

GET OUT OF MY LIFE

– BUT FIRST TAKE ME & ALEX INTO TOWN

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P
PROFILE BOOKS

This third edition published in

First published in by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD

Exmouth House
Pine Street
Exmouth Market
London
www.profilebooks.com

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Typeset in Bembo by MacGuru Ltd
info@macguru.org.uk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN
eISBN



Mixed Sources
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www.fsc.org Cert no. TT-COC-002227
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Preface

This is a guide to adolescents – how to understand them, cope with them, and, to the extent that we can, direct their turbulent lives.

Teenagers of today have grown up in an era of far more lenient parenting practices compared with any previous generation. Their world may be complicated and scary; nonetheless, they feel more empowered than teenagers did in the past. They are more assertive and less directly obedient, especially at home. This change in teenage behaviour is real. It requires a similar change in teenage parenting.

This book differs from other parenting books in at least one crucial way. It does not offer a set of teenage parenting rules, though it does provide concrete suggestions on how to deal with a wide range of teenage

issues. It explains why teenagers do what they do; it gives you the ability to translate teenage behaviour into its true, often less complicated meaning. Armed with this new way of seeing, parents will not need to be told what to do. They can make their own decisions, based on their general good sense and individual child-rearing beliefs.

An example:

'Louise, please could you lay the table?'
'Why are you always picking on me?'

If you understand the development issues embodied in this typical response, you can translate Louise's words:

No, I'd rather not lay the table. I would prefer to have an argument with you.

Knowing the teenager's underlying message, parents can then respond as they wish. One option would be:

Don't you dare talk to me like that.

However, despite the intended lesson of the parent's words, namely that they really do not want to tolerate this kind of disrespect (which is a perfectly reasonable message) – their teenagers unfortunately will always interpret their response differently. They will hear:

P R E F A C E

Yes, I will fight with you.

And that leads them to respond:

I'll talk to you any way I want.

Which, translated, means:

Good, now let's keep this fight going, and with any luck you'll forget about laying the table altogether.

Parents with a clearer understanding of their teenagers' behaviour may choose alternatives to such a self-defeating response.

Throughout this book you will hear the re-created voices of teenagers and their parents. The quotes and conversations in the text are not from real people but a distillation of what really goes on. This will give you access to the real but never recorded discussions that take place in people's kitchens, in their heads, mumbled as they leave rooms, or screamed out in shopping centres. Their accuracy will be for you to judge. But many of you will recognise, as recorded nowhere else, those scenes that are a part of your life with a teenager. If you do, you will, we hope, be reassured. You are not doing anything wrong: everyone confronts the same kinds of problems with teenagers.

Living under the same roof as a teenager is frequently

exasperating and painful. But at times they can also be entertaining and original as well as keeping us on our toes – providing us with an insight into everything from computers and mobile phones to contemporary culture. Much of what goes on between teenagers and their parents is often rather funny, if we can only step back far enough from our lives to view our daily travails for what they are, instead of as deadly serious issues.

Finally, if this book achieves its goal, you may notice a strange transformation in those scenes that used to drag you down. With a new understanding of your teenager's psychological development and state of mind, you may find that those scenes are never quite the same again. They look different, less desperate, more like the inevitable interaction between a normally developing teenager and a caring parent. You may also discover that, seeing things differently, you act differently as well.

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'Emily, please would you mind taking those dirty glasses into the kitchen?'

'Why? They're not mine.'

'I don't care if they're not yours, Emily. You live in this house and I am asking you to take those glasses out into the kitchen.'

'But they're not mine. Why should I do it?'

'Emily, you're asking for it.'

'You're asking for it.'

Fifty years ago the above conversation would rarely have taken place, but it's common enough today. Teenagers have changed. This is not an illusion. Teenagers treat the adults in their lives in a manner that is less automatically obedient, much more fearless, and definitely more outspoken than that of previous generations.

'I would never have dared talk to my parents the way that Melissa does to me. Never.'

'What would have happened if you did?'

'I would have had a slap across the face.'

True enough, but the harsher ways of dealing with children, especially physical punishment, are no longer viewed as acceptable, or in some cases even legal. Many parents still treat their children harshly; many still hit them. But such punishment is far less acceptable than it once was, even to those who do it.

We live in an era of 'child-centred' and 'permissive' parenting. As a result, the most effective weapons have been taken out of a parent's arsenal. No more hard smacks across the face for disrespectful answering back or when rooms are not tidied on demand. It's inevitable that without these harsher forms of enforcement, children's behaviour has changed. This is just human nature. The new teenager feels freer to answer back and to do as he or she pleases, especially at home.

