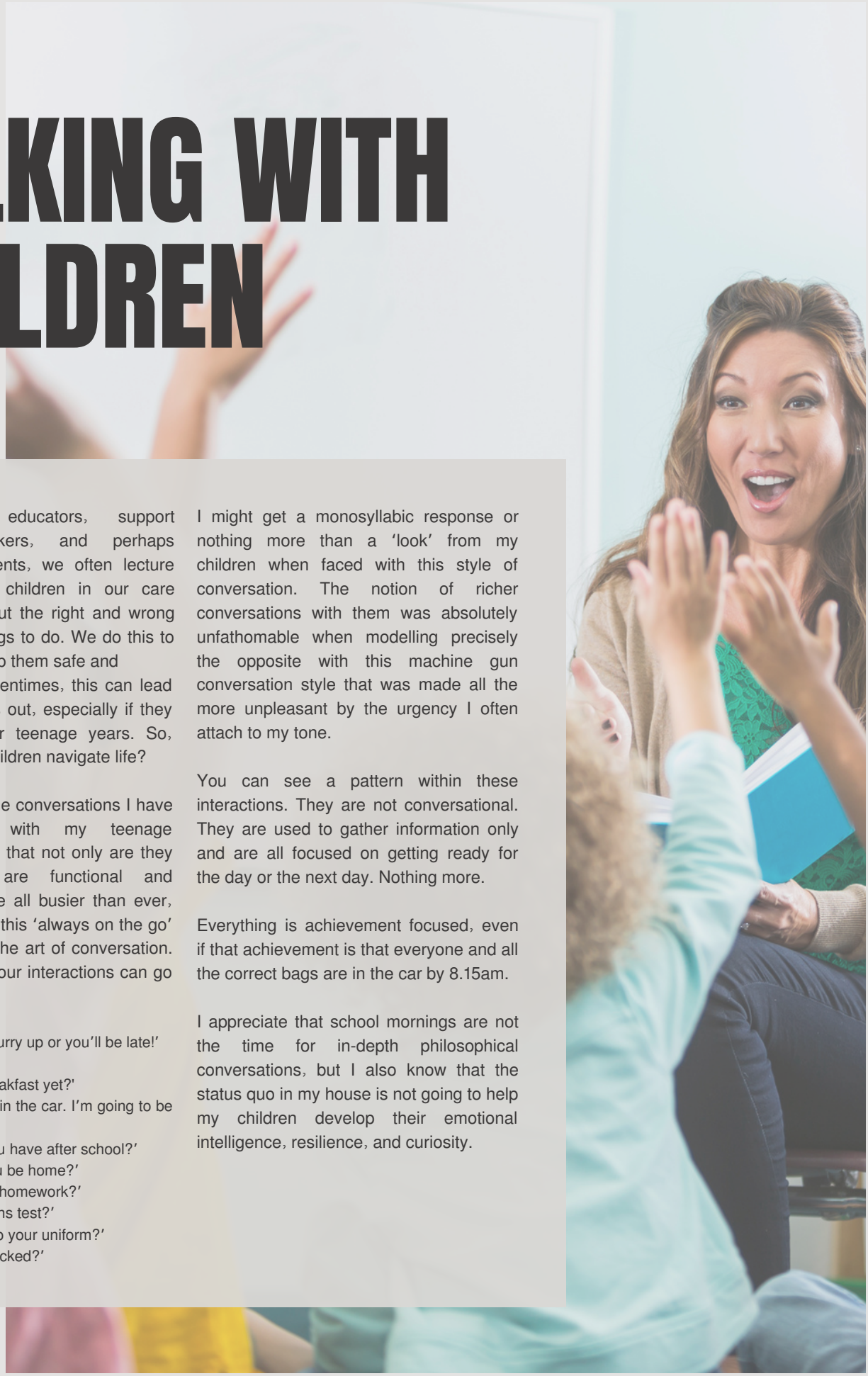
TALKING WITH CHILDREN



As educators, support workers, and perhaps parents, we often lecture the children in our care about the right and wrong things to do. We do this to keep them safe and responsible, but oftentimes, this can lead to them shutting us out, especially if they have reached their teenage years. So, how can we help children navigate life?

