

Chapter 2

YOUR ADOLESCENT'S WORLD: SEX, DRUGS, AND ROCK 'N ROLL LIKE YOU NEVER SAW

IN MOST WAYS, kids are pretty much the same as they've always been. Nuts. But in most ways, the world around them is incomprehensibly different. And also nuts. We've created a world dripping with sex, drugs, and violence and plunked our temporarily insane children in the middle of it. Our wonderful economy has also provided unprecedented quick-path avenues of easy access to these things. It is an adolescent world different from the one you recall.

When your son tells you that you "don't understand," trust him. You don't. Neither do I. He lives in a culture foreign to both of us but with one big commonality: Adolescents do value and respect honesty. So in return for my being straight-up with them, some teenagers have granted me a visa to tour their worlds a bit. Let me tell you what I've seen.

Drugs: A Short-Term Antidote for the Pain

Satan keeps his end of contracts, at least where drugs are concerned. Drugs do what they promise, and a lot more, particularly for teenagers. They are very effective and very efficient ways of changing reality. They're certainly much more proficient than any therapy or prescribed medication that I know. When parents ask me why their child does drugs, I often ask them why she *shouldn't* do drugs.

Remember the discussion in Chapter 1 of the intense and chronic pain that adolescence presents for troubled kids? Drugs are excellent antidotes for that pain. If you, as a competent, rational adult, had a

searing toothache with no foreseeable relief, would you respect my admonition to “tough it out” without painkillers that might be addicting, or would you not give a damn about the long-term consequences of drug use, focusing instead only on numbing that terrible pain?

I’d pick Door Number 2. And before you tell me that my metaphor is inappropriate, please remember back to your darkest adolescent day, when the future looked most bleak and long-term consequences were irrelevant because you felt little potential or desire to survive. Remember how scary this time can be. Now, tell me once again, why *shouldn’t* your kid do drugs?

The first truly frightening fact you need to confront is that drug use often *does* make major sense in the context of the adolescent world. Drugs can serve so many purposes so well. They change painful emotional realities, make uncool kids cool, provide friends, enable identity development, help rebel against authority, spotlight adult hypocrisy, and do many other wonderful things for your kid, at least in the short term. In the long term, they can kill her.

“Buddy has been depressed ever since his friend Sherry died. They were doing shots with a group of friends celebrating someone’s sixteenth birthday. These are good kids, Dr. Bradley. They don’t do drugs. We knew they were drinking occasionally, but that’s no big deal these days, as I’m sure you know. I guess they didn’t keep track of how many [shots] they did, but Sherry ended up having convulsions and inhaling her vomit...” Mom’s voice trailed off, overwhelmed at the horrible scene that Buddy had witnessed. When Mom found her composure, she lost her perspective: “It’s so hard to believe that Sherry’s gone. It’s not like these kids do drugs.”

ALCOHOL IS *the* DRUG

Believe it or not, your child stands a radically better chance of dying from booze than from marijuana, heroin, cocaine, and hallucinogens *combined*. So why is it that we adults much prefer to find our child drunk on alcohol than stoned on marijuana? Do you drink? Are you wearing blinders? Billy’s parents did both.

“We’d caught Billy with marijuana paraphernalia three times. He’s only

16. It really terrifies us. He obviously isn't listening to us anymore. He adores his Uncle Bobby, so I asked my brother to take my son out to talk with him about the dangers of drug use. I think it may have worked. We haven't had a drug incident in a few months now, so doctor, why did you call us in?"

"I'm breaking confidentiality with your son, since he's doing something that may be life-threatening, and has refused to tell you himself," I intoned quietly. "He's drinking to a potentially fatal extent on his weekend sleepovers. He needs immediate drug treatment." I couldn't help but ask, "Did you know that Uncle Bobby took your son to a bar for that antidrug conversation, and that they drank together?" Mom looked at Dad. Dad stared at the floor. He knew. Dad, by the way, smelled of beer.

Our national hand-wringing over "drug" (non-alcohol) use among our children becomes laughable in the face of statistics that cite our intense and clandestine love affair with booze. We simply flat-out refuse to admit that alcohol really is a drug, let alone an extremely dangerous one. Want some numbers? Be sure now, because you may look a little differently at that beer in your hand.

In this country last year, for every loser who died as a result of a "drug-related" event (including AIDS fatalities caused by drugs), there were at least 15 "good citizens" who quite legally drank themselves to death. Alcohol factors into 50 percent of this nation's homicides, suicides, and driving fatalities. *Eighteen million* Americans currently suffer health problems related to drinking.

