



TNM YOUTH GUIDE

You Belong Here

Can I tell you something that took me a long time to understand?

Almost everyone wants to belong. It doesn't matter if you're in fifth grade, high school, or fifty years old. We all want to know there's a place where we're accepted, where people are glad we're there, and where we don't have to wonder if we're enough.

When you're growing up, though, belonging can be confusing. It's easy to think it means being popular, having lots of friends, making the team, getting invited to everything, or looking like everyone else. Somewhere along the way, it's easy to start believing that belonging is something you have to earn. If you could just be a little funnier, a little cooler, a little smarter, or a little better at whatever everyone else seems to care about, maybe then you'd finally feel like you fit.

I remember looking around when I was your age and thinking everyone else had already figured it out. It seemed like everyone knew where they belonged. They had their group, they looked comfortable in their own skin, and they always seemed to know what to say. Meanwhile, I was still trying to figure out where I fit.

It took me a long time to realize I wasn't the only one. The people I thought had everything figured out were carrying questions of their own. They worried about what other people thought. They wondered if they were good enough. They had bad days, awkward moments, and times when they questioned themselves. I just couldn't see any of that because, like me, they were doing their best to hide it.

Looking back now, I think that's one of the hardest parts about growing up. We spend so much time comparing our inside to everyone else's outside that it's easy to believe we're the only one who's struggling. Most of the time, we're not. Most people are simply better at hiding it than we realize.

I've also learned that fitting in and belonging aren't the same thing. You can fit in by acting like everyone around you. You belong when you no longer feel like you have to. One asks you to become someone else. The other gives you permission to become more of who you already are.

Maybe nobody has ever told you this before, but just because you haven't found where you belong doesn't mean you don't belong. Sometimes it simply means you haven't met your people yet. There's a big difference between those two ideas. One says there's something wrong with you. The other says your story is still unfolding.

That's what I hope these next few pages help you discover. Not that growing up is easy, because it isn't. Not that you'll never question yourself again, because you probably will. I simply hope you begin to see that the search for belonging isn't proof that something is missing in you. More often, it's part of discovering who you are and where you'll feel most at home.

You're Not the Only One

One of the hardest parts about growing up is believing you're the only one who feels the way you do. You look around at school, on your team, or even online, and it seems like everyone else has life figured out. They have friends. They seem confident. They know who they are. Meanwhile, you're wondering if everyone else got some kind of instruction manual that somehow skipped you.

I remember thinking that all the time. I honestly believed everyone else had something I didn't. Maybe they were naturally more confident. Maybe they just knew how to talk to people. Maybe they had always known where they belonged. Whatever it was, I convinced myself I was the one who hadn't figured it out yet.

I can still picture walking into the cafeteria on days when none of my friends were there yet. It sounds like such a small thing now, but at the time it felt enormous. You walk in carrying your tray, trying to look like you know exactly where you're going, while secretly hoping someone waves you over. You don't want to pick the wrong table. You don't want to feel like

you're interrupting. So you pretend you're fine, even though all you really want is to know there's a place for you. Looking back, I realize I probably wasn't the only person in that room feeling that way. We were all looking around thinking everyone else belonged, while many of us were quietly wondering if we did.

Looking back, I also realize how easy it is to believe that when you're only seeing the outside of someone else's life. You see them laughing with their friends, making the team, getting good grades, or looking completely comfortable in their own skin. What you don't see are the conversations they have with themselves when nobody else is around. You don't hear the doubts, the fears, or the questions they carry with them.

That's something I wish I had understood sooner. Every person you meet is carrying something. Some people are afraid of failing. Some worry they won't be accepted. Others wonder if they're good enough, smart enough, talented enough, or whether they'll ever find where they truly belong. The details are different, but the feeling underneath is surprisingly similar.

The strange thing is that almost nobody talks about it. We spend so much time trying to look like we've got everything together that we accidentally convince everyone else they're the only ones who don't. Before long, everyone is quietly carrying the same questions while believing they're carrying them alone.

If I could go back and tell my younger self one thing, it would probably be this: you're far more normal than you think you are. The questions you're asking don't mean something is wrong with you. They mean you're growing up. You're trying to understand yourself, and that's something every person has to do, whether they admit it or not.

There's something comforting about realizing you aren't the only one still figuring things out. It doesn't solve every problem overnight, but it reminds you that you were never meant to have all the answers at your age. You're allowed to be learning. In fact, that's exactly what this season of your life is for.

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

One of the things nobody really warns you about is how quickly a moment can turn into a story. Something happens—a bad grade, a missed shot, a friendship that falls apart, or a team you didn't make—and before you know it, you've started telling yourself it means something about who you are.