When I reflect on the conversations I have most frequently with my teenage daughters, I realise that not only are they not rich, they are functional and transactional. We're all busier than ever, but one casualty of this 'always on the go' approach to life is the art of conversation. On any given day, our interactions can go a bit like this:

- 'Time to get up! Hurry up or you'll be late!'
- 'Are you up yet?'
- 'Have you had breakfast yet?'
- 'Hurry up and get in the car. I'm going to be late for work'.
- 'What clubs do you have after school?'
- 'What time will you be home?'
- 'Do you have any homework?'
- 'How was the Maths test?'
- 'Have you hung up your uniform?'
- 'Is your P.E. kit packed?'

I might get a monosyllabic response or nothing more than a 'look' from my children when faced with this style of conversation. The notion of richer conversations with them was absolutely unfathomable when modelling precisely the opposite with this machine gun conversation style that was made all the more unpleasant by the urgency I often attach to my tone.

You can see a pattern within these interactions. They are not conversational. They are used to gather information only and are all focused on getting ready for the day or the next day. Nothing more.

Everything is achievement focused, even if that achievement is that everyone and all the correct bags are in the car by 8.15am.

I appreciate that school mornings are not the time for in-depth philosophical conversations, but I also know that the status quo in my house is not going to help my children develop their emotional intelligence, resilience, and curiosity.

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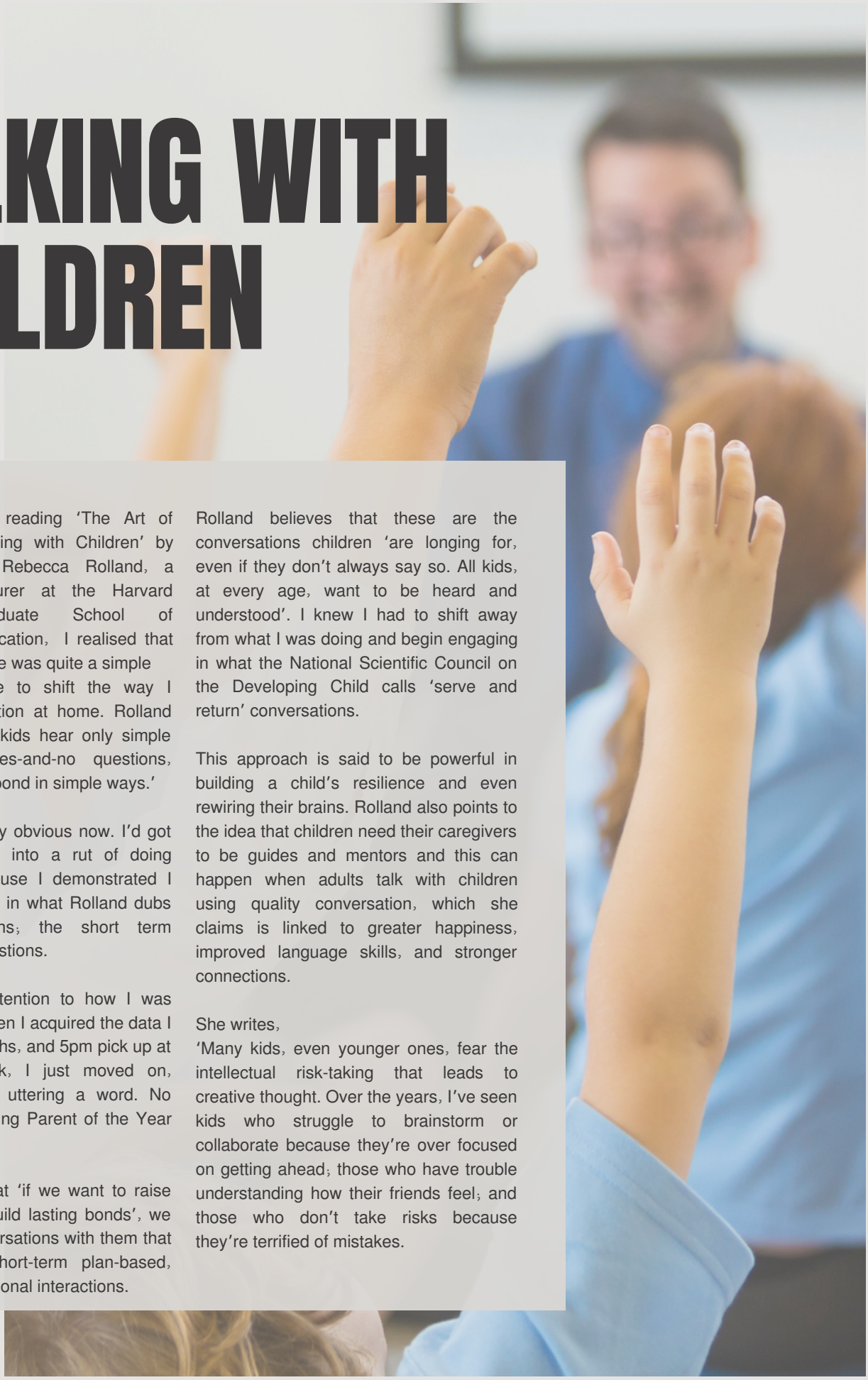

