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help

MY KIDS ARE HURTING

A SURVIVAL GUIDE TO WORKING WITH STUDENTS IN PAIN

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section one

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF HURTING KIDS

The world of adolescents is a foreign and unfamiliar place for many adults. In this world grown-ups often feel like the aliens—the ones who don't belong. Kids seem to have their own language, fashions, music, and values—and, in fact, they do. But they also have their own fears, struggles, worries, problems, and concerns. And that's where you come in. As an adult who cares about kids, you want to venture into the strange world of teenagers to offer a listening ear, an encouraging word, and a helping hand. As you step into that place, prepare for what you'll find. Your role in the world of teenagers is more important than you'll ever know.

chapter one

FIVE THINGS YOU CAN COUNT ON

1. Kids today are hurting more deeply than they—or we—are willing to admit.

Lots of hurting teenagers have learned to cautiously hide what's really going on inside. They've figured out that opening up to someone—especially an adult—could set them up for more hurt than they're willing to risk. When a kid tries to share his story with someone and is ignored or judged or exposed or given quick advice, for a while he may not make himself that vulnerable again.

When we look at most teenagers, their lives seem so put together. The brand-name wardrobe, cool accessories, and apparently carefree attitudes fool us into thinking everything is fine. But too often, beneath that carefully crafted exterior beats the frightened heart of a little girl or boy who has no one to trust. It's easier for kids to deny what they're feeling and pretend everything is just fine, rather than risk possible rejection by opening up.

Let's think about something even more important: Many of us who work with teenagers find ourselves denying the reality of what's going on with the kids in our care. We pretend everything is okay even when we know the truth. Why the denial? Probably because most of us don't feel equipped to deal with their issues. And besides, getting tangled up in a kid's mess would take more time and energy than we have to give. So we simply carry on the game. As long as nobody's talking about heavy stuff, we don't have to deal with heavy stuff. We try to keep our relationships with our students lighthearted and superficial for fear that if we open the door to deeper issues, we'll have to deal with them.

Many of us haven't even sorted out our own stuff yet, so at all costs we avoid getting involved in someone else's pain. Maybe this explains why some sociologists have described today's teenagers as "the abandoned generation." They don't tell; we don't ask—that way nobody has to worry about what's really going on.

2. The deepest hurt most kids feel is relational.

Neither the chaos of adolescent transitions nor the bizarre circumstances in which kids often find themselves are what wounds kids the most. No, the deepest wounds happen when the people they count on fail to honor that extended trust. When a person who is supposed to provide safety and support walks away and leaves kids on their own, they feel most deeply hurt. We are talking about abandonment—relational, emotional, and at times even physical abandonment. This generation has been left to care for itself. Unfortunately, the deepest betrayal of trust kids experience is often family based. And even more upsetting, in too many cases a kid loses his relationship with his dad. Kids need people in their lives whom they can count on—no matter what. In the absence of trustworthy people, they're often left to do whatever they must in order to survive. That can lead to all kinds of destructive and dangerous choices.

3. Kids will decide whom they'll trust with their deepest pain.

Most teenagers have little or no access to nonparental adults, particularly ones who know them well enough to help teenagers navigate the realities of their complicated adolescent world. Formal systems to deal with kids at risk have been established in many communities. Guidance counselors in schools, child protection officers and social workers, walk-in medical clinics, toll-free crisis lines, after-school programs, and counseling centers invite hurting kids to tell their stories. But when an adolescent really hurts, he longs for a relationship with someone who cares about him on a personal level—someone who knows his name and is

available outside of office hours. Kids share their lives with people who've taken the time to prove their trustworthiness. They don't care about the education, certification, or experience of the people they choose to trust. They just need to know those people care.

4. The church has a long way to go.

The idea of true community deeply appeals to teenagers. After all, they're in the process of disconnecting from their families and developing social identities of their own. If our churches functioned the way they were originally intended to, they could provide places of shelter and safety for hurting teenagers. The community of faith has at its disposal unique resources intended to bring hope and help to hurting people of all ages. Unfortunately, for the most part those resources remain unacknowledged and untapped. Many churches have lost their ability to provide a welcome for hurting people—especially adolescents, who often represent an even greater challenge because of the generational misunderstanding that plagues them. The fact that you're reading this book tells me you want to provide hurting kids with a way to experience love, acceptance, and hope. When our churches become the communities they're meant to be, we'll see hurting people of all ages finding help.