The numbers in your kid's world run like this: When the Federal Department of Health and Human Services last asked in 1999, *over half* of our seventh through twelfth graders said they drink. *Twenty percent* noted they drink weekly, with 8 percent admitting to binge drinking (five or more shots in a row) more than once in the preceding month. Annually, 45,000 of our teen children get their bodies broken in booze-related driving accidents. And every year we bury 10,000 of our sons and daughters who drink very well and drive very badly. These numbers make the "drug" body count pale in comparison. Last year we lost far more of our children to alcohol poisoning and drunk driving than were stolen from us by heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, accidents, and

illness *combined*—so somebody, please explain to me how alcohol is not a dangerous drug!

We don't have a National Booze Czar, or a War on Wine. We actually tax, hawk, and profit from this particular drug in ways that might draw the envious admiration of the worst opium lord in the world. Picture a foreign gangster desperately holed-up in his hideout, with attacking drug-agent helicopters hovering overhead. He glances at his satellite TV and catches a famous American commercial. Incredulously he watches soft, fuzzy, winter camera shots of Christmas-adorned sleighs. They're carrying loving, devoted, drug-bearing, red-blooded American families to warm gatherings to celebrate a joyous day, using nonmedicinal, reality-altering substances that are fully government approved. "This holiday message brought to you by your local connection. We urge you to do your drug responsibly. Have a safe, wonderful day."

Is this a great country or what?

This irony does not escape your kid. The National Institutes of Health celebrated the new millennium by releasing a chilling study that shows one out of every four children in our nation sees family alcoholism and alcohol abuse while growing up. Do we really even see this irony ourselves? We'd better, for if we are disabled by a blindness to our true national epidemic drug, we put our kids at great risk.

One of the most powerful universal truths about adolescents is their zero-tolerance policy for adult hypocrisy. They just go wild (and oppositional) in the face of "Do as I say, not as I do." Having a glassy-eyed, beer-breathed conversation with your child about the evils of marijuana is an excellent way to promote the drug's attractiveness. And having a double standard concerning your kid's use of beer versus marijuana is to make yourself ridiculous in his eyes, for he knows the science of drugs much better than you do. Kids have laughed at our antimarijuana propaganda, which, by default, promotes the great American lie that alcohol is not really a drug. They've also seen the unbiased research that proves that alcohol, in so many ways, *is a deadlier drug* than marijuana. If you don't believe this yourself, read the literature. Quickly. Because your child is watching and reacting to what you do. Your double standard puts him at risk. Before I show you how, I need to explain a few other adolescent cultural differences.

THE NEW-MILLENNIUM DRUGS:
STRONGER AND MORE POWERFUL THAN EVER

Marijuana and heroin are not the same drugs they were years ago. In fairness to the pushers, we should rename them, since comparing the drugs of your day with those of today is like comparing a 1975 Corvette with a new one. Today's model is dramatically better and shares only a name with its predecessor.

Marijuana potency has increased radically due to innovations in production. Heroin "purity" rates have increased by factors of *four to nine*, and as a tribute to the efficiency of capitalism, many drugs are much cheaper (relatively speaking) than they were in 1975, so when you hear the "Dosages" used by kids, you need to understand that the drugs you knew (and/or used) that were "10 milligrams" might now be "90 milligrams." They work much better and cause much more damage.

These gains in potency coincide with a frightening reclassification by many adolescents of what technically constitutes "doing drugs." Our own blindness in seeing alcohol as a drug is ultimately responsible here. Here's how it works.

Alcohol (the true horror) is viewed by kids as only slightly more dangerous than caffeinated coffee. It's certainly not a drug. After all, everybody's parents drink, and some drink a whole lot. Many adults drink weekly, even daily, and many parents don't really view drinking as all that bad for adolescents, as long as they don't drive. This is particularly true if the teenager in question is male (you know, "rights of passage," "boys will be boys," "at least he won't end up pregnant," and so on). Therefore, it follows that if alcohol is not a drug, then marijuana cannot be a drug, since according to objective medical and psychological research, *marijuana poses fewer risks than alcohol*.

Be clear that I'm not espousing the virtues of marijuana, by any means. In Chapter 14 we'll talk about the terrible problems all drugs present for our kids, especially marijuana. My point here is that we *grownups* have created this dangerous adolescent paradox that marijuana is OK, and we've done this out of our prejudice against one drug, and out of our blindness towards another. And we expect our kids to listen to us like we make sense?

“I’ve talked to my daughter Sarina about drugs since preschool. I always felt she was truthfully swearing that she didn’t do drugs. Last week her high school principal called and told me she had admitted to being a member of a group they had caught that smoked-up daily before school for almost a year. Incredible! Eight months of daily marijuana use and she doesn’t do drugs! When I confronted her, she denied lying to me. With full conviction, my 15-year-old daughter stared me straight in the eye and said, ‘MMOOO MMM, weed is not a drug. It’s just like drinking alcohol. Everybody knows that.’ Then I felt really confused, like I forgot which way was up. I didn’t know what to say. Is it true that marijuana really is not considered a drug anymore?”

