

Parenting your out of control teenager: 7 steps to reestablish authority and reclaim love

Dr Scott Sells

St Martin's Press, New York, 2001. 358 pages

This book is a creative and comprehensive guide to managing the behaviour of 'out of control' adolescents. It is a step-by-step guide which is easy to read and full of insight and practical solutions. It offers assistance to all parents who are overwhelmed and paralysed by the challenging behaviour that extremely difficult teenagers present. The book is designed as a resource for parents who have already tried all traditional discipline techniques and are searching for a new approach. Dr. Sells presents a seven-step process to reestablish authority and reclaim love, which is based upon both extensive research and practical experience. He provides rich examples to illustrate each point, making the text highly accessible for all readers. Dr. Sells strongly recommends parents read the entire book before implementing any strategies. A parent who commits to taking the time to read the book cover to cover, is likely to gain 'renewed energy, clearer direction and a better road map to follow' (p.328).

Understanding why your teenager is 'out of control' is Step 1 of the process. In this chapter Dr Sells speaks to the heart of parents and offers a non-judgmental perspective into the development of parent/teen difficulties. Dr Sells offers parents insight into the reasons why adolescents can become extremely difficult. Included in this discussion is the impact of unclear rules and the ways teenagers get around these rules with ease due to their 'advanced social perception', that is, their ability to think two steps ahead of their parents. Dr Sells also provides an illuminating discussion on button-pushing techniques used during arguments to derail the parent and control the emotional content of the argument. He also provides parents with a deeper appreciation of the influence of the peer group and the teenager's insatiable desire to satisfy their immediate needs and worry about the consequences later. The chapter ends with parents being asked to consider their own perspective on why their teen is having trouble. They must then decide if they are ready and are strong enough to work through the remaining steps of the book.

Step 2 involves the writing of 'ironclad' contracts with clear and effective consequences. Dr Sells skilfully illustrates why other contracts may have failed in the past. This encourages parents to try his approach of ironclad contracts. This chapter provides a fantastic step-by-step guide to identifying the behaviours that parents wish their child to change, along with a series of questions to help parents prioritise the behaviours they wish to target. The chapter covers the process of changing the behaviours into well-written rules that cannot be misinterpreted or negotiated by the skilful teenager, who according to Dr. Sells suffers from 'literal disease'. Once the rules have been established Dr. Sells provides his readers with a creative and refreshing range of consequences for parents to choose from, including freedom, clothing, trust, materialism and appearance. Again he provides a step-by-step process to help the reader to identify the best possible consequences for their child. Dr. Sells also emphasises the importance of including both positive and negative consequences and provides a discussion as to the importance of rewarding good

behaviour, even if parents believe the behaviour should come naturally. In summary, this chapter will allow parents to develop a solid and well thought out contract that can be adhered to.

Step 3 is a particularly useful and unique aspect of Dr Sells' program. He illustrates the need to troubleshoot all possible counter moves that a teenager may make when the new contract is implemented. The discussion enlightens the reader about the adolescents' ability to out-think their parents, that is, to think two steps ahead. Dr Sells suggests that parents need to anticipate how their adolescent is likely to respond to or attempt to derail the contract and then plan a response for each possible 'counter move' the adolescent may make. This approach of troubleshooting is likely to result in increased success for parents, as they will be better prepared as they hold a deeper understanding of the likely battle that will ensue when parents attempt to regain power in the parent/child relationship.

Step 4, button pushing, provides useful insights into the communication dance of parents and teenagers. Dr Sells' top 10 button pushing techniques of adolescents speak to the hearts of all parents, regardless of how difficult the teen is to manage. Having identified the button-pushing strategies of teenagers, Dr Sells then presents the top 8 button pushers which parents use when in conflict with teenagers. It is in the presentation of these ideas, followed by the practical 'button-buster' strategies that the communication patterns between parents and teens are able to change. Parents can learn to dance differently when in battle with their teens and remain in control of the emotional climate of the conversation. The insights parents will gain from this chapter will provide them with greater understanding of the tactics of arguing with teens and also assist in recognizing that these tactics are not personal.

Step 5 is a discussion of how to stop teenagers 'seven aces', which are disrespect, truancy or failing grades, running away, teen pregnancy, alcohol or drug abuse, violence and suicide threats. Each of the seven aces consists of behaviours that are likely to leave a parent up in arms or terrified to intervene for fear of the adolescent's response. Dr Sells offers a wide variety of strategies which can overcome these behaviours, whilst also providing the comfort to parents that they are not the only people dealing with these challenging behaviours. The strategies outlined provide creative ideas that are likely to jolt any teenager. Dr Sells' strategies balance the need to regain control, attend to safety issues and re-establish a nurturing parent/child relationship. He also provides unique ideas to lighten the mood of the house and reinject playfulness into the family's interaction. However, it is likely that many parents will find some strategies to be too severe or embarrassing for their children. Dr Sells attempts to address this problem by forecasting a grim future if parents don't act now. However, I am uncertain if that would be enough for some parents to overcome their fear of their child's potential resentment.