After reading 'The Art of Talking with Children' by Dr Rebecca Rolland, a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I realised that there was quite a simple path I could forge to shift the way I modelled conversation at home. Rolland points out that, 'if kids hear only simple sentences and yes-and-no questions, they'll probably respond in simple ways.'

This seems painfully obvious now. I'd got everyone at home into a rut of doing precisely this because I demonstrated I was only interested in what Rolland dubs 'check-in' questions; the short term planning-based questions.

I wasn't paying attention to how I was conversing, and when I acquired the data I wanted: 67% in Maths, and 5pm pick up at the main car park, I just moved on, sometimes without uttering a word. No chance of my winning Parent of the Year 2023, then.

Rolland advises that 'if we want to raise thriving kids and build lasting bonds', we need to have conversations with them that go beyond the short-term plan-based, simple and transactional interactions.

Rolland believes that these are the conversations children 'are longing for, even if they don't always say so. All kids, at every age, want to be heard and understood'. I knew I had to shift away from what I was doing and begin engaging in what the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child calls 'serve and return' conversations.

This approach is said to be powerful in building a child's resilience and even rewiring their brains. Rolland also points to the idea that children need their caregivers to be guides and mentors and this can happen when adults talk with children using quality conversation, which she claims is linked to greater happiness, improved language skills, and stronger connections.

She writes,
'Many kids, even younger ones, fear the intellectual risk-taking that leads to creative thought. Over the years, I've seen kids who struggle to brainstorm or collaborate because they're over focused on getting ahead; those who have trouble understanding how their friends feel; and those who don't take risks because they're terrified of mistakes.