There was a puzzle piece missing here. I asked, “Mrs. Young, is alcohol really not considered a drug anymore?”

Mom shifted uneasily in her seat. “Well, alcohol isn’t, you know, so bad as using drugs. No one thinks that alcohol is a drug. I mean everyone—mostly—drinks, right? And when she’s 21, she’ll just drink anyway, so what’s so wrong with letting her occasionally drink in my basement with her friends? It’s not like we let her do drugs. This way we know where she is, and know she’s safe. We even buy it for her so she’s not breaking any law.” Mrs. Young’s eyes begged me to say something, but she needed to hear what she had just said. She had.

Tears flooded her eyes. “Oh my God! We did this, didn’t we? But Sarina swore to us that if we let her drink, she wouldn’t do drugs. We were so scared of her doing drugs we thought we were helping her. Her grandmother warned me we were making a deal with the Devil.” Grandmom knew the Devil when she saw him.

Once we parents hand out a pass to our adolescents on any type of drug, particularly alcohol, we open up Pandora’s box. Where would you like to draw the line? Two beers? Six beers? Understand that drug use with teens is just like speeding. If you post 55 miles per hour, everybody pushes to 65. The threshold keeps getting pushed back. This point is made well by the same conversation I have with a different kid once a month:

“So, if alcohol is OK, and grass is safer than booze, then what’s the big deal? And if my parents lie to me about marijuana, then maybe they’re lying about cocaine and heroin. Hmmm. . .”

Sex: Too Much + Too Soon = Too Late

It's arguable that, just as we did with heroin purity rates, we may have raised the "potency" impact of sex by 900 percent—as if sex for adolescents needed any tweaking. But before we talk about your kid, let's journey back to your own adolescent sexual experiences. Remember those days? Can you say *obsession*? The adolescent sexuality struggles of your day were overwhelming enough. Today we've gone over the edge.

On its own, teenage sex represents a terrible confluence of volatile developmental and emotional issues simply waiting for a match to ignite them. These "vapors" include new and powerful hormonal rushes, peer acceptance needs, rebelliousness, curiosity, nurturing, intimacy, desires to please (female), desires to dominate (male)—this list could go on for two pages. Remember how sexually preoccupied you were? Good. We can skip the rest of the list.

Now let's add a couple of ingredients to this mix and look at your teenager's sexual struggles.

We have pretty much presented a world to our kids that is saturated by sex. From 1999 to 2000, we increased television "family-hour" sexual references by 74 percent. This could not have been easy to do. As a society, we've "ratcheted down" the sexualizing of kids to such young ages that they simply don't possess the emotional or rational maturity to process this information in a healthy way (as if they can when they're 17). Six-year-olds now commonly have a detailed fund of knowledge about specific sexual functions that can set off shock waves and alarm bells in the adult community. For example, when Tony's mom told me what her first grader had said, I was pretty sure he hadn't learned it watching Sesame Street.

"The school staff is convinced that my six-year-old Tony must have been sexually abused. He's been grabbing at girls' private parts and saying terrible things. They tell me that he must have been exposed to these things somehow."

"What things?" she forced me to ask.

"I can't even say it to you, doctor, so I wrote it down." Her shaking hand held a napkin on which she had written her first grader's words to those sweet, angelic six-year-old girls: "Suck my sweet thang, babeee." I silently wondered why this phrasing and even accent

sounded so familiar to me. “There’s no way he’s ever heard this at home,” Mom continued. “We even religiously police his television watching to be sure he’s not seeing crazy stuff.”

When I brought Tony alone into the room, I started doing the possible sexual assault interview, but nothing fit, either with Tony or in the constellation of behavior that Mom and the school reported. Tony freely admitted saying and doing these outrageous things. “So where’d you hear this stuff, Tony?” I finally asked, like a buddy. He leaned forward. “It’s kinda a secret,” he confided. “I’m not supposed to tell. When we go to my cousin’s house, we’re not allowed to watch *South Park* ’cause it’s a bad show, so my cousin tapes it late at night when his parents don’t know. We watch it until a grownup starts comin’ down the stairs to see what we’re watching. Then my cousin turns on the other video player with a good movie in it.” Admiring their collective genius, it suddenly hit me where I’d heard that phrase before.

As a joke, one of my adolescent clients who thought I was hopelessly unhip used to leave *South Park* sound bites on my phone machine. He always said I needed to know more about kids if I was supposed to help them, “...so at the tone please leave your message for Dr. Bradley. Thank you.” Beeeeep. “Suck my sweet thang, babeee.”

