

## **“Troubled Teens”**

### **Searching for Meaning and Purpose**

*“Doctor Doctor Giver of meds  
giver of advice, giver of life  
Prescribe me a cure for this world  
In which I find myself trapped,  
Unable to break free, find peace.  
Write me a script  
That will make me understand  
The bodies of babies discarded on the streets of China  
Perverts harbouring mountains of kiddie-porn multimedia  
My friend’s innocence stolen at 9 years of age  
Tanks powering down the streets of Israel  
And children blown to shit when they throw rocks at them.....”*

Excerpt from The Problem by Linnea Pierre from A Circle in a Room Full of Squares edited by Suzanne Covich

Our teenagers are struggling more than ever before. Our chaotic threatening world with it’s accelerated push of change and uncertainty, coupled with the heightened threats of terrorism and violence is pretty scary for us oldies let alone our fledgling adults. Philosophically we are moving in the right direction: outcomes based education which honours the unique way children learn differently and holistic parenting which seeks to encourage the development of our children’s emotional and spiritual needs. **But what do we do for those teenagers who are lost, troubled and disconnected from life NOW?**

Most of us are all aware that the authoritarian and punitive methods of child raising and behaviour management are largely ineffective. Indeed the result of such an approach is often festering anger and resentment and a deep loss of respect for the adult concerned. As a child I experienced emotional deprivation, deep criticism and many beatings from my alcoholic mother. It took years to realise that the physical abuse did less damage than the absence of love, kindness and positive touch. My teen years were pretty miserable even though I was able to achieve academically. I was largely disconnected from others to avoid being hurt, and yet I could fake it that I was a friend. My vulnerable, wounded parts were totally hidden from everyone and the mask I wore fooled everyone.

After my failed suicide attempt at 17, I decided I wanted to help teenagers grow through this confusing time of their life better than I had. As a high school English teacher I began **to explore solutions for our troubled teenagers simply by treating them with more kindness, empathy and concern.** I know this must sound really obvious and yet as carers of teenagers I believe we do this badly on the whole.

I was once stopped by a very hairy black leathered biker who asked if I remembered him? Many years before he had been a very quiet little boy in a

year eight class. He wanted to tell me how important it had been for him to be able to come to my classes often without his file or biros to know that I always kept spare ones in case you forgot to bring any. It was the only class he could feel safe not to be ridiculed or shouted at. He then told me why he often came without his things: both parents were alcoholic and sometimes it was not safe to go home. His grandmother would often care for him at these times and if she was also drunk, or away he would sleep in the park. He thanked me. I wish I had known more at the time - such is the power of that mask that teens can wear. How can we bring more kindness into our teens' lives? Little things. Making them a cuppa when they least expect it? Leaving small bars of chocolates on their desk or bed for no reason? Collecting them from school sometimes when they could catch the bus and walk. Doing their given chore like the dishes just occasionally. Stop nagging. Rub shoulders while they watch TV. Slip special goodies into their lunch boxes or enough money for an ice-cream. Notice nothing expensive. Teenagers know when they are being "bought" or appeased.

**The heart of our teenagers can be filled with real time and attention from people who care**, when they want it. Have you noticed how they often want to chat while you are getting dinner ready? About to go out? Or when it's nearly bed time? Being available to really listen without our adult heads, and with compassion and concern for a fellow traveller on this thing called the journey of life. Adults may be older in physical age that does not mean they are necessarily wiser. Many of our troubled teenagers are very wise, sensitive and deeply disillusioned with the way of the world as is so beautifully expressed in the poem by Linnea Pierre. To be heard as you explore your thoughts and feelings is one of the most loving things an adult can do for a teenager. It is about being validated and worthy of being heard.

**The search for identity is one of the strongest driving forces of adolescence** and over my twenty years as a high school teacher I have seen lots of different ways teenagers have explored identity. I love the pulse of vitality and energy of being noticed that exists in our government high schools. They wear their hair in all sorts of shapes and colours and their clothes – well it's very entertaining. It is the only age that can do this and it honours their search for acceptance and individuality. Many of our country's leaders probably wore some pretty interesting gear when they were a teen too. Remember it takes a lot of courage to step out of the tribe and be different!

