

[Click here to buy](#)

"Rich Van Pelt and Jim Hancock have produced a book that every parent needs to read, not only when a teenager is in crisis, but long before: as in right now."

Stephen Arterburn, founder and president, New Life Ministries;
founder, Women of Faith



**A PARENT'S GUIDE TO
HELPING
TEENAGERS
IN CRISIS**

Rich Van Pelt and Jim Hancock

 **ZONDERVAN®**

ZONDERVAN.com/
AUTHORTRACKER
follow your favorite authors

 **youth
specialties**



The Parent's Guide to Helping Teenagers in Crisis
Copyright 2007 by Rich Van Pelt and Jim Hancock

Youth Specialties resources, 300 S. Pierce St., El Cajon, CA 92020 are published by Zondervan, 5300 Patterson Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49530.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Van Pelt, Rich.

The parent's guide to helping teenagers in crisis / Rich Van Pelt, Jim Hancock.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-10: 0-310-27724-8 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-310-27724-8 (pbk.)

1. Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Parent and teenager—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Christian teenagers—Religious life. I. Hancock, Jim. II. Title.

BV4529.V36 2008

248.8'45—dc22

2007039360

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, Today's New International Version*[™]. TNIV[®]. Copyright 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other — except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Web site addresses listed in this book were current at the time of publication. Please contact Youth Specialties via e-mail (YS@YouthSpecialties.com) to report URLs that are no longer operational and replacement URLs if available.

Cover design by SharpSeven Design

Interior design by Mark Novelli, IMAGO MEDIA

Printed in the United States of America

✚ TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0	Understanding Crisis	7
1.1	Is This a Crisis or Isn't It?	9
1.2	Dangerous Opportunity	20
2.0	What to Do First	27
2.1	<i>Triage</i>	29
2.2	SLAP: What to Do When You Fear Suicide	43
2.3	Connecting	46
2.4	Deep Listening	57
3.0	Getting Help When You Need It	67
3.1	Calling in Reinforcements	69
3.2	Developing an Action Plan	75
3.3	<i>Interventions</i>	83
4.0	Crisis Compendium	89
4.1	Accidents	91
4.2	Anger	95
4.3	Bullying	97
4.4	Cheating	103
4.5	Cutting + Self-Injurious Behavior	106
4.6	Death	109
4.7	Divorce	112
4.8	Dropping Out	117
4.9	Eating Disorders	120
4.10	Hazing	125
4.11	Incest	129
4.12	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	134
4.13	Pregnancy	137
4.14	Rape	140
4.15	Sexual Abuse	143
4.16	Sexual Identity Confusion	154
4.17	Sexually Transmitted Diseases	160

4.18	Substance Abuse + Addiction	162
4.19	Suicide	173
4.20	Terror	184
4.21	Trouble with the Law	189
4.22	Violence	193
5.0	Prevention Inside Out	199
5.1	Inside Prevention: Building Resilience	203
5.2	Outside Prevention: Building Preventive Partnerships	209
5.3	A Final Word	218
6.0	Appendices	223
6.1	Action Plan Worksheet	225
6.2	Child Abuse Reporting Numbers	228
6.3	Emotional Map	236
6.4	First Aid for an Overdose	240
6.5	State Sex Offender Registries	242
6.6	The Serenity Prayer	247
6.7	Glossary of Child Protective Services Terms	248
7.0	Endnotes	267

1.0

UNDERSTANDING **CRISIS**



Rich Van Pelt: *This book is for parents. It's especially for parents who find themselves dealing with teenagers in crisis. Everyone wishes there were no use for such a book, and everyone knows that's wishful thinking. So here we are, parents trying to help each other deal with the chaos and brokenness of life as we know it.*

Jim Hancock: This parent's guide is as smart and practical as we know how to make it. We are both fathers; our children now adults making their way in the world. We're both veteran youth workers with decades of involvement among adolescents and families. Between us, we've lived through most everything in these pages and vouch for what we say here from firsthand knowledge. That said, we're the first to admit there's a lot we don't know. So we've included endnotes from sources we believe are credible.

One little wrinkle: For the most part we're writing with one voice here. But from time to time you'll find a story or reflection that's truer to tell in Rich's voice or Jim's—as we did in the previous two paragraphs.