This mental sexualization of too-young children coincides with a scary physical change in our kids. In an intriguing coincidence that gives me a bad feeling, the National Association for Pediatric Endocrinologists recently revised their guidelines regarding early puberty initiation. What we used to call “precocious puberty” ain’t precocious anymore. Puberty initiation for Anglo girls at age seven and African American girls at age six is now considered normal and not evidence of dysfunction. We don’t know why, but girls are commonly beginning physical maturation before seven and eight years of age, and this is now seen as normal due to its prevalence and lack of associated dysfunction. You read that right. *Six- and seven-year-olds*. The melding of this tender-age mental conditioning with this new physical development in first graders sets the stage for some new-age recess games, such as the one that brought Brianna to me.

Brianna was mad. This six-year-old genuinely felt the principal was unfairly making a big deal out of nothing. “The boys play stupid games

all the time, and they don't get sent to a doctor!" "What games do they play?" I asked. "Stupid hitting games, like Wrestlemania and stuff." "And what game were you and your friends playing?" "Stripper," she answered with those innocent blue eyes, "Me and Gina and Charlene were dancing and taking off our clothes, and making the boys pick which one of us they wanted." I could not bring myself to ask this child what she meant by "wanted."

INTIMACY AND SEX: A WARPED VIEW

All of this early sexualizing raises a gnawing fear in those of us who are familiar with substance abuse research. This data has shown that the earlier drug experimentation occurs, the greater the odds of developing drug dependency or addiction. In a potentially powerful noncoincidence, early and frequent sexual activity among adolescents has also risen dramatically. Nationally, in 1998, 17 percent of seventh and eighth graders had sexual intercourse. This number increases with age to 50 percent of the girls between 15 and 18, and 60 percent of the boys. Over a million teenage girls become pregnant every year.

Perhaps predictably, boys in general say they have no regrets about having sex. Yet those of us who work with adolescents see subtle and possibly profound damage to these boys who are often more sexually active at 15 than you were at 25. They seem to turn emotionally cold and cynical, as if they've visited places they weren't ready to see. I fear these boys often become emotionally arrested and unable to be truly emotionally intimate with women. They come to believe that through sex they've experienced the ultimate in being part of a couple. While it's great fun, it actually gets old for them. Since they're emotionally incapable of having intimate relationships (they're crazy and immature), they become frozen in space, thinking that impersonal sex is the end point of sexuality. Many of these boys become cold and sad, frequently engaging in wild passion and devoid of any real passion.

But many of these girls don't enjoy the experience. One study showed that 11 percent of the girls regretted having sex, and over 60 percent admitted to mixed feelings. Girls (and women) value emotional intimacy over physical intimacy. Interestingly and frighteningly, girls now cite peer pressure as the greatest factor in their decision to have sex. Their peers' opinions are twice as powerful as the old "pressure from

boys.” This finding runs so frighteningly contrary to what we believe to be healthy female sexual function that we really have no idea where it may lead.

The other newly researched factors that are involved in a girl’s decision about whether or not to have sex have to do with family influences. Parents who value good academic performance typically have teens who postpone sex. Demanding, unaffectionate mothers often have daughters who have sex early and often. Girls from single-parent households are also likely to become involved in sex early. Girls from two-parent families with emotionally and physically distant moms and dads often look for love in sex. They rarely find it, but they keep on looking—and the more they look, the less they find.

In short, we adults have presented our kids with a world that has acculturated sex to an unprecedented level—one where boys now have sex as casually as they used to get a kiss, and where the greatest motivation for girls to have intercourse is to *earn the esteem of their peers* (gee, I thought that’s why the boys used to do it). The impact of this insanity for both boys and girls at the very time that their brains are undergoing massive neurological rewiring (see Chapter 1) is so potentially staggering that we are holding our breath to see what the long-term consequences might be. We may be hard-wiring warped views of intimacy and sex into their vulnerable heads. For kids like Karen, *Love Story* is just a stupid old movie.

Karen ran down the list of her drugs with me. This 17-year-old was in way over her head. The hair on my neck was starting to rise. The pattern looked almost suicidal, as if she might be hoping to die. She spoke dispassionately with the thousand-yard stare of a combat soldier. “And I also do ecstasy a couple of times a month.” “Why ecstasy?” I asked. She gave me that “he’s a dinosaur” look. “For the sex, of course. I’ve got a sex problem. I, like, sometimes can’t get it on with guys at parties.”

Once in a while, a client will say something that makes me pause, groping for some sensitive, objective, noncontaminating question to figure out what the heck the person is saying. This was such a moment. “Karen, do you think you’re supposed to...sorry, strike that question. How often do you have sex with guys at parties?” She looked upset with the question. “Just like my friends, maybe a couple times a week.

Some weeks none. Why? You think I'm a whore or something?" "Do you want to be having sex like that?" I asked. At least she had some life in her eyes now. She was mad. "What's wrong with that?" she snapped. "Maybe nothing," I deflected. "I just wanted to know how you felt about it." Her anger slowly melted into tears. Then she cried and cried and cried...

