

INTRODUCTION

Your defining act of love for your child will not be the 2:00 A.M. feedings, the sleepless, fretful night spent beside him in the hospital, or the second job you took to pay for college. Your zenith will occur in the face of a withering blast of frightening rage from your adolescent, in allowing no rage from yourself in response. Your finest moment may well be your darkest. And you will be a parent.

IN YOUR HANDS you hold a survival guide for parents facing the tests of raising a new-millennium adolescent. Like talking with a brother who is a shrink, this book empathizes with your pain, explains just what the heck is going on, and provides clear, well-researched recommendations on courses of action. The tone is as soft and humorous as possible to help shell-shocked parents regain a perspective on which to rebuild competence and confidence, two essential qualities for surviving your kid's adolescence.

The startling news offered here is groundbreaking research that is finally proving with science what you've come to suspect through your pain: *Your kid is crazy*. What used to be a sad, quiet joke between Mom and Dad is now becoming accepted more and more as neurological fact. *Adolescents are temporarily brain-damaged*. The implications of this are enormous, and those implications are what this three-part book is about.

Part One describes adolescents. I'll show you what we recently learned about your kid's brain that rocked the adolescent treatment community. This data will help you avoid personalizing your kid's insane behaviors by proving to you that he's not a bad person, he's just brain-challenged. This part is quite fascinating.

Part One goes on to show you how that misfiring brain interacts with the dangerous world we've built around your temporarily disabled child. Did you know that your kid can actually make the case that we adults are the ones telling her to have sex, do drugs, and rock 'n roll (a popular general term used by kids that refers to aggressive and violent acting-out behaviors)? This part is quite terrifying.

In Part Two of the book, you'll learn what this new research says about your behavior. These brain imagings of your kid's head tell us that your parenting training is obsolete—that being what you thought was a good parent actually can create problems for your at-risk kid. We adults must now rethink who we are as parents in light of the new data.

Part Three will teach you how this new information rewrites the old book on how to raise that brain-damaged teen in our value-damaged world. The old rules of parenting adolescents just don't work in this new millennium because *rules* don't work anymore. Today you need *skills* to deal with the insanity that rages both inside your child's brain and outside, in his world.

But the truly wonderful side to the new research is that it gives you a neurological window of opportunity with your child that we never knew existed. Contrary to what we used to believe, the brain development game is not over by adolescence. *You can rewire that head.* Mother Nature believes in second chances; however, that second-chance rewiring can either be miraculous or disastrous. You get to choose by parenting with either obsolete rules or with newfound skills. This is truly exciting stuff, but it comes at a price.

Be forewarned that this is not another “how-to” book. Cookbook approaches to working with difficult adolescents work just about as well as counseling a teenager without working with the parents. As Rocky the Squirrel used to warn Bullwinkle, “That trick never works.” And it never will work, my dear parent, *because you are still the most influential force in your adolescent's life.* Yes, that baggy-pantsed, many-colored, multi-pierced creature who elects root canal over being seen in the mall within 10 linear feet of you is nonetheless largely living his life in relation to who you are, for better *and* for worse. Thus, for your child to change, your relationship must change. For this to happen, you must change. That is the first step.

WAIT! Before you angrily toss this book back onto the shelf, stay

with me for one more minute. This is *not* about parents being bad people. On the contrary, parents by definition are usually wonderful people. In fact, some of my best friends are parents. Typically, they're hard-working, self-sacrificing, caring, and loving folks. Those with tough adolescents are usually also exhausted, angry, isolated, and terrified. They're just as any one of us would be if someone stuck a scalpel in our hand and told us to perform brain surgery with no medical training—and on our own child, no less. Overly dramatic metaphor? Not to those who have stayed up all night agonizing over how a certain decision would affect their child's life.

You see, it's simply the *training* that you lack, not the heart. If you didn't give a damn, you wouldn't be reading this book, but I'm afraid the training is more involved than just giving advice. It requires our understanding that as parents we are the stage upon which our children will act out their conflicts. We have to go along on their ride, and accept that our teens will confront us with ourselves, rubbing our noses in our own shortcomings. Thus we must be open to difficult self-examination and disclosure. Easy to say. Tough to do.

To make it a little easier, this book teaches with stories. The names in the stories are fictitious, but the circumstances are based on real situations from my patient files. I share them with you to try to ease your pain and sense of isolation.

Just like trauma survivors, parents of adolescents in crisis are very slow to discuss their experiences with "civilians." They've had too many instances where they shared a horror story only to see that infuriating look of pompous disbelief on the faces of those who have had the good fortune of never ducking bullets in a trench. Those judgmental eyes often betray that maddening secret disdain: "I would *never* allow *my* child to act like that."

Parents in crisis first scan the faces of their audience looking for the gray hairs, the facial worry lines, and the knowing, judgment-free nods that tell them *you understand* their pain. Only then can they begin to open up.

The stories are that connection for you. These vignettes are comforting, powerful, and profound, and they signal a safe haven from the societal judgments and self-recriminations that parents often bear. When faced with a crisis, you first need to feel that you are in a safe place. Then, and only then, will you be able to listen to see if there are

better ways of dealing with your child. There can be no safer place than in the company of all those parents of adolescents who preceded you. This book is that safe place.

In that light, understand that this book belongs to the many parents and kids who have struggled with the issues we'll visit. The families I've worked with over the past 27 years inspired me to write this book. Many offered to have their stories told without anonymity so that other parents might benefit. These people are the true authors of this work. As you read you will come to see their failings, their wisdom, their tenacity, and most of all their courage. For in sharing their own vulnerabilities and mistakes, they give us the great gift of perhaps not sharing their pain.

Finally, three warnings. First, try to keep in mind those individual differences that make the human race so interesting. These apply to you and to your kid, too. The adolescent issues I address represent the major new trends of parenting teenagers today. Your situation will vary according to your child's and your own uniqueness. Use what I present here as basic examples to shape what works for your particular situation.

Second, the subject matter and language used here are strong and I'm sure offensive to many. If this book were a CD I wouldn't let my nine-year-old play it. But this reflects the reality of the adolescent world, and like it or not, it is part of their language and culture. To edit out the upsetting material means to lose the true context of the experiences. Therefore, all of the dialogue is quoted accurately.

Finally, some may find this book flippant and insensitive. That's because it *is* flippant and insensitive. It sometimes treats serious, painful, and terrifying subjects with comedy and irreverence. For example, calling teenagers "crazy" may alarm or offend some of you who have dealt first-hand with true mental illness, especially in your own families (as I have). And if you haven't dealt with true mental illness, it might make you a bit uncomfortable or defensive to use the word "crazy" to describe your child. But for 27 years, "crazy" has been the word I've heard over and over again used by wide-eyed, ashen-faced parents struggling to explain inexplicable teenage behavior. So throughout this book, I'm going to use your language to explain your kid's behavior. Remember, he's not insane; he's just crazy.

In both my work and this book, I often choose to be flip *just because* this subject matter can be so serious, painful, and terrifying. I've found

humor to be our last defense against chaos, allowing us to push back the darkness, keeping it from infecting our souls.

If I offend or shock you, I really do apologize. I'm not a fan of shock jocks myself, but I'm afraid that being offended and shocked are prerequisites for parenting adolescents in the new millennium.

Fasten your seat belt. We're going in.