome Mom. You're going back to school again, but this time around you'll actually have a clue.

Oh, did I mention there would be homework? And a Reading List, and Field Trip suggestions, and projects for you to do with your daughter.

So, school is in session! And the warning bell for homeroom is about to ring. It's time to get to class.

According to The 2016 U.S. Census Bureau, out of about 9.6 million **single** parent families were headed by **single mothers**. These women are raising 1 out of every 4 children under the age of 18 — by themselves. While this book applauds those fabulous fathers who are raising our next generation of empowered young women, my focus is on the moms, and that particularly unique bond between mothers and daughters.

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By The Time You Finish This Book

By the time you finish reading this book, you will have laid the groundwork for the relationship you want to have with your daughter **for the rest of your lives**. If you sprint through it, you will achieve some temporary changes in your strained relationship. A token effort aimed at a quick fix will produce short-lived results. In the long run, it will also reduce your credibility with your daughter.

However, if you treat this journey to a better-quality relationship as the marathon it truly is, if you invest the necessary time, and consistently work hard on these challenges, you will see a vast improvement in how you communicate with your daughter. In the process, her attitude, and your attitude, will improve significantly.

And why wouldn't it? As you explore options and experiment with techniques, you will find she responds more and more readily to you as her trust builds. Your commitment to the bond you share will show her how important she is to you. Little by little, she will realize you can be entrusted with her innermost thoughts and problems. At some point she will share something really significant with you, even if she doesn't think you get her yet, because you will have demonstrated your capacity for communicating with her.

She will feel stronger. That will make her less vulnerable to negative influences from her peers. Her self-esteem will grow as she successfully navigates her life. In turn, she will be able to apply what she has learned with you to the ever-changing and tumultuous world of teenagers. Your trust in her ability to make good decisions will grow and she will know it.

As you learn new strategies for dealing with your own issues, the positive effects will trickle down to her. There will be more joy in your home as the burden and isolation of living under a strained relationship lifts. When your daughter cries, "Mom!" you won't tense up wondering, "Oh, great. What now?" Instead of expecting her to pose something that will careen you into an argument, you will be eagerly

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anticipating a tidbit from her life. Your heart no longer will clench when the door slams because you will know it was just the wind.

Is it corny that as a teacher, I've written this book to parody the school experience? Definitely, but it paints a familiar picture for nearly all of us, no matter how we lived it. Why not capitalize on a time of our lives when our job was to learn, the same period of maturation, vulnerability and turmoil your daughter is experiencing right now? A few reminders of your own experience will help you better relate to hers.

The best way to use this book is to journal your progress. Use the blank spaces provided in this book to track the issues and solutions unique to you and your daughter. Record your thoughts and reactions as you go along. Keep track of your daughter's reactions to your attempts to create change. When you are feeling frustrated, and thinking that nothing you try works, the journal will remind you of the incremental changes you recorded over the course of your marathon, renew your hope, and fuel fresh motivation to propel you forward.

Plus, she will love to read it when she has her own daughter.

You can expect a series of challenges accompanied by stories and examples to illustrate the major points. There will be a couple of clarifying quizzes, tips and hints, and chapter summaries at the end of each section. You will also find additional help in the **Answers At the Back of the Book** section at the end.

xxxDo you remember the Three R's? Reading, Writing, and 'Rithmetic? (Does it bother anyone else that only one of those words begins with 'R?') Each chapter begins with its own set of The 3 R's that will encapsulate my points. I've loaded a lot of information into each section, along with exercises at the end of each chapter, and lots of blank pages for journaling!

If you commit to the process, and follow the path laid out in these pages, you're going to do great! And, you'll rock the final exam.

What? Yes, there's a final exam. I told you we were going back to school. So what are we waiting for?

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Do you miss the spunky tween who used to confide in you? Are you tired of the eye-rolling and exasperated sighs that have replaced the winks and giggles? Is your daughter pushing buttons you didn't know you had?

By the time you finish following the steps in this book, you will have all of that in hand.