If you're thinking that Karen's predicament and that of her generation represents a lack of morals and ethics on their part, I won't argue. I can't. It's not my field. I'll leave that question to the religious leaders and politicians. I will, however, remind you that these kids are really confused, just like we were. Not morally corrupt and ethically bankrupt. Just nuts. They simply don't have the neurological tools to make good decisions about such things, particularly in the face of the incessant sexual bombardment we adults rain on their heads. These kids didn't write the shows, create the ads, or produce the music. That's on us.

So let's get this straight. We're going to constantly stimulate these brain-damaged people sexually, leave them unsupervised and underloved, and then act shocked and appalled that they're having sex? Give me a break. What would you have done? Remember, their world is very different from the world you knew as a teenager.

And while we're chatting about bombarding brain-challenged children with dangerous messages, let's look at that other point of saturation we've achieved in what your kid refers to as rock 'n roll.

Rock 'n Roll: A World of Violence and Aggression

Rock 'n roll is the term kids use to encapsulate all of the other forms of adolescent acting-out behaviors. These include criminal acts, fighting, and suicide, all tied commonly by aggression and violence. The news media seems to portray the adolescent world as one of nonstop violence. Actually, in one respect it's much less violent than your world was. In another, it's much more deadly.

A weird paradox has developed in your kid's world regarding violence and aggression that is critical to understanding the contemporary adolescent culture. The good news, disbelieved by most parents, is that according to our statistics, the overall frequency of youth violence has

plummeted. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), overall rates of school violence have actually *decreased* by 25 percent since 1993. The number of violence-related school deaths has dropped over 50 percent. The FBI says that in the early 1970s, *twice* as many kids under the age of 13 years committed murder than in 1999.

But everybody believes the opposite to be true. Most parents and students consistently report that they believe juvenile violence is wildly escalating and most report being much more fearful. Both our schools and our laws are treating kids like deranged, homicidal maniacs succumbing to some mysterious violence virus. The horrific battlefield pictures of Columbine High are, blessedly, a less and less frequent occurrence in our media. Yet an overwhelming feeling of fear pervades, and prompts us to install metal detectors in our schools, to suspend kids for minor shoving matches, and to sentence psychologically sick, violent juveniles to adult prisons (more on this later). Are we all just reacting hysterically to overpublicized rage events? Not necessarily.

The bad news is that there appears to be a boiling down of aggression and violence among many adolescents to a leaner, meaner, and more pervasive form not seen previously. This has become acculturated into your kid's world in a variety of ways. It's very apparent in the lovers' spats, arguments with parents, and adolescent fighting rules that have been rewritten since your day.

Options to resolve lovers' spats have changed. A recent study of 2,300 adolescents from urban and suburban public and private schools (uniforms offer no protection) found that fully one-third of the kids felt violence to a female is deserved if a girl "disses" (yells at or insults) her boyfriend. They went on to quote the unwritten teen code that an appropriate punishment for a "steady" girl seen talking to another boy is a shove or slap from her boyfriend. This is different from your world. Earlier generations of kids held that violence towards females was considered cowardly. It probably occurred, but it wasn't publicly approved. Now for many kids it's a sign of "true love."

Similarly, the parent versus adolescent fight rules have been revised. Teens have argued loudly with parents since the dawn of time—but not quite like Jesse's kid. Last year, this frightened 39-year-old single mom from a small town in Pennsylvania went to court to obtain a Protection From Abuse (PFA) order. A family member had threatened to burn down her house and to "take us out in body bags." That horrifying

threat was not from a drunk, raging ex-husband; that promise was from her son.

What once would have set off titters of laughter has now become a routine sight in courtrooms around the country: terrified parents of adolescents obtaining legal protection against the threats and assaults of their own children. Jesse's request became the sixth PFA granted to parents by that one judge in five months. "They [the parents] have tried everything else," said the judge. "Their children are either assaulting them or their siblings. They're out of control." Even professional veterans of adolescent wars are scratching their heads over this new rage phenomenon—but then again, a fight ain't what it used to be, either.

Years ago a "fight" meant two combatants who used their fists to try to settle a score. Like an exaggerated rugby match, they'd whack at each other until either one went down, or, more commonly, both got too tired to swing anymore. Then, by some unwritten yet strict rule, the match was declared over. Rarely did animosity extend beyond the game clock. Busted noses and lips seemed to be the worst of it. The loser often still won status by simply showing his willingness to make a stand.

Use of weapons or ganging-up on an opponent usually brought disaster for the aggressor. Win or lose, he'd be seen as the real loser, often socially shunned for his blasphemous disregard of the rules. Sometimes a weapons-user would get roughed up by the onlookers for being a cowardly punk. Guns in fights were definitely not cool. These fight rules are changing.

