

**WHEN THINGS GET
CRAZY
WITH YOUR TEEN**

***The Why, the How,
and What to Do NOW***

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New York Chicago San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City
Milan New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore Sydney Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bradley, Michael J., 1951–

When things get crazy with your teen : the why, the how, and what to do now /
by Michael J. Bradley. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-07-154571-6 (alk. paper)

1. Parent and teenager. 2. Teenagers. 3. Parenting. I. Title.

HQ799.15.B727 2008

649'.125—dc22

2008024963

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 FGR/FGR 0 9 8

ISBN 978-0-07-154571-6

MHID 0-07-154571-9

Interior design by Monica Baziuk

Illustrations by Ross Bradley

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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PREFACE

“YOU STILL DON’T get it,” Marc sighed. “If this book is such a good idea, it would have been written long ago. You can’t get that specific with teen behavior problems. They’re far too complex. Aren’t you the guy who’s always saying that each kid is a different book? These are not simple physical issues, and, besides, you ain’t no Dr. Spock.” Marc was my third peer to advise against writing this book, and he made a lot of sense. A psychologist would have to be nuts to think that one book could help families deal with so many issues. Teenagers, their problems, and their families are all about as similar as fingerprints. That complexity is what forces very smart psychologists to write very generalized books. In the game of human behavior, becoming specific often means becoming inaccurate and looking stupid. So why would someone ever try to write one parenting book crammed with nothing but very specific advice?

Because of what happened to me later that week. At the end of one of my teen-parenting seminars I watched a mom roll her eyes in exasperation as I overanswered her question. “That theory stuff is fine,” she sighed. “But what should I do about this *tonight—when I get home?* That’s what I came here for. I don’t have time to do all those things you just said. That theory stuff might help me do a better job with my kid when things calm down—*IF* he calms down. I need *practical* help for *RIGHT NOW*. What should I do *TONIGHT?*”

That must have been the hundredth time I had heard the same thing from a scared, frustrated parent, but this time something clicked. As I listened to that mom, all those rows of excellent parenting books in bookstores flashed before my eyes. I pictured her picking up one after the other (including my own prior ones), frantically flipping through the pages, and angrily mumbling, “But my kid is raging *NOW*. What do I do *NOW*?” With that picture in my head I quickly snapped off three brief things for that mom to try when she got home that night. She smiled a big, tired smile, nodded, and thanked me. She had gotten what she came for. That’s when I decided to write this manual.

What drives most parents of adolescents to bookstores and seminars is not scientific curiosity about adolescent development theory. Usually it’s more about the algebra text she just hurled through the picture window. Or the bottle of vodka he just hid in his backpack. Often it’s about report cards that mimic the last hours of the RMS *Titanic*. Or the bedroom floors from which the cockroaches flee. The desire to learn parenting techniques typically arises from problems, not perfection. People with those “perfect” teenagers scoff at parenting books. The rest of us (the ones with the normal kids) hold a love-hate relationship with those pages. Speaking as a parent, my hate part comes from being forced to read endless passages while trying to sift out the what-to-do-now pieces. Speaking as a psychologist, I intend to fix that.

In this book you’ll find little theory and lots of advice—practical, specific, and well-researched advice. This (hopefully) works because I’ve limited the scope to provide generally accepted strategies for only the *initial intervention* with each of these teen issues, problems that were selected by parent groups as the ones most common to contemporary adolescence. For most of the smaller problems that you’ll face with your teen, this is all you’ll

need. For the biggies, this will help to keep everyone safer until you get the more involved help you'll need.

Think of this manual as a hospital emergency room (ER) and you'll get the idea. Here's where you get minor problems fixed (such as with a few stitches) and major ones stabilized (as with a temporary cast) until you get to see the specialist. At the ER and in this book you find that knowing what *not* to do is at least as important as knowing what to do. If nothing else, you'll learn how to keep minor disagreements from exploding into major disasters. As an airline pilot once explained to me, "You know, there's a lot of similarity between the training for parenting and the training for piloting. It's often not the *problems* that cause crashes. Frequently it's *our bad reactions to the problems* that create the disasters."

And if your particular disaster is a less urgent one, you really should read the last section of this book first: "The Twenty-Minute Guide to the New-Millennium Teen." Those ten quick reading topics can provide all the ingredients you'll need to concoct your own curative recipe for any teen challenge you might encounter.

In closing, allow me to note four things. First, in the interest of readability, I generally alternate gender references from topic to topic. Of course, almost all of these problems strike both sexes with equal opportunity pain. By the way, the attributed quotes you'll find under the topics are the actual words of real kids. The others I just made up. (But I'll bet the farm they've been heard many times.)

Second, I must acknowledge the risks that my friend Marc pointed out. Indeed, these are simple solutions to sometimes complex problems, and some may not work in your particular situation. Just as you need to be your own "first" physician, so must you be your own "first" shrink. Use this information as options to be considered, but apply them or not according to

your own expertise and knowledge of your family. And whenever in doubt, get expert help. If we're frequently wondering whether we need some counseling, then we likely do.

Third, I must apologize for repeatedly telling you to stay calm as you get through these issues with your kid, many of which will absolutely enrage you. Being Irish, I can enjoy a good parental firestorm at least as much as the next parent. Unfortunately, the research is overwhelmingly clear that snapping out at best does no good and at worst can do tremendous damage. To paraphrase an Alcoholics Anonymous mantra, *there's no teen problem that a parent rage cannot make worse*. If you take only one thing from this book, take the idea that keeping your cool is at least 50 percent of the cure for any adolescent crisis you'll ever see.

Finally, know that in addition to researching and gathering this wisdom, I've tried out much of it myself with my own kids. It's amazing—a lot of it actually works!

Good luck! And keep your head down.