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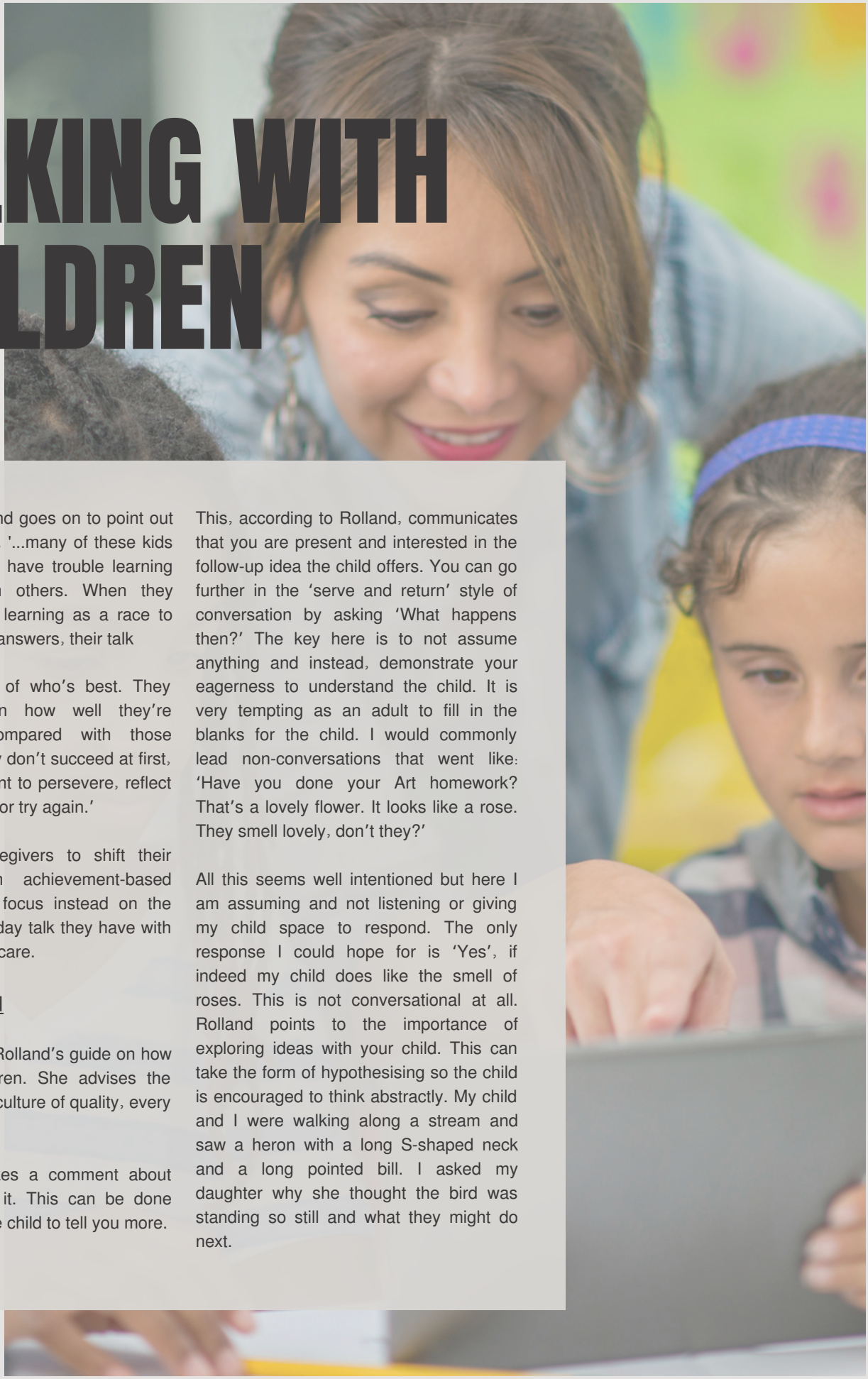

Rolland goes on to point out that, '...many of these kids also have trouble learning from others. When they see learning as a race to get answers, their talk turns to questions of who's best. They tend to focus on how well they're performing as compared with those around them. If they don't succeed at first, they're often hesitant to persevere, reflect on what happened, or try again.'

Rolland urges caregivers to shift their focus away from achievement-based conversations and focus instead on the quality of the everyday talk they have with the children in their care.

The way forward

I decided to follow Rolland's guide on how to talk 'with' children. She advises the following to build a culture of quality, every day conversations:

When a child makes a comment about something, stretch it. This can be done simply by asking the child to tell you more. This, according to Rolland, communicates that you are present and interested in the follow-up idea the child offers. You can go further in the 'serve and return' style of conversation by asking 'What happens then?' The key here is to not assume anything and instead, demonstrate your eagerness to understand the child. It is very tempting as an adult to fill in the blanks for the child. I would commonly lead non-conversations that went like: 'Have you done your Art homework? That's a lovely flower. It looks like a rose. They smell lovely, don't they?'

All this seems well intentioned but here I am assuming and not listening or giving my child space to respond. The only response I could hope for is 'Yes', if indeed my child does like the smell of roses. This is not conversational at all. Rolland points to the importance of exploring ideas with your child. This can take the form of hypothesising so the child is encouraged to think abstractly. My child and I were walking along a stream and saw a heron with a long S-shaped neck and a long pointed bill. I asked my daughter why she thought the bird was standing so still and what they might do next.