The basic adolescent instinct toward aggression certainly existed previously, but its context may have now changed in a frightening way, where savage gang attacks are not only often sanctioned by teenage onlookers as acceptable, but prized as *entertainment*. And if you are one of those parents who thinks this scary, dark violence exists only in our cities, let me tell you about Eddie. This middle-class, suburban kid will probably think twice before being a Good Samaritan again.

Dad's news clippings told the story of a son who was attacked by four older and larger kids. Eddie managed to fend off one attacker and tried to run. The cheering crowd of 20 students who came to watch the fun apparently felt they hadn't gotten their money's worth. They formed a circle keeping Eddie in the "ring" so the death match could continue.

As Eddie begged for help on his knees, his attackers used TV wrestling elbow swings and kicks to beat Eddie's head into a bloody mash. Undeterred by having an unconscious victim, the attempted murder continued until a neighbor on this nice suburban street pushed his way into the center of the ring to stop the carnage. He was booed by the crowd.

Even the judge who handled the trial, who was no stranger to cases of violence, was clearly at a loss to understand what happened. When she asked one of the attackers for an explanation, he offered that he had heard that Eddie may have said something about the attacker's mother. The truth was that two days before the attack, Eddie had called a teacher to stop one of the assailants from beating up another smaller kid at school. After hearing this, the judge stared for a moment and then said, "All of the testimony I've heard does not explain the hatred, the level of violence here. He nearly died. This was a repeated series of violent acts. That viciousness I don't understand. I don't think there's a rational explanation for this behavior."

These incidents happen every day—in small towns, big towns, cities, and suburbs. While they occur less frequently than in the past, when they do happen, they occur with an edge of rage that might be new. Some psychologists theorize that the reduced fight numbers may reflect the fact that many kids have become much more fearful of physical confrontations and now avoid them at all costs.

While conducting a conflict-resolution program at an elementary school, I asked the upper-grade boys to write down what the goal was in a physical fight with a peer. Forty percent cited causing serious physical injury (hopefully requiring a trip to the hospital) and half of those said that weapons were OK to use in pursuit of that goal. They explained that this was important to discourage the revenge posse they could expect to hunt them down if they only won the fight without seriously injuring their opponent. Winning to these children meant disabling your enemy and infusing fear into the onlookers as well. Incidentally, the elementary school where I conducted this program was a private, suburban institution. This is not to say that these kids would actually commit such horrors, but it is scary to hear how our culture has made an impact on their views of aggression and violence. They see their world as the OK Corral. Guns are becoming acceptable.

Before you become judgmental about teens, think for a moment.

Given the fight rules of today's teen, would you, as a bullied adolescent, have ever considered carrying a gun just in case? Many do. From 1984 to 1994, the death-by-gun rate among teenagers increased fourfold before the homicide rate began to decline mid-decade. Last year, it was estimated that more than 100,000 of our children took guns to school. One kid in 20 admits to having carried a gun to someplace other than school. A 2000 CDC study found that over 17 percent of our kids traveled with various armaments in any given month.

Many psychologists who work with adolescents are as shocked as you are about the number of recent school shootings. We're shocked that the number is so *small* in light of the availability of weapons and the emotional volatility of adolescents. This low number is a tribute to the self-control of our brain-challenged teens, but not to our adult efforts to reduce our kids' exposure to violence. As we've done with sex, we are also saturating our youth with violence.

How many times have you seen fight/assault scenes like Eddie's? If your answer is "lots of times," and you haven't served time in a penitentiary, then you've watched this on TV and movie screens. A lot. Studies of the ironically named "family-hours" on television have found that violent references have increased by 60 percent from 1997 to 1999. I'm sure I don't have to tell you about the movies, CDs, and video games.

Many researchers think they know why the rage factor is worsening, but they just can't prove it yet. We may be redefining adolescent violence as a less frequent but more brutal phenomenon by desensitizing our kids to aggression, but researchers have yet to find scientifically accepted *proof* that these exposures absolutely cause increased aggression. This missing "smoking gun" (pun intended) is due more to the tremendous difficulty of this type of research than to the question itself. Scores of studies show strong correlations between this profitable media fetish and increased child preoccupation with violence, but a *correlation* is different from *cause-and-effect proof*. A correlation just means that these things happen together. Cause-and-effect proof means one makes the other happen.

It's kind of like the confusion surrounding cigarette smoking years ago. We knew it was killing people, but we just could not scientifically prove it. Using this argument as skillfully and unethically as the cigarette makers of yesteryear, the entertainment industry experts insist there is no

connection between screen violence and the real thing. Oh, OK. Sure.

