

'Madonna tells us the truth about what Australian tween and teen girls are feeling and thinking. Best of all, she equips parents with useful tips on what our girls need from us and wish we knew.'

**Rebecca Sparrow, author of *Ask Me Anything***

# MADONNA KING TEN-AGER

What your daughter  
needs you to know  
about the transition  
from child to teen



# Preface

**O**livia is writing a list of goals for this week. 1) *MAKE FRIENDS!* This was number two on last week's list, but has proved more difficult than she thought since she swapped from her primary school to middle school last year. 2) *ASK MUM FOR A PHONE.* It's second this week after falling a notch, but she's not giving up. She will pester her parents today and tomorrow and the next day because she is the *only* one, she says, in her class without one. Once she gets a phone, she's going to get TikTok and then her life will be perfect. Almost. Some of her other goals are more secret. She hasn't written down that she wants to lose weight, because her mother would get angry like she did the first time she saw her new cursive writing commit it to paper. But she does want to. And she wants to be shorter, too. That's probably why some of the girls

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don't want to be her friend: she is too tall. Maybe that accounts for the teasing. Emmy laughed at her last week, on the day they were allowed to wear their pyjamas to school. 'Who's wearing Disney pyjamas?' She'd spat out that question almost like an accusation, and everyone looked at her. *Everyone*. Now Olivia keeps her pyjamas under her pillow. 3) ASK MUM FOR NEW PYJAMAS.

Olivia could be your daughter or mine; our niece or best friend's daughter or granddaughter. She is ten and lives in cities and towns the nation over. Her thoughts and feelings, like those of her peers, teeter between childhood and womanhood. She's a ten-ager: the new teenager, in a world of instant learning and connectivity, where the power of celebrity reigns, where the online world envelops decision-making and where friends can turn into foes over lunchtime. She's seeing a bigger world and all the opportunities and challenges it offers, but she needs to be cared for and nurtured and hugged. She needs to be encouraged to reach for her own stars, not those of the A-student sitting next to her. And she needs us – her parents and others in her life – to listen, without judgement. She'll explain why in the pages that follow.

In Australia, ten-year-olds don't face the same challenges as some of their peers in other parts of the world: banned from education, sold into slavery, marked for marriage a year or two later. That is just execrable, but it doesn't mean that our own daughters, going to school

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in Sydney and Melbourne and Geelong and Perth and Adelaide, are finding today effortless and uncomplicated. Some days, as they explain, are burdensome and daunting and downright hard as they navigate their own journey into adulthood. And they need our help, even if they don't ask for it.

A ten-year-old girl is precious. Wide-eyed and willing to learn. Wanting to help. Wanting to please. Wanting to fix the environment. Wanting to be heard. She's likely to be more worldly than her parents were at this age, but less independent. She's well-read, and the music she listens to and the television programs she follows are full of good things, mostly. But *how* she listens and watches – and the pervasive influence of the online world and the messages it carries – is more challenging. And it's a world, and an influence, that is difficult for any parent to really understand. Feminism, for our daughters, is different: it doesn't have to be argued; they know they are equal to their male peers. Social justice is different, too. Theirs is a world where most are disarmingly non-judgemental of others . . . and agonisingly judgemental of themselves. There, the judgement can be unimaginably harsh.

If Olivia's mum were writing her goals for the week, they'd revolve around her ten-year-old. 'I'd want her to smile more.' 'I'd want her to like herself more.' 'I'd want her to believe enough is enough.' This project was born out of *Being 14*, a book chronicling the specific challenges

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facing the fourteen-year-old cohort of girls. But parents, particularly mothers, asked me to look earlier. They wanted me to find out what was happening at ten, when their daughter was showing a touch of attitude along with a new social conscience, a worldliness, without the analytical skills to decipher real from fake. An age where some of their daughters were just beginning to wriggle out of hugs and into the privacy of their own rooms. An age where they would do anything to fit in.

To those girls and their peers – in big places and small, in cities and on rural properties – who allowed me into their lives, thank you. Almost 500 of them, across Australia, answered my questions, wrote me notes and sat around tables having discussions to help me understand what they really wanted their parents to know. My take-out is that despite the vulnerabilities and challenges being faced by our ten-agers, our future is in the most marvellous, caring and clever hands.

This is a book for their parents. It includes the views of 1600 mothers and draws on the experience of 400 dads. Educators, too, have been invaluable, and in addition to school principals, counsellors and psychologists, almost one hundred Year 5, 6 and 7 public and private school teachers have explained how they see the ten-year-old girls sitting in front of them. Their insights made me smile and frown in equal measure: girls wanting to learn everything, but be liked at all costs; girls wanting to act

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years older than they should, but who burst out crying too easily; girls wielding their popularity like a weapon, but who were lost finding allies.

Over the next eighteen chapters you'll meet experts on sleep and puberty, friendship and self-harm, on education and resilience and a dozen other issues. They have all given their time to answer question after question about Olivia and her ten-year-old peers in the hope that we will listen to them more, and understand them better. That's what they want, and I know that because they told me.