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I asked her about the bird's physical appearance and what, if anything, might make the bird more or less successful in their quest to catch a fish. This was a natural conversation that arose from what we had experienced together. Having quality conversations with children cannot be generated by a bank of standardised questions you write on your hand ahead of time, but you can think about opportunities to get a child thinking about consequences, design ideas, 'what if...', and reasons for things as you go about your daily lives.

The next piece of advice Rolland offers is to build in time to pause and reflect... something I absolutely did not do. By pausing we can model a really helpful mindset where we show children that we might not have all the answers, and that's okay. Rolland writes about how we need to ask ourselves, 'What am I missing?' Second-guessing ourselves is not a weakness, but a way to build up our evaluation and critical thinking skills. This practice, according to the author, will help to build up resilience in children over time.

I've practised this when shopping in the supermarket, and planning to decorate a room at home. This talking aloud affords children the opportunity to see thinking in action and to make contributions.

Rolland writes about developing a culture of 'curious waiting' where you, as the adult, asks a question, or proposes an idea, then steps back and waits. This communicates to the child that you are interested in what they are thinking, not interested in controlling them.

Supporting children to talk about their thinking is what is known as metacognition and sets children up to be successful and resilient learners, and not only of academic subjects.

By exploring their thoughts and feelings, children can grow to become more secure to talk about them. This will help to develop confidence and shift a child's focus away from their self-worth being derived from tangible achievements such as gaining likes on TikTok, winning a horse riding competition, or achieving an A grade in a Physics exam.

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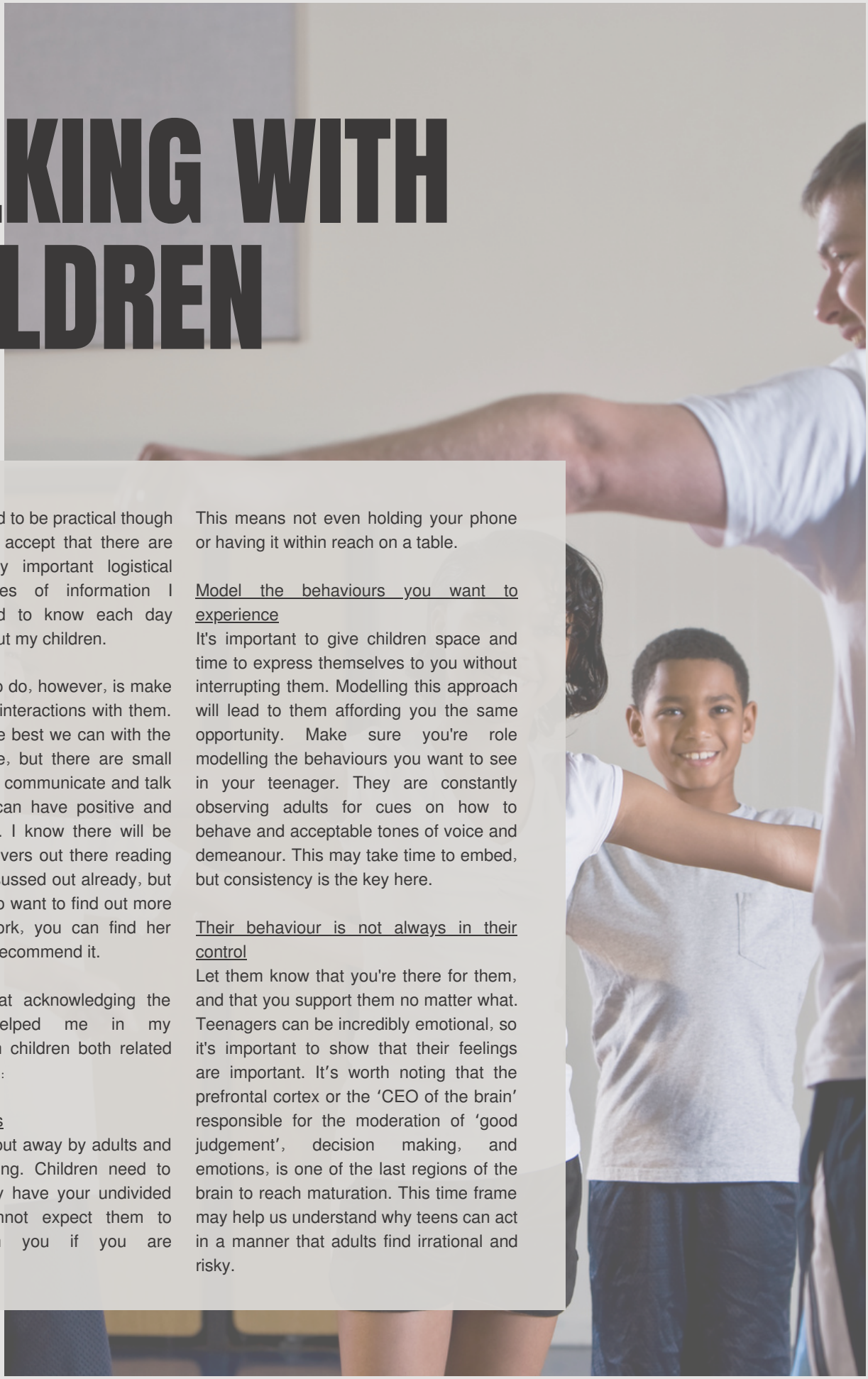

