

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY
RESOURCES

STICKING WITH YOUR TEEN

Joe White
with **Lissa Halls Johnson**



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Sticking with Your Teen: How to Keep from Coming Unglued No Matter What

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A Word from Joe

There are no magic pills or potions that make us great parents, and no magic deeds that guarantee our efforts will “work.”

Great parents can have prodigal children.

Horrible parents can have great children.

Some parents have kids on both ends of the spectrum—same environment, different outcomes.

No matter which kind of teen you have, chances are that sometimes you’ve wanted to wring his neck. You may get so frustrated at his stubbornness that you want to scream, and sometimes do. Well, join the rest of us.

But there’s hope. I realized this recently when I danced with my daughter at her wedding. Reaching out her slender hand, she led me to the dance floor. Tears flowed as I cherished every moment, every memory of our years together.

Things had not always been good between my daughter and me. For too many years they were hard, so hard. As I let my tears fall, I knew this was the crowning moment.

I want this for you as well. It’s the payoff for all your hard work—dancing with your daughter at her wedding, standing up for your son at his, being asked by your adult son to help him with his first business venture.

Think it’s impossible? Well, look at me. I’m a dad who started

out much too busy. But by the grace of God, my daughter and I danced at her wedding, and only the best of our memories remained.

"It Was Worth It"

The chaos of having four teens in the house is as distant in my memory as a sliver of new moon on a foggy January night. But the good times seem like yesterday.

I don't miss the long, sleepless nights, but how I miss the adolescents who caused them! I don't miss the conflicts, but I miss the precious ones with whom I shared them. I don't miss the seemingly hopeless sea of misunderstanding, but I miss the waves of hope that flowed to the shore when reconciliation came.

Now the phone rings with calls from my precious grandchildren. I'm discovering the wisdom of the old gentleman who said, "If I'd known being a granddad was this much fun, I would have been a whole lot nicer to my kids!"

Dancing in the firelight that flickers with memories is good at age 56. The leukemia that five years ago threatened to kill me is now in remission; my teenagers are in their twenties, at peace with their mom and dad and raising children of their own.

I can honestly say, "It was worth it a billion times over; it was worth it!" The seasons of rebellion and rejection pale in comparison to the smiles and gratitude and accomplishments and team-building and spiritual growth that crowd the treasure chest of my memories.

Not that everything is perfect. My kids still catch me in "hopeless Dad" mode. The other day I was hustling from my car to the front door of the mall, talking to my oldest son. It dawned on me that I must have left my cell phone in my car. I went back and looked everywhere, but without success.

“I think I lost my phone,” I told my son.

“Dad,” he laughed in pity, “you’re *talking* to me on your phone!”

Maybe it’s God’s design that our memory gets a little “selective” at my age. It seems all the days I made “D’s” and “F’s” as a frustrated dad are, like my cell phone, lost to my conscious mind.

You Make the Difference

Your home life, like mine, may not be pretty all the time. Our parenting may not be perfect. Our teens may seem standoffish or downright mutinous.

But we moms and dads can make the difference. We can stand firmly at home plate, swinging at the fastballs and curveballs that parenting teens hurls in our direction. Our hugs may not always seem appreciated, but we can deal them out knowing that someday, someone will be nurtured by them.

Our “I love yous” and “I’m proud of yous” may seem like sparse raindrops on the desert of our teens’ hearts, but at least they’re hearing them. The day may well dawn when the phone rings and the long-awaited words flow humbly through the earpiece: “Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad. You are the best! You never quit on me. Even when I didn’t love myself, you did. Even when I didn’t know how to receive love, you gave it. Even when everyone else abandoned me, you always stood in my corner.”

I Hope You Dance

Dancing may be the activity furthest from your mind right now. Maybe screaming or sobbing or throwing a brick through a window would express your emotions more clearly. Maybe it seems

your teen is so far away, or so sunk in trouble, that reconnecting is impossible.