5. The stakes are high.

At the risk of setting off alarm bells, we need to face a sad and frightening reality: The number of adults that kids are willing to trust may be quite small. It takes time to build the kinds of relationships that encourage them to open up. Not many adults are willing to make this kind of investment. If a teenager has trusted you enough to tell you her story, she has given you a sacred gift. You may be the only adult in a position to help her make wise choices. I don't want to be melodramatic about this, but if we choose to ignore a student who trusts us enough to tell us her story, she may have no choice but to bury her feelings and try to cope on her own.

chapter two

EIGHT UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF WORKING WITH KIDS IN PAIN

When we spend time with hurting kids, we quickly realize that working with teenagers differs in many ways from working with other age groups. Teenagers are often dealing with adult issues but without the emotional resources and relational maturity to do so wisely. Think with me about some of the unique issues we face when we work with at-risk adolescents.

1. THE OFTEN INTENSE URGENCY OF IT

Helping hurting kids can involve the frightening reality of working with people engaged in immediately dangerous and destructive behavior. Adolescents believe they're invincible—"Nothing will happen to me." They may be participating in high-risk activities without recognizing the dangers involved. Promiscuity, substance abuse, violence, eating disorders, and self-injurious behaviors are all part of the adolescent landscape. Yet our kids may be oblivious to the risks of getting involved in these activities. It means we can't stand idly by. The potential for long-term damage is just too great.

2. THE SOMETIMES ARMS-LENGTH NATURE OF IT

This may involve third-person helping because kids typically confide in each other first. "I think my friend is considering suicide. What should I say?" "My friend has a drinking problem. Can I do anything?" "My friend thinks she might be pregnant. Who should she call?" We find ourselves called upon to provide support and counsel for kids we may never meet. The teenager who needs the help either doesn't know or doesn't trust us, so he talks to a friend whom he does

know and trust. We feel a bizarre combination of responsibility and helplessness because we know what's at stake but have no way of dealing with the problem directly. It means we have no choice but to trust the kid who asks for our help and to encourage him to stay involved in the life of his hurting friend.

3. THE FRUSTRATING ONE-SIDEDNESS OF IT

We rarely get the whole story—not because kids are trying to withhold the truth, but because they simply can't be objective. Their stories are always tangled up in several others. They share their personal perspectives on situations, but we know these versions may be inaccurate or incomplete. Teenagers will share wild accounts of abusive, unreasonable parents who may turn out to be the most loving, caring parents you've ever met. You'll hear about teachers who obviously don't get it, classmates who are complete jerks, and friends who are just plain mean. The problem is we have no way of knowing what is true and what isn't. The bottom line: For a teenager in pain, perception is reality. It means we need to take what we hear with an appropriate dose of caution. We must be careful not to jump to conclusions until we've heard the whole story, while still offering the adolescent the respect of listening without judgment. It's a balancing act.

TELL PARENTS YOU WON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING THEIR KIDS SAY ABOUT THEM IF THEY PROMISE NOT TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING THEIR KIDS SAY ABOUT YOU.

4. THE MADDENING UPS AND DOWNS OF IT

Kids sometimes seem developmentally schizophrenic—slipping back and forth between adult thinking and childlike immaturity in a way that seems almost random at times. It can be frustrating to observe them processing circumstances

with wisdom and maturity during one conversation, only to see them deteriorate into naive helplessness the next time they need to talk. It can feel like three steps forward and two steps back. We must realize that adolescents do, in fact, straddle the worlds of children and adults. Sometimes kids are just too scared to deal with pain as adults would. We honor hurting kids when we give them permission to move back and forth between these two worlds—respecting and validating them as young adults but also protecting them as vulnerable children. Most teenagers have very few adults in their lives who understand that this critical tension is one of their survival mechanisms.

5. THE COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS OF IT

Working with hurting kids often requires us to cooperate with established community agencies such as the police department, probation officers, social workers, hospitals, schools, and so on. These systems were put in place to deal with many of the issues hurting teenagers face. Unfortunately, they're an unfamiliar world for a lot of people who work in the church. We often treat these secular helpers with disdain and distrust, and sadly, they often have the same cynicism about people in the church. It's time for us to learn to work together. We can't afford to alienate ourselves from these valuable resources. Frankly, in most cases we have no choice. If established agencies are in place to deal with specific issues (such as abuse, divorce, mental illness, and suicide intervention), then they are well positioned to help and, in fact, may be legally required to get involved. Certainly the bureaucratic machinery can be frustrating at times, but make no mistake—it's wise for us to build bridges of cooperation for the sake of the students we work with and for the sake of the gospel.