I need to be practical though and accept that there are really important logistical pieces of information I need to know each day about my children.

What I don't want to do, however, is make this the sum of my interactions with them. We are all doing the best we can with the children in our care, but there are small shifts in the way we communicate and talk with children that can have positive and long lasting effects. I know there will be parents and care givers out there reading this who have this sussed out already, but for those of you who want to find out more about Rolland's work, you can find her book here. I highly recommend it.

I've also found that acknowledging the following has helped me in my communication with children both related and unrelated to me:

Remove distractions

Phones should be put away by adults and children when talking. Children need to feel as though they have your undivided attention. You cannot expect them to communicate with you if you are distracted. This means not even holding your phone or having it within reach on a table.

Model the behaviours you want to experience

It's important to give children space and time to express themselves to you without interrupting them. Modelling this approach will lead to them affording you the same opportunity. Make sure you're role modelling the behaviours you want to see in your teenager. They are constantly observing adults for cues on how to behave and acceptable tones of voice and demeanour. This may take time to embed, but consistency is the key here.

Their behaviour is not always in their control

Let them know that you're there for them, and that you support them no matter what. Teenagers can be incredibly emotional, so it's important to show that their feelings are important. It's worth noting that the prefrontal cortex or the 'CEO of the brain' responsible for the moderation of 'good judgement', decision making, and emotions, is one of the last regions of the brain to reach maturation. This time frame may help us understand why teens can act in a manner that adults find irrational and risky.

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This brain development does not reach completion until the age of 25, so you will need to cut them some slack for their decision making as it really isn't in their full control.

Listen, don't tell

It's tempting to tell your teen that you understand how they feel, but I would caution against this, because they might not be willing to accept your grasp of the situation, even if it is spot on. Avoid the 'when I was your age...' statement. You may think this shows empathy, but you would be better off listening to them as opposed to telling them you've been there.

To some teens, this approach can come off as patronising, dismissive and superior, even though this is unlikely to be your intention. To move things on, work out a solution together. This could involve setting some ground rules, or simply talking through the issue until you are both happy with some form of compromise. This shows that you have listened to them and taken their feelings seriously.

In turn, such action builds respect and sets the foundations of a supportive relationship.

All behaviour is communication and that goes for teens and their parents alike. Try to see the world through their eyes without telling them what to do. The difficulty lies in the opposing forces of you wanting to protect them and them needing to make mistakes and learn from them.

Parenting, guiding, and caring for children is not a 'one and done' action. It takes time, resilience, consistency, and thought.

The most important take away I gained from reading Rolland's book is to listen more than I talk to children.

Click the image below to find Rolland's book on Amazon.