Nonetheless, there are enough strategies available for parents to select from, with the option to work up to some of the harsher or more embarrassing strategies. It should be noted that the chapters on teen pregnancy and alcohol and drug abuse have an American flavour, which may not translate directly into an Australian context. There may be some differences in approach to the fear of teen pregnancy between Australian and American parents. Further, the strategies outlined in the alcohol and drug abuse chapter rely heavily on drug and alcohol testing, which isn't prevalent in Australia.

Step 6 involves the mobilising of outside helpers to provide support and the strength in numbers. This chapter emphasises the need for parents to avoid handing over their authority to police, judges, medication, schools, hospitals or probation officers. Instead Dr. Sells describes a process of creating a village to support the parents who are managing an extreme teenager. Included in this village may be extended family, neighbours, work friends or boss and congregants from local churches or synagogues. Dr Sells provides ideas as to how parents can request help from others and how to designate roles for each helper to play. Counsellors can be a part of this village too. However, Dr Sells emphasises the importance that outside helpers should only take on support roles, as ultimate control needs to rest with the parents. Otherwise, when the support stops the adolescent is likely to revert to old behaviour patterns, as the parents have not truly regained authority.

Step 7 tackles the need for parents to reclaim love in their relationship with their teenager. This chapter helps to address the love lost through years of conflict between teenagers and parents. The practical strategies that Dr. Sells offers to restore a nurturing parent-child relationship are full of warmth and are presented with the responsibility of this role to be instigated by the parents. He also gives careful warnings to parents about likely responses of adolescents which may deter the parent from continuing to attempt to reclaim love and place the adolescents behaviour in context of an anticipated event rather than a personal attack on the parent.

It is also important to note that whilst Dr Sells presents a comprehensive step-by-step program for parents to work

through, he also provides careful instruction to parents as to when it is essential to involve a qualified counsellor. This occurs through the book and is generally recommended when there are safety concerns, serious family issues or highly challenging strategies are being implemented. Dr Sells is non-judgemental when addressing the link between serious family issues and the 'out of control' teenager, but is firm in indicating the need to get outside help on top of implementing his step-by-step program. He also provides guidelines for how to find a competent counsellor to assist parents, though at this stage I believe the listing are only for the U.S.A. A further feature of this book is the provision of on-line support via a website Dr Sells has provided to link parents of 'out of control' teenagers, and provides a forum to discuss problems and offer support, guidance and encouragement.

This book is specifically designed for parents who are at a loss as to how to cope with the 'out of control teenager', though its application is more wide reaching. The free-flowing and accessible use of language makes it an easy and enjoyable read for all. Parents of all teenagers are able to benefit from the Dr Sells' wisdom in the chapters addressing writing 'iron-clad' contracts, troubleshooting, button pushing and regaining love. Some families may only need to implement some of the strategies in these chapters to get things in their house back on track or prevent difficulties. Other families would gain significantly from the strategies to challenge the adolescents '7 Aces'. Further, this book is also highly recommended for all professionals working with families, especially when the parents come to seek out assistance with managing a difficult teenager. For those professionals who specifically work with adolescents it is also a useful resource, though some adaptations are necessary if the adolescent is the client. .

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A Child Called 'It'

Dave Pelzer

London: Orion Books Ltd. 2002 edition

There is a book that had been on the best-seller lists in the UK (and presumably the US) for 66 weeks at the time of writing this review (April 2002). The book had sold a grand total of 694,000 copies in the UK alone. According to *The Observer* Bestseller Lists, the author had three other books in the Top Ten and one of those had sold more than a quarter of a million copies and been in the charts for six months. The author's name? No, it is not Stephen King. It is not John Grisham either. Nor is it Danielle Steele or Joanna Trollope.

Dave Pelzer is not a name that is well-known in Australia, but he is something of a celebrity in the northern hemisphere. His books are autobiographical and selling like the proverbial hot cakes that Dave himself presumably never had

as a child. For Dave was beaten and starved by his alcoholic, sadistic mother and he has written this book as his story of surviving appalling child abuse. It was the title that first grabbed my attention. Bernadette Saunders and I have written of the gender loss of children who have been abused and the willingness of so many to objectify a child by calling him or her 'it' (Goddard & Saunders 2000). I wrote in the *Age* (Goddard 1993) of how Daniel Valero was called 'it' at the coronial request into his brutal death.

Dave Pelzer dedicates *A Child Called 'It'* to his own son and to the staff at the Thomas Edison Elementary School who, on 5 March, 1973, saved his life by calling the police. The first chapter, entitled 'The Rescue', describes that day in