But if I've learned anything from parenting teens and from talking with tens of thousands of them at Kanakuk Kamps and elsewhere, it's this: *It's never too late to start, and it's always too soon to quit!*

The western Kansas farmer never stops planting milo, corn, and wheat in his faith-filled springtime ritual. Drought after drought, disappointing harvest after disappointing harvest, he never stops believing, never stops hoping, never stops casting seed into the parched ground. Somewhere in his heart there's a dream of a vibrant sea of early August five-foot stalks, filled with golden ears of corn awaiting the blade of the combine.

The soil of your teen's heart may seem hard right now. But the plow and the rains are on the way, and the harvest is coming.

This is a book about believing in that day, and in the God who's going to help you and your teen get there together.

A Word from Lissa

I'm scared of heights. So why was I three stories up, my legs dangling over nothing?

I knew others had made it safely down this 300-foot zip line at Kamp Kanakuk, speeding at treetop level to a brick stop at the other end. Some had even done it upside-down.

I knew it *could* be done safely. But would *my* ride be safe?

There was no more time to contemplate. The person running the ride began the countdown and shouted, "Geronimo!" I threw myself off the bench and flew down the line—screaming the entire way.

At the other end, my six companion zippers asked if I'd had fun. I said, "I don't know. I was too scared to tell."

I think many parents of teenagers feel the same way.

They're scared before raising their teens, and they're scared during. Afterward, they have no idea if they did it right—or if they had fun doing it.

Time to Reconnect

For some parents, the process is especially frightening. The sweet child who threw chubby arms around their necks and said, "I wub you, Mommy, Daddy," now gives them an obscene gesture. These

parents may have done their best to raise that teen in a godly, loving way. But something genetic, tragic, mistaken, or mysterious causes their child to snap.

For other parents, it's not so dramatic. They just wake up one morning and realize they're living with a stranger. Or at least someone who seems not to need them anymore.

We all have days like that. We flounder, wondering how to connect with our teens. Should we even try? Is it too late?

Some of us give up. Others try to exert more control.

Neither approach works.

We're here to encourage you to climb back up the spiral staircase to the zip-line platform. We'll strap you into the harness and make you as secure as we can. But at the count of three, you'll have to push yourself off the bench and begin your wild descent.

We don't offer recipes to "fix" your teen. We do offer an arm around the shoulder as you learn to become a relentless parent—one who never, ever gives up.

We've been down that zip line ourselves. Our own kids have acted out their anger and frustration over hurts we caused and some we didn't. We did the best we could and made some mistakes—and discoveries—along the way.

We'd like to share the most helpful parts with you.

Relational and Relentless

This book is about reengaging a disengaged teen. It contains no easy answers, no steps that guarantee success. That's because every human being has the right to choose wisdom or stupidity. You can guide and encourage your teen, but you can't choose for him.

Fortunately, that guidance and encouragement can make all

the difference in the world. They did for a boy I met at Kamp Kanakuk. His father, an all-American football hero, had dreams for his son to follow in his footsteps—and the son shared that dream. The two of them trained long and hard until a doctor discovered that the boy had a congenital back problem that made it unwise for him to play football. Just like that, the dream was gone.

What did that father do? He threw his arms around the boy and said, “It doesn’t matter, son. We’ll have a new dream. I know you can do anything you set your mind to do, and you will.”

When I met him, that boy barely could sit still; he was that excited. “I can do anything,” he exclaimed, “because my dad believes in me.”

Connecting with your teen requires that kind of belief. It requires not giving up. It requires letting your teen make mistakes and then beginning again.

It’s the kind of thing God has done for us. He’s allowed us to choose a relationship with Him—or not. Every day we have that choice.

That’s what we’re going to do in this book—learn who we need to be so that our teens have every opportunity and reason to choose a relationship with us.

It’s never too late to start that process.

And it’s always too soon to quit.

You may not be sure right now whether the zip line of parenting a teen is worth the effort—or the risk. By the time you finish this book, though, I hope the *how* and the *why* will be clear.

It’s about being relational—and relentless.

And when you get to the other end, it’s about breathing a sigh of relief—and recognizing that, in spite of everything, there really were some good times after all.