If you're in the middle of a crisis, jump ahead to chapters that address your specific concerns. If you're preparing for the *possibility* of a crisis—or steeling yourself for the next one—the place to begin is understanding the nature and characteristics of crisis. Get that down, and you're halfway home.



1.1 IS THIS A CRISIS OR ISN'T IT?

JH: I was having breakfast at the Potato Shack a couple of weeks ago when my wife called.

"I'm bringing Hannah to see you," Susan said. "She found a notebook in Ben's bedroom this morning, and she's panicked."

"Did you read it?" I asked. The tone of her response told me Susan was convinced this was for real. "I'll see you in a few minutes," I said.

The notebook had everything but a skull and crossbones warning people to stay out. Several pages were removed from the front of the book, which was empty except for a short story followed by hand-drawn images of self harm and a post script on the final page to the effect that if we were reading this, that meant something had happened to Ben. The short story described the ritualistic torture of someone very much like Hannah by someone very much like Ben.

I already knew that Ben was abandoned as an infant and adopted by my friend Joseph and his former wife, who subsequently abandoned Joseph, Ben, and his siblings. Ben has shuttled between his parents' households several times in the last half decade. He doesn't much trust adults in general and women in particular. Hannah and Joseph are newly married.

Hannah told me how she came across the notebook and why she opened it. Ben had repeatedly threatened and taunted Hannah when his father was out of earshot. Having been the victim

of domestic violence in an adolescent marriage, this brought out all kinds of ghosts for Hannah. She was afraid to be alone with Ben. Ten days earlier, he left a letter for them indicating he'd attempted to kill himself.

"What should they do?" Susan asked.

"I need to think," I said. "I'd like to read that letter and see his room."

Alone in my car, I called Joseph and asked him to check with the school and find out if Ben was in class. "I'm on my way to your place," I told him. "I read the notebook; I'm going to read the letter. I think you should find out what your mental health coverage is. From what I know so far, if you asked me if I think Ben might be a danger to himself or others, I would have to say yes."

"I'm on my way," Joseph said. "I'll make the call and meet you at my place in 15 minutes."

When therapists talk about crisis as "a period of *disequilibrium* that overpowers a person's *homeostatic* mechanisms," they're just showing off. In plain English, they're saying *crisis throws people off balance for a while*—emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and sometimes physically.

The clinical psychologist and author Gary Collins called crisis "any event or series of circumstances which threatens a person's well-being and interferes with his or her routine of daily living."¹ The subtle truth of that statement is that crisis is a *self-defined* experience. Meaning that a crisis for one kid may be a non-crisis for another.

Think about that for a moment and you'll see it can't be any other way. Like every painful experience, crisis must be endured first-hand. Perhaps you've been asked by a healthcare professional to rate the intensity of your pain on a scale of one to 10, where 10 equals the most pain you ever experienced. Get five mothers talking about childbirth, and one may rate the pain of delivery as a 10 while

another rates it a six. Which is it? Well, for the first person delivering a baby compares with the most painful events in her life: It's a 10. The second woman either had a relatively less painful delivery or experienced some other even more intense pain somewhere along the line. Each is describing her own experience of pain, which is all any of us can do because there's no absolute, objective scale for mental, physical, emotional, or spiritual pain.

This is why crisis is difficult to predict (but not difficult to spot). Crisis can be brought on by anything, where *anything* means: "Any event or series of circumstances that threatens a person's well-being." What's more, circumstances that once overwhelmed a person might be more endurable on a later occasion because *she* is in a different space. And the opposite is also true.

This means nobody gets to vote on the validity of another person's crisis. A parent does a great disservice if he dismisses an adolescent's crisis because it wouldn't rise to the same level for him. The heartaches of "puppy love" spring to mind which, think what you will, are *very* real to the puppy. Parents who take their kids' heartbreak too lightly are not only rude—they also may endanger the well-being of the children they love.

Of course there's also no reason to borrow trouble. It's not a parent's responsibility to *anticipate* that something will be a crisis in the future just because a similar experience precipitated crisis in the past. Kids grow and change—parents ought to *let* them (as if we had any choice). It's not a parent's responsibility to expect the worst, but it *is* our responsibility to pay attention and engage sons and daughters who are *by their own definition* in crisis.

If that brings to mind someone whose life is defined by one crisis after another to the point where you doubt he even knows what a true crisis is, that's fair enough. That's partly why we wrote this book: To help parents calculate the stakes in a crisis and act appropriately to help their children survive and thrive when they come out the other side.