I remember getting home from school some days and replaying conversations in my head. Why did I say that? Did that sound stupid? Should I have just kept my mouth shut? At the time, it felt like everyone else was probably thinking about every awkward thing I'd said that day. Looking back now, I realize they were probably doing exactly what I was doing—replaying their own conversations and worrying about themselves. The stories I was telling myself felt completely real, even though most of them existed only in my own head.

It's amazing how quickly our minds can go from, "I didn't do well," to, "Maybe I'm just not good enough." One mistake becomes, "I'm not smart." One bad game becomes, "I'm not an athlete." One person rejects you, and suddenly it feels like nobody ever will. The event lasts a few minutes. The story we create about it can stay with us for years.

The strange thing is that those stories usually don't sound dramatic. They sound believable. We repeat them often enough that we stop questioning them. Before long, we aren't just remembering what happened—we've started believing that's who we are.

One of the most important things I've learned is that what happens to you and who you are are not the same thing. A bad day isn't your identity. A mistake isn't your identity. Failing at something doesn't suddenly become your identity. They're experiences, and experiences are meant to teach us, not define us.

You're going to have days that don't go the way you hoped. You'll make mistakes, get embarrassed, fail at things, and wish you could have a few moments back. So will everyone else. None of those moments get to decide who you become unless you hand them that responsibility.

Your story is still being written. Don't let one difficult chapter convince you it already knows how the book ends.

There Is Another Way

If you've made it this far, you might be thinking, "Okay...but what am I supposed to do with all of this?"

That's a fair question.

I wish I could tell you there's one moment when everything suddenly makes sense. That one day you'll wake up completely confident, never doubt yourself again, and always know exactly what to do. Life doesn't usually work that way.

What I've found is that most real change happens much more quietly. It happens every time you choose to try again after a setback. Every time you're honest instead of pretending. Every time you do something difficult, even when you're nervous. Every time you decide that one bad moment isn't going to define the rest of your day.

Those decisions probably won't feel life-changing when you make them. Most of the time, they'll seem small. Almost forgettable. But those small choices have a way of adding up. One becomes another, and then another, until one day you realize you're handling situations that used to overwhelm you.

You don't become more confident by waiting until you feel confident. You become more confident by doing things that are a little uncomfortable and discovering you can handle them. The same is true for courage, resilience, discipline, and almost everything else that's worth building.

That doesn't mean you'll never have difficult days again. You will. There will still be moments when you doubt yourself, compare yourself to other people, or wonder if you're enough. The difference is that those moments don't have to stay in control. You can acknowledge them without believing everything they tell you.

I've learned that growth isn't about becoming a completely different person. It's about becoming more comfortable being the person you were always capable of becoming. That doesn't happen overnight, and it doesn't happen perfectly. It happens one decision at a time.

That's good news, because it means you don't have to change your entire life today. You only have to choose your next step. Then, when tomorrow comes, you choose the next one again.

Where Do We Go From Here?

By now, I hope you understand something I wish someone had told me years ago. You don't have to have your whole life figured out right now. You don't have to know exactly who you're going to become, where you're going to end up, or have all the answers before you're allowed to move forward.

Growing up isn't about having everything figured out. It's about continuing to learn, even when life feels uncertain. Some days you'll make great decisions. Other days you'll wish you could start over. That's true for every person you've ever looked up to. Nobody gets through life without making mistakes.

The important thing isn't avoiding every failure. It's refusing to let failure convince you to stop trying. Every time you get back up, you're learning something about yourself that success alone could never teach you. You begin to realize you're stronger than you thought, more capable than you believed, and far more resilient than you ever gave yourself credit for.

As you move through life, there will always be people willing to tell you who you should be. They'll have opinions about how you should look, what you should do, who you should spend time with, and what success is supposed to look like. Listening to advice can be helpful, but don't let someone else write a story that belongs to you.

I hope you find people who encourage you to become more of yourself instead of asking you to become someone else. I hope you discover friends who celebrate your successes, stand beside you during your failures, and remind you who you are when you forget. Most of all, I hope you never stop believing that your future can be better than your past.

If there's one thing I'd like you to remember after you finish reading this, it's this: you are not behind, you are not alone, and you are not finished becoming the person you're capable of being. Your story is still unfolding, and some of its best chapters haven't been written yet.

I'm glad our paths crossed, even if it was only for a few pages. I hope this gave you something to think about the next time you find yourself wondering if you belong. I think you do. The rest of the journey is simply discovering where that place is and having the courage to keep moving toward it.