The Experiment

My mom and I do not get along very well, so we usually find ourselves disputing over the simplest things. Lately she has been very judgmental of my friends because of their hair or the way that they dress. She brings up the old cliché line, "Name someone successful that looks like that," and I always come back with, "We're teenagers. We're not supposed to be successful; it's our experimental years."

—A TEEN

If the teen years are experimental, how's the experiment going at your house? Are you on the verge of a great discovery? Or are you afraid to enter the lab each morning for fear of the rotten-egg smell and the mold growing in the corner? Or are you ready to hang a DANGER sign on the wall?

Sandra and Richard McDonald found themselves in the danger category at two o'clock one morning.

When the doorbell rang, Sandra dragged herself from a deep sleep. Her husband, Richard, rolled out of bed.

At the front door, Richard was surprised to see Ken Bell, an acquaintance of his own son, Kurt. Ken's father was there, too.

“Mr. Bell?” Richard said.

The man nodded. “Ken’s truck was broken into. They smashed the windows. Stole the stereo.” He cleared his throat, looking uneasy. “Ken says he saw your son’s truck leaving the scene.”

Sandra felt her heart race. “Someone must have stolen Kurt’s truck.”

“Kurt is spending the night with a friend,” Richard told the Bells. “We’ll find out what happened and get back to you.”

After the men left, Sandra called her son’s cell phone. “Kurt!” she said.

“Mom, why are you calling so late?”

“Where’s your truck?”

“I don’t know. Outside, I guess. Why?”

“You’re looking at [your teen] and you’re thinking, yeah, he is a little less communicative, but it seems like everything’s okay.”

—A PARENT

“Well, you’re not going to believe this, but Mr. Bell and Ken came by. Ken’s truck was broken into. Your truck was leaving the area. Look outside; is your truck outside?”

Kurt made some noises, then said, “No, it’s gone.”

“I’m going to get him,” Richard told Sandra.

Soon Richard and Kurt were driving around town, looking for Kurt’s truck. But Kurt was calm—pretty strange, Richard thought, considering the boy’s truck supposedly was stolen.

As they drove, Kurt began to talk. Puzzle pieces fell from nowhere. He admitted that he’d been hanging out with a kid, Jeremy, who everyone knew was bad news.

This shock had barely landed when Kurt added, “Oh, yeah, Dad—I’m moving to Mexico with Jeremy.”

Dumbfounded, Richard barely managed to keep steering the car.

“We’re leaving as soon as Jeremy gets this huge inheritance when he turns 18.”

More silence.

“It’s all planned.”

The puzzle pieces fell into place, creating a picture Richard didn’t want to see. Instead of asking about the planned move, though, he probed the whereabouts of the truck.

Kurt’s answer gave him another jolt: “Well, I can’t remember anything, because I took Xanax and I’ve been drinking.” The boy fidgeted. “Well, yeah, maybe I was there. Maybe I did help Jeremy break into that car. And maybe, you know, maybe, that stuff we stole out of the other car is kind of . . . well . . . actually in my truck. Jeremy is kind of, well, driving it.”

Overwhelmed, Richard pulled the car to the side of the road. He sat there with the car running, staring at his son. “What else?”

“Well, I guess—yeah, I guess the cops are chasing him right now.”

Is that how the experiment is going at your house?

Maybe the developments in your “lab” aren’t quite so dramatic, but they’re just as frustrating. Maybe conversations with your teen go something like this:

“Jen! How was school?”

Glare. “Fine.”

“Did you do anything fun?”

Glare. “No.”

“How was your math test?”

Glare. “Stupid.”

“Come sit and talk to me.”

“Why should I?”

“I’d just like to know—”

“I’ve got homework.” Footsteps pound up the stairs. A door slams.

Or maybe you’re hearing more silence than sarcasm these days:

“Hi, Scott. How was your day?”

Grunt.

Backpack drops to the floor. Footsteps fade down the hall.

Sound familiar?

Whether your teen-raising experiment is going terribly wrong or not, chances are it isn’t quite meeting your expectations. You may feel like the child you knew has switched places with a taller,

gangly person you couldn’t possibly have given birth to.