**The need to belong is very much the other main driving force in those teenage years.** That is why we hear so much about peer pressure. I know that the alienated teenager with few friends is the most at risk in life of struggling. Today's teenagers are much better at being good friends and thankfully they also make friends across both the gender and cultural divide – a thing that did not happen often in the past. Teenagers need a strong network of friends to survive this transition to adulthood and without it the struggle to make sense of where they are in their life, and to take effective steps to create opportunities for themselves is weakened enormously. My youngest son was due to come and move to Dunsborough this year and go to

school over here instead of where we have lived for the last 26 years. James is going into Year 10 and will be 15 in a couple of months. He came and stayed when school finished with two of his best mates. They surfed, played cricket, endless hours of cards and of course eating. It dawned on me that such friendships are formed over time and that they are precious and so important for the future emotional well being especially for boys. Also the high school he was leaving is an excellent one and my three older sons have all done well and gained university places - not bad for boys in a country government high school! Moving James just so that he could be with me was more about me than him in many ways. So we had a chat and we have decided that he will do "boarding school" with his Dad in Albany and have all holidays and long weekends with me over here. We both cried heaps and are now positive about the idea. I have worked with so many men who have suffered enormous trauma from being sent to boarding school or who suffered deeply from moving town, city or state without being heard or listened to. Boys are not as well equipped to create new friends as our chatty and more social girls. Tricky thing about being a resiliency expert, you need to walk your talk not just talk it! So please be mindful of being supportive and really listening if you have to send a child away for school. They do suffer from a deep sense of loss of their home, family and their "place" in the world. Ring often, send funny cards, boxes of cookies, or chocolates to show that you care and still love them. Also be honest about your own feelings and share them with those you can trust. Its OK to cry or bawl and that goes for Dad too! Change affects us on all levels and we need to be real enough to own the emotional side to it.

**Teenagers need to find a way of mattering or of having a reason for being here** on this planet. This deep search for purpose seems to be present now in many teenagers from an early age and I know that they search the big questions much earlier than previous generations. Without discovering "a reason for being" many of our wise teenagers become deeply disillusioned with our world and their own lives and hide in depression, alcohol and drug abuse and other forms of mental illness. In my trainings with teens I share the idea that everyone's purpose on earth is to make the world a better place in some way. Each of us has a unique mix of talents and abilities and its up to us to find a way to use them to improve something about our world. I help them discover the small ways first so that they can experience a sense of achieving this task with an intention and little effort. Doing things for others whether helping grandparents, coaching junior sports, mentoring or volunteer work is excellent. If environmentally minded there are many ways to help improve the environment from picking up rubbish to doing voluntary tree plantings or animal rescue. Another simple way to make the world better is to be a good friend through thick and thin. By starting simple teenagers can create that deep sense of having a value and reason for being here now instead of frightening themselves with the future.

Everyone yearns to be loved, valued and appreciated exactly as they are and this is the real secret to helping our troubled teenagers: To be reassured when they perceive they have failed or let themselves down - to be encouraged when they lack faith in their own ability - to be loved for being

themselves whether they have blue hair, or they have chosen to leave school too early or they have just damaged your car.

My four sons have been my greatest teachers in the area of understanding patience, unconditional love and the value of finding their own path in life. We must remember they are here to live their lives and not our expectation of their lives. The parents who allow their teenagers to explore our chaotic world for a sense of purpose and meaning that is uniquely their own, while loving them and appreciating them, are the parents who will always be a positive part of their teenagers' lives when they become adults.

*"Enlighten me  
as to how  
In a world where women's bones jut out  
Unnaturally  
Across billboards for all the supposed free world to see  
To sell a product  
made from another creature's skin.*

*In this universe  
Where someone is paid  
To give me drugs to make me numb  
To diagnose me something new every other week  
To tell me how I probably will never get better  
Making money off my pain.*

*Tell me oh Holiness  
How can the problem be with me?*

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