And they do mostly come out the other side. Not that it's easy. What parent hasn't lost patience (or courage) and wondered:

Why did I ever believe I could be a good parent? What was I thinking? If you truly engage your kid in crisis, there's a decent chance you'll experience wide-ranging emotions. With any luck they won't all land at once:

- **Compassion.** *I hate seeing my child in pain! What can I do to help?*
- **Fear.** *My child could die! I'm not prepared to handle this.*
- **Resentment.** *Does he think he's the only one who ever faced this? How selfish!*
- **Impatience.** *How long is this going to drag on? Why doesn't she do something to change her situation? It's a simple decision! Choose already!*
- **Trapped.** *What have I gotten myself into? Is this kid gonna be dependent on me forever?*
- **Guilt.** *I'm such a bad parent. This is all my fault.*
- **Anger.** *When is he gonna stop acting like a baby and get this thing solved? He's just taking advantage of me.*

If they're real, there's no sense in denying these feelings—better to be honest with ourselves and confide in other adults who support us and keep us grounded in reality. Some parental emotions say more about our inexperience with crisis than our enduring emotional condition. Hearing ourselves admit difficult emotions can be a reality check about how soon we need to call for help from someone who's in better shape to lend a hand at the moment.

If a less-than-ideal emotional response doesn't necessarily indicate a parent's permanent condition, the same can be said for the child she's trying to help. Crisis does strange things to people, making them think, feel and behave in ways that are out of character with who they most truly are. All of us who've lived through a crisis know this. The rest will learn eventually.

THREE KINDS OF CRISES

Children and other humans experience three kinds of crises:

- *Acute* crises are pointed, painful, and immediate.
- *Chronic* crises are enduring, recurring, and persistent.
- *Adjustment* crises are temporary, transitory, and situational.

The first two terms—*acute* and *chronic*—are borrowed directly from medical diagnosis and treatment.

An *acute* crisis is urgent and severe enough to demand immediate intervention. It presents the possibility of serious emotional or physical danger. Acute crises include suicidal episodes, drug overdoses, serious flights from home, crisis pregnancies, either side of violent physical and sexual assaults, and losing a loved one.

A *chronic* crisis results from persistent, ongoing, accumulated pain. Chronic crises surface in behavior patterns that demand attention and care. Long-term conditions such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; parental neglect; and child endangerment sometimes yield behaviors that may in turn become chronic themselves: obsessive or compulsive sexuality, abusing alcohol and other drugs, eating disorders, fighting, high risk-taking, and cutting are chronic crises with dangerous consequences.

Some chronic crises appear to have biochemical roots—Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and clinical depression, for example. These are medical diagnoses, not parental hunches. But parents are positioned to see the emotional and behavioral cues that call for professional help.

Finally, some crises are described as *adjustment* crises because they express a child's difficulty adjusting to the demands of growing up or adapting to rapid change. Adjustment crises are often expressed by habitual lying, trust violations, communication breakdowns, defiance of reasonable standards and values, and impulsive behavior. Adjustment crises tend to be non-lethal, but they can stress

relationships to the breaking point and may precipitate unhealthy alliances with other kids who are acting out (and sometimes an impulsive act can cost a life or limb).

HOW CRISIS AFFECTS PEOPLE

Countless personal, relational, and environmental factors influence how any individual experiences crisis, so it's only a tiny exaggeration to claim that no two people experience crisis the same way. That said, some experiences are common to most crisis situations—*this will definitely be on the test*:

- Crisis takes people by surprise
- Crisis overwhelms
- Crisis awakens other unresolved life issues
- Crisis paralyzes
- Crisis distorts thinking, feeling, and acting
- Crisis paints a gloomy picture of the future

Crisis Takes People by Surprise

What could possibly prepare a teenage girl for date rape? How many families have even minimal emergency plans should a disaster destroy their homes? Show us the parent prepared to hear a judge say his child has been arrested for possession and sale of narcotics. We're never quite ready for some things—this is why we have a category of human experience called *crisis*.

JH: I had 20 years' notice that my father would die from congestive heart failure. That did exactly nothing to prepare me for news of his sudden death: "Uncle Willard found your dad dead in his apartment today." How do you prepare for that phone call?