“We didn’t want to continue down the path we were on, but we didn’t want to give up on having a relationship with her.”

—A PARENT

Well, come on in and join me. I’ve lived through that experiment.

My wife, Debbie Jo, and I had four teens in the house at the same time. What a ride those years were! I wish I could tell you I did everything right, but I didn’t. We had broken curfews, defiant attitudes, intense sibling rivalry, late-night phone calls that revealed things I never wanted to hear, emotional meltdowns, the silent treatment, depression, rejection, and rebellion. The season on any behavior, with any kid, could last a day, a month, and sometimes years. Many times I’d wake up in the morning and think, *What in the world is going on?*

Depending on how your experiment is going, you may feel sometimes like you’re on the verge of a nervous breakdown. You may be going bald from all that head-scratching and hair-pulling.

You're probably trying the best you can. But you've noticed the relationship with your son or daughter is getting distant—or downright fractured. You want to be connected with your teen, to continue to help shape his life, but something's happened. You may not be sure what to do. And even if you are, you wonder whether it's too late.

Confessions of a Former Teenager

Before you can figure out what to do about your situation, you need to decide just how bad things really are. One way to do that is to remember what things were like when *you* were a teen.

Let's take a little trip down memory lane, shall we?

Remember those raging hormones? Maybe you resisted the urges they created; maybe you didn't.

Remember how you saw your parents? Maybe you listened to them; maybe you preferred your friends' ideas. Slowly or quickly you moved away from your folks, trying to become your own person.

Remember your relationships with other kids? You wanted to be noticed, to be loved, to find a circle of friends where you fit in.

And those industrial-strength feelings—remember them? Sometimes you felt angry for no apparent reason. If you were a girl, maybe you felt like crying all the time. If you were a boy, maybe you wanted to punch something every couple of hours. The smallest event could throw you into one mood or another, or several at once.

Did you rebel as a teen, or just disconnect a little? Maybe you bought clothes your parents would never buy, listened to music they hated. Or maybe you went off the deeper end, skipping

school or binge drinking or dealing grass or rolling an SUV at 90 miles per hour and ending your best friend's life.

Times Have Changed

Recalling your teenaged self can help put your son's or daughter's behavior in perspective, especially if you were a headache-producing handful. But if you were no more rebellious than Beaver Cleaver, you may ask, "Why can't my kid be more like I was?"

Part of the answer may lie in the fact that Beaver's world is long gone. The emotions and questions of adolescence may be the same, but practically everything else has changed. Friendships can be established and built on the Internet, without face-to-face contact. Knowledge—good, bad, and perverted—is on tap there, too. Kids stay in touch on personal phones that go with them everywhere. Thousands of songs in a tiny metal box provide a soundtrack for their lives.

*"You were a kid
once, too.
Be sure your
kids understand
that."*

—A PARENT

Think the world hasn't changed all that much? I heard recently of a young actress who needed to play a scene in a movie that showed her putting a record on a turntable. She had to be taught how to do it; she'd never even *seen* a record!

The most important changes, though, aren't technological—they're moral. Everything from radio deejay talk to comic books is far more graphic than it was two decades ago. Drugs and alcohol are more accessible and acceptable, even in many Christian circles. Premarital sex is more expected than shameful; "hooking up" is a way for casual friends to experience anything from kissing to oral sex to

intercourse. One girl told her mother, “Mom, Daniel and I are the only kids in my school *and* church that I know who are not sexually involved.”

Our teens today live in a world of hurt. They’re hurt by broken homes and broken promises. They’re victimized by sexual abuse, date rape, gang violence, and bullying. They’re growing up in the shadow of threats most of us didn’t face—like terrorism and school shootings. If they’re trying too hard to control their world, the results may not be excusable—just understandable.

“When you have a child that is basically dominating the entire family life—that’s what they do, they take over the whole [family]—they’re the center of attention all the time, 24/7. The other two kids get shoved under the rug.”

—A PARENT

Warning Signs

So, have you seen hints that trouble is brewing in your “lab”? Is your teen distant? Belligerent? Is the relationship you’d hoped for disappearing under indifference, anger, or defiance?