6. THE PERSONAL RISKS OF IT

Be ready to experience some emotional intensity and maybe some verbal abuse if you decide to get involved with hurting kids. They may have some very deep feelings connected to painful relationships from their pasts. As an adult involved in kids' lives, you might unknowingly represent something or someone that hurt them in the past. I happen to be a "dad-aged" man, so kids transfer to me a lot of the disappointment and anger they feel in their "dad memories." (The technical term for this is *transference*.) This generational reaction may mean that we'll have to endure seemingly random outbursts, anger, and lack of regard from the very kids we're trying to help—despite the fact that they *invited* us into their stories. By the way, teenagers often feel most free to vent their anger on the people they trust most deeply. As part of our ministry to these kids, we can offer them safe relationships where some of this passion can surface and then be redirected toward more positive ends.

7. THE SOMETIMES APPARENT HOPELESSNESS OF IT

Sending hurting kids back into the relational mess that produced their pain in the first place can create a sense of hopelessness in our efforts. The terrified victim of bullying who heads right back to school where she's an easy target; the kid whose dad has called him stupid for the last 14 years goes straight home after you've spent an hour telling him he's all right; the gang member who's trying to kick his drug habit has to return to the horrible neighborhood where his addiction started. Just when we feel like we're making some headway with kids, we realize how fragile that growth can be. It's maddening when we realize the context that created the problem (often the family) is thoroughly damaging and isn't likely to change. One of the greatest challenges we face is helping kids understand that they can be healthy, even when unhealthy people surround them.

8. THE OFTEN INVISIBLE RESULTS OF IT

This can feel like thankless work. In many cases the outcome and results of our investment in a hurting teenager may not be visible for many years to come. In fact, we may not hear the end of the story until heaven. Because adolescents are in the midst of multiple transitions—physiologically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, morally, cognitively—progress can be difficult to gauge. Kids may not remember the things we say until months or even years later. Because they may not be ready to make the right choices in the immediate reality of their circumstances, they may not implement our wisdom until they're older. Working with kids is like walking a short portion of a long journey with someone. We must understand the value of our presence in light of the big picture. Those who need immediate affirmation for their ministry work probably will be frustrated by working with hurting teenagers. The payoff may happen years down the road. We may not be there to see the results of our involvement. In fact, someone else may get the credit for changes we helped bring about, which is humbling. Get used to it if you choose to work with wounded kids.

SO WHY WOULD ANYONE IN THEIR RIGHT MIND WANT TO WORK WITH HURTING KIDS?

When I talk with people who are regularly involved with hurting kids, I often ask them why they do it. Given the risks and personal costs involved, I'm amazed at the consistent responses I receive—four answers over and over. Perhaps you would also echo one of these reasons:

“Somebody did it for me.” You remember being a hurting teenager with nowhere to turn, but a caring adult took the time to hear your story and give you the support and help you needed. You know how much it meant in your life, and now you simply want to offer a hurting kid what you received when you were her age. In a very appropriate way, it feels like you're giving something back—and you are.

“Nobody did it for me.” As a teenager you faced your pain alone. You reached out to adults whom you hoped could help you but never found one willing to step into the gap. You know the lonely memories of floundering through the chaos of adolescence. Now you want to make sure no teenager misses out the way you did. You can sense when kids suffer deep pain—just by looking at them. This awareness motivates you to be there for them.

“It’s the call of God on my life.” You’re naturally drawn to hurting teenagers. You can’t help it. You don’t find struggling students burdensome. In fact, you seem to have a sixth sense that helps you sniff out kids who need help. Rapport with them comes easily, and you don’t understand why other people seem so terrified of kids who need help. Recognize this as a gift and use it faithfully. You’re part of a small minority set apart by God for a special ministry. Don’t take it for granted.

“I’ve seen it work.” Even though the odds seem to be against you, you’re incredibly excited to see a changed life. You’ve known the thrill of having God work through you before, and you’re willing to put yourself in that place again. With each story you hear, you learn to trust God more deeply.

Whatever our reasons for helping hurting students, we’re amazed God chooses to use us in the lives of kids. There is no greater joy for those who experience it.