The entitled teenager

Teenagers of today possess a distinct sense of entitlement. They have their rights, which they are only too well aware of. 'My parents are supposed to take care of me. And they're not allowed to hurt me. They're supposed to protect me. I suppose that I should act better towards them than I do. But even if I act like a prat,

they're still supposed to love me. No matter what I do.' This is good. We want them to feel this way. We have empowered our children and they feel the power. Still, we did not think they would be so ungracious about it. Ours is a generation of uncertain parents. We witness our children's less restrained behaviour, and we do not understand and we do not know what to do. We would not have behaved that way. In the face of their teenagers' insolence, parents feel frustrated, upset, and, above all, inadequate. 'What can I do? I shout at her. I ground her. I take away privileges. But none of it seems to change her attitude.'

Nor do the teenagers benefit from their parents' frustration. They become victims of the classic adolescent paradox. While they demand freedom, and fight to attain it, they still need to feel their parents' strength. Teenagers battle to dismantle their parents' authority, but they can find themselves adrift if too successful. Anxiety, depression, even suicide can arise with the added stresses of adolescence. A frequently quoted statistic is the alarming growth in teenage suicide. The rate of suicide – especially amongst young men in the UK – has steadily risen over the past thirty years. There are on average around two suicides a day amongst young people in the UK and Ireland and according to the Samaritans, three teenagers in the UK attempt to self-harm every hour. Unquestionably, the more that adolescents feel themselves to be truly on their own

and without their parents' support, the more vulnerable they are.

Yet for the average as opposed to the seriously troubled teenager, things are not nearly as bad as they may seem. The new teenager is not impossible to deal with. Parents must learn to adjust and to rely on a different kind of strength from that which their own parents used.

The new parent

'I'll tell you what the problem is. Teenagers today don't have any respect for their parents.' This is true. Old-style respect is gone. We have entered a new era in child-rearing. Perhaps the old way was both easier and more straightforward, but it is gone. Nostalgia is acceptable, but that style of parenting also had flaws. It was based in part on establishing fear. Creating fear as an explicit child-raising practice has some bad consequences. It can breed anger and resentment. It can intimidate and cause the intimidated to lose confidence in themselves. Perhaps worst of all, it tells children that in the service of getting what one wants, fear and intimidation are necessary and acceptable in everyday life.

Teenagers today are not pliable, and they say what is on their mind – always. They live in a society which has seen an overall decline in deference to all kinds of authority, including parents. Yet for all their rudeness, especially at home, it is not clear at all that as adults these teenagers will be 'worse' than their parents, either

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less caring or less motivated. They may be more caring and more motivated. They may, in turn, be better parents.

Besides, it is possible to elicit respect from teenagers; it's just of a different kind than the old version. This new respect can only be based on the strength and confidence of parents. This kind of strength of character is not as easy to come by as a strength based on the cane or the belt. More confidence is required to employ this strength. With few apparent weapons in their arsenal, parents must stand up to all that their teenagers may dish out, and still come out with their heads high, their confidence intact, their position as the parents and the bosses still acknowledged, if grudgingly. It is not easy. But it is possible.

The first step is to accept a child's right to say what he or she has to say, no matter how stupid or unreasonable. You don't have to listen to all of it, you can leave whenever you want, but you respect their right to say it. Then you say what you have to say, you stand your ground and are not blown away by the inevitable response. This kind of parenting earns respect. It's the strength not to descend to teenagers' level of name-calling, when they would lose respect for you. It's the strength to walk away.

'Don't you dare talk to me that way, Eleanor. When are you going to show some proper respect? I don't

know what's wrong with you. You are going to have to get your act together.'

Eleanor rolls her eyes.

'Don't you roll your eyes at me. Do you want a smack on the face?'

'Go ahead. Hit me. I dare you.'

Eleanor knows that the time for that was over many years ago. Perhaps the greatest skill for a parent today is learning not to be hurt, truly understanding that what teenagers say and scream means nothing other than that they are teenagers and this is how teenagers today behave, understanding that what they say and what they do in no way diminishes who you are and what you do. Your teenage children cannot diminish you unless you allow them to do so. 'That all sounds very simple. But in the real world how can we as parents have the strength to rise above the daily onslaught?' You need confidence – not confidence that you are always making the right decision (nobody can do that) or that you are always in control of the child (nobody can even come close to achieving that), but rather the confidence that you are the right person for the job and that your efforts are definitely not in vain.

You must understand what you say does have an impact on your teenager, despite much evidence to the