Sometimes the signs couldn’t be clearer. “[Our son] David took a ball off the pool table and threw it at my husband, who ducked,” recalls one mom. “It broke a window, and David picked up a chair and threw it down the hall, broke a leg off the chair. . . . So my sister, my husband and I spent the night locked in our bedroom. That’s where we all three slept that night, in the bedroom, locked up.”

Another parent remembers: “[Our daughter] hauled off and threw a glass of Coke or something at my face—and I really did think for a second that I was going to kill her. I was just ready to

annihilate her. I was embarrassed and so outraged that I thought, ‘I’m going to kill you.’”

“Pretty much from day one, we knew [our son] was going to be a challenge. . . . We never were able to really break that independent, strong spirit that was so defiant.”

—A PARENT

Still another parent recalls, “Sometimes [our son] Kyle would say, ‘I would rather go to juvenile hall than live with you all.’”

Maybe the hints have arrived more quietly. You may have found a marijuana bag, or a pack of condoms, or the empty aerosol cans and rags and paper sacks that indi-

cate “huffing.”

Or maybe you’re worried about smaller earthquakes. Your daughter paints her fingernails black. Your son gets his nose pierced. You hear “I hate you!” more than any other phrase—or you hardly hear anything at all.

Try taking a quick test to figure out whether there might be a problem at your place. Do you identify with any of the following statements?

- I don’t like my teen.
- My teen doesn’t like me.
- I’m embarrassed for anyone to know what my family life is really like.
- I don’t want anyone to know what my kid is doing.
- I don’t like my teen’s choices.
- I want to fix my teen.

If you find yourself agreeing with any of those statements, chances are that your relationship with your teen is stretched, strained, or snapped.

Welcome to the club.

You're Not the Boss of Me

Admitting things aren't going well is scary. It means you have to do something.

So what can you do about this?

A lot of parents, especially Christian ones, try the “crack-down.” Determined to make their teens submit to authority, they haul out the howitzers—rules on stone tablets, year-long groundings, sermonettes, house arrest.

The problem is that these parents don't realize their job description has changed since their kids were little. Teens need parents who have moved from governor to mentor, from commander to coach, from benevolent dictator to guide. It's time to be an advisor, not a puppet master.

It's hard to make that transition.

When my kids started “breaking away,” they just about broke my fingers trying to peel away my grip of steel. I wanted so badly to protect them. When they told me how rough the language was on the school bus, and about the bully that picked on them, I wanted to ride with them or drive them to school or walk them to class. But I couldn't. When they started dating, I wanted to double-date so I could keep them out of trouble. But I couldn't.

The trick, I learned, is allowing the transition to happen gradually. Start off firm, slowly giving way to more liberty. If you come in with handcuffs, you'll become a controlling, frustrated parent with a rebellious teen.

“Every time we tried to talk ended up being constant yelling back and forth in the house. It would get so bad sometimes that my sister would run next door to my aunt's house.”

—A TEEN

Some parents wouldn't think of trying the crackdown. They're more likely to give up. *It's out of my hands*, they think. *I've done all I can. She'll be leaving home soon. And she won't listen to me anyway.*

"Our oldest son's life philosophy is, 'No problem.' Our younger son's life philosophy would come down to, 'Says who?'"

—A PARENT

The truth is that our kids need us more than ever when they're teens. Not as controllers, but as counselors.

"Hey," you may be saying. "I'm no counselor. I don't even understand why my kid is acting this way."

You're not alone.

So let's look at that in the next chapter.

Let's find out why your teen may be growing distant or self-destructive. Let's put that young person under the microscope—or at least the magnifying glass.

Sounds pretty scientific, doesn't it?

But that's okay.

Like I said, this is an experiment. Before you know it, you'll be breaking out the test tubes—and improving the chemistry between you and your teen.

Notes

Chapter 10

1. Barbara Ryan, "Relinquishment," unpublished essay. Copyright © 1999 by the author. Used with permission.
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Chapter 11

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2. Hayden, *Wild Child, Waiting Mom*.