Even young children say that screen violence affects them. In the same conflict-resolution seminar that I mentioned earlier, I asked the upper-grade kids if they thought video games, CDs, and TV shows affected their tendency to be aggressive. They all looked at me in amazement that I was the one being paid to do that seminar. “YES!” they all declared in one voice. One student asked, “How can a kid see that stuff all his life and *not* get affected?”

But exclusively blaming the media for our cultural fetish with violence is like blaming the mirror for your weight problem. The media and the mirror both coldly reflect who we are and what we like. Both can contribute to our lust for blood in glorifying violence, but in the end we decide what is real and what is an illusion for our children through our actions. Our kids are learning that the violence we adults present to them in their movies, games, and CDs is the *reality*, not the illusion.

This reality is reinforced by another paradox of youth violence, this one involving kids as the victims. While our juvenile crime rate is declining, those same CDC statistics point out that our nation leads the world in murdered children. Of the world’s 26 wealthiest countries, we lose more of our kids to homicide than the other 25 *combined*. Our tendency toward violence exists throughout our society. It is not restricted to adolescents, but they’ve become our focus and often our scapegoats. We parents who scream at the violence in the media are far too often the same ones who scream at, demean, and hit our children. In a child’s mind, just how do we distinguish that “irresponsible” media violence from our “responsible” parental violence of hurting a child to make her stop hurting her brother?

And after relentlessly pounding aggressive, rage-based behavior vignettes into children’s neurologically deficient brains 24 hours a day, where do we find the nerve to act so astounded when Johnny pays back his tormentor with a shotgun? I believe we should be thankfully puzzled that so few do.

ADOLESCENT SUICIDE: THE ULTIMATE IN ROCK ’N ROLL

Adolescent suicide, something almost unknown in the 1960s, has exploded into your kid’s world—a 400 percent increase in the last 40 years, with the greatest increase occurring over the last two decades

among kids 10 to 14 years old. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that in 1999, over 19 percent of our teenage children either attempted suicide or had a serious plan to kill themselves. Look at your daughter's sleepover gang. Two of those 10 children came close. Suicide has become a stylized violence ritual, a kind of "X-treme" game of chicken played by disenfranchised, temporarily brain-damaged kids. Often romanticized as victims of desperation, many suiciders elicit little sympathy from psychologists who work with all of the broken lives the "victim" leaves behind. While some suicides result from hopeless, zero-option scenarios like crippling depression, many adolescent suicides are self-centered acts of anger, a kind of terrible "screw-you" to the true victims, the loved ones who must survive the aftermath.

This harsh characterization is critical to understand for both potential suiciders and for their caretakers. Many adolescent suiciders exhibit anger, rather than the popularized withdrawal and depression, prior to taking their lives. It is impossible to predict whether or not someone will attempt suicide, but psychologists are able to provide good assessments as to the relative risk potential of an individual. Therefore, we must always act extremely conservatively whenever any possibility of suicide exists (more on this in Chapter 5).

Looking closely at this horrific trend gives clues about its nature. Teenage suicides often occur in chain reactions among circles of acquaintances or even locales. The "fame" that the media awards to victims can seem attractive to another troubled kid. We grownups also love to tell these stories, and thus romanticize them to our children.

Threatening to commit suicide (often on the Internet) has become a bizarre pastime among teenagers, along with a "rescuing" game on the part of the respondents, be they cyber or real. The problem is that the line between fantasy and reality becomes blurred with a few beers at 2 A.M., and frighteningly large numbers of these young people end up with a bullet in the brain. And most of the "successful" players pull a trigger on a weapon that belongs to their mom or dad.

I've had the terrible task of working with families seeking grief counseling and explanations about their teenage suiciders who spoke for months on the Internet about killing themselves. Tragically, in the cases I've seen, none of the scores of Internet respondents, some of whom were adults, thought to call these kids' parents or the police. When questioned after the fact, they typically respond, "Kids say this stuff all

the time. I never thought he'd actually do it."

Again, before you become judgmental about how inferior today's youth are, let me harken you back to the days of your own youth, when the line between reality and fantasy got blurred a lot. We were fortunate in that suicide wasn't cool then. It kind of is cool now. We'll talk later in Chapter 5 about ways you can reduce the odds of having this particular nightmare, but for now allow me to jump ahead into quicksand while we're chatting about violence, adolescence, and suicide.

SPEAKING OF GUNS. . .

Get rid of your guns. I speak here not as a liberal, a conservative, Republican or Democrat. Just as a middle-aged shrink staring at a list of gut-wrenching names. These names are on files that tell the stories of families that were annihilated directly or indirectly by guns. This list is not offered here as objective data; it's very personal. But if you have guns, you'd better read this.

I won't venture into the more objective statistical quagmire that represents the current gun debate. For every study that links increased gun ownership with increased violence, another researcher claims that more guns equals less violence. I'll leave those numbers for you to sort out on your own, but there are two statistics that jump out at me as someone who works with teens.

The first is that as we Americans have armed ourselves in record numbers, the rates of violent adolescent crime have finally decreased dramatically after peaking mid-decade. This creates an illusion that having more guns around somehow should get the credit.

The second perplexing number is that the incidents of gun-related juvenile activity (shootings, gun threats, brandishings, and suicides) have continued to increase dramatically even in the face of these reductions in overall teen crime and violence rates. "Trickle-down" theories do work when it comes to the economics of weapons. Guns get to our kids with frightening ease.

You need to decide if you believe that the arming of America has reduced crime by teens. Most researchers shake their heads sadly at this theory, but even if you do think that guns reduce crime in general, you need to ask yourself what the potential cost is to *your child* of keeping those firearms in the house. You need to decide this quickly,

because what we may be doing for your kid's generation is providing a deadly efficient means of expression for those dark and terrible thoughts that have been harbored at times by teenagers of all generations. I didn't have any guns in the house calling to me in my days of teen madness. Did you?

This is not about statistics or politics, it's just about TV, brain damage, and ballistics. I hope I've convinced the previously unconvinced that adolescents are nuts (due to wiring problems) and that the adolescent world is a dangerous place (just watch TV for an hour). So how can we justify providing these troubled human beings access to guns?

Simply put, guns work too well. Can homicidal kids bludgeon classmates out of this world with a baseball bat? Possibly. Can the suicidal ones overdose on drugs or cut a wrist and bleed to death? Sure. But the death literature clearly proves guns work best. Most homicidal bat swingers don't kill. Most suicidal pill takers and wrist cutters survive. As a tribute to technology, the body counts conclusively prove that the trigger pullers are all much better at their craft. The targets in gunfights survive much less frequently. The life-defining act of most successful teenage murderers and suiciders is pulling a trigger. Let me try this one last way.

If one night, God forbid, your kid or mine gets so far gone that she starts roaming around the house looking for a way out of this life for herself or her tormenter, what would you want her to find? And what would you hope she doesn't find?

Finally, please leash any fantasies about the childproof lock, the safe combination that only you know, or the secret hiding spot. Don't you remember when your child was eight he knew more about house locks, safes, or secret hiding places than you? If you think these things can protect your kid, in six seconds I'll name six children who aren't here anymore as a result of those very same fail-safe measures. And if you still want to argue, let me put you in touch with the parents of those kids. In the hope that it might save your child, they'll tell you about the lifelong agony, and I mean *agony*, they carry as the result of having once shared your "safe" gun fantasies. Mr. Murphy thought he kept his guns very safe.

Dad jumped in to take control of the conversation before his wife could finish her opening question about my political views on gun control. "OK, Doctor, let's just get this straight from the beginning. You might

be one of those liberals who hates guns and that might present a problem for us seeing you. Well, I like guns, and I know how to safely use them, and I've trained my kids how to safely use them to defend themselves. And when Bobbie was getting depressed, I locked my guns away in my safe that only I have the combination to. Even my wife doesn't have it. There's just no way anyone could have that combination. I take every precaution. I'm very responsible.

"And you know what else, if someone decides to kill themselves, they're gonna find a way, right? You shrinks are always saying how no one, even you guys, can prevent somebody from killing themselves. Am I right? So guns are not going to be the issue here."

First-session therapy notes of a couple whose adolescent daughter shot herself four weeks earlier with Dad's pistol from the impregnable safe. On her desk they found a copy of the safe combination, next to her last letter. She was well trained. She didn't miss.

Over 8,000 of our children died by gunfire last year. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), folks who live with guns in their houses for "protection" have *five times* the risk of suiciding. Love guns? Fine. Love your teenager more. Get rid of your guns until he's out of the house. Keep your kid off my list.

Thank You for Flying Air Terror

This concludes the really frightening part of the tour. I do hope you're scared, because as the father of two kids, I constantly keep myself scared. We do better work when we're not complacent. It helps push us to do our parent jobs better, even when we're tired, sick, or just fed up. And once again, let me remind you that this parenting stuff is a job, and probably the toughest one you'll ever have. It certainly will be the most important, but, like any job, training is required to do it well.

Thus far, this training has taught you two vital things you'll need for the final exam: Kids are nuts and the world we've stuck them in is out of control. You suspected that, but now you can at least be comforted in knowing you have good instincts. You also have some bad information, but we're going to fix all that.

You can unfasten your seat belt for the time being, and feel free to

walk around the cabin. Let's move on to Chapter 3 to look at the latest news on one eternal adolescent battle, known for its famous parental war chant:

“Oh yeah? Well, if all of your friends marched off a cliff, would you?”