RVP: *When my father was diagnosed with lung cancer, the prognosis wasn't good. The cancer progressed very quickly, and he died in just a few months without much of the suffering that often accompanies cancer. I'll never forget the last day of his life. His lungs filled with fluid, and he ultimately died from suffocation. Our family gathered around his bed and prayed that God would spare him further suffering and mercifully take him to his eternal home. After about six grueling hours, Dad breathed his final breath, and it became obvious that our prayers were answered. Even so—even after praying that he would die and experience relief from his suffering—when he finally did, we found ourselves in a state of disbelief. As much as we think we're prepared for crisis, it seems we never really are.*

Adolescents are famous for believing bad things only happen to bad people—or at least *other* people. Teenagers forget—or maybe adults forget to tell them—what Jesus said about the good, the bad, and the ordinary. Talking about people who died when a tower fell on them, Jesus demanded: “Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?”² They weren't. Jesus said his Father causes the “sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”³

Good things happen to bad people; bad things happen to good people. Much of the time the universe does a pretty good impression of randomness. In the middle of all that, people are caught unaware, unprepared, and maybe unwilling to face *life as it is* and not as they would have it. Hence crisis takes even the most self-aware by surprise.

Crisis Overwhelms

When a 15-year-old finds out she's pregnant, there's a good chance clear thinking may elude her for a while. Denial, fear, anger, wonder, regret, confusion, embarrassment, doubt, isolation—it's a lot to sort out.

If a parent loses the last scrap of trust in her son, the next thing she's likely to lose is perspective. Anger, fear, shame, regret, and resentment may conspire to declare a state of martial law in the household.

The onset of a crisis can short-circuit normal mental and emotional capabilities. A driven, motivated, self-starting, Type A personality may find the most ordinary tasks slipping from his hyper-competent grasp.

RVP: *I was shocked when I found myself incapacitated by situational depression over a work crisis. Here I was, flying in excess of a hundred thousand miles a year, yet I was barely able to pack for an overnight trip. Fortunately, the crisis passed and soon after so did the depression. But it was a sobering reminder of my humanness.*

JH: For the record, I don't believe in *writer's block*. Still, the last time Rich and I wrote together, a cluster of family crises made it so hard to concentrate that I ended up burning all my margin and hitting the *send* button at 11:59 PM the day the manuscript was due. I hate working that way, but what can I tell you? I was overwhelmed.

Crisis Awakens Other Unresolved Issues

When a crisis strikes, other issues come grumbling from the back of the emotional cave—grumpy and demanding food. Suddenly half a dozen other voices join the howl of the immediate crisis. It's no wonder so many people in crisis mutter, "This is just more than I can handle."

Consider: A high school junior loses his part-time job three weeks before prom. In addition to being worried about paying for prom, you learn he's also concerned about completing an English

essay on time and finding a store that sells the right trucks for a skateboard he bought on the Internet.

After deciding it doesn't really matter whether you know what a skateboard *truck* is, your natural response might be, "Just a second: What do finding a new job, writing an essay, and locating those whatchamacallits for your skateboard have to do with each other?"

If you're not careful (as in full of care), you may be inclined to dismiss his concerns because you've forgotten what life can be like for a high school junior. Project your own values, perceptions, and experiences onto him and you'll fail to respond to what he genuinely needs (which may end up having little to do with the details of his complaint). It's easy to miss that—in the grip of an immediate financial challenge—he's also trying to cope with two other marginally connected issues. So of course he's thrown off. Given the often-delicate balance of adolescence, the question is not, "Why is this such a big deal?" The question is, "What can I do to help you sort this out?"

Crisis Paralyzes

Crisis stops people in their tracks, sometimes leaving them stuck indefinitely. No one this side of Superman can reverse the clock and alter events leading to a crisis. A lot of kids burn precious energy wishing things were different—so much energy they may not have enough left to take steps that lead to the light—think Miss Havisham in Dickens' *Great Expectations*—stuck in a dark room, wishing for a different ending.

When feelings of hopelessness combine with a short-circuiting of normal operating capabilities—especially if you throw addictive substances and behaviors into the mix—it's enough to grind the most proactive person to an emotional halt. Everybody knows an adolescent who seems stuck at age 11—or age *two*—his emotional growth frozen in time. It's remarkable how often that sort of stagnation is traceable to a crisis the teenager is too paralyzed to resolve.

Crisis Distorts Thinking, Feeling, and Acting

Parents often say of a kid in crisis: *He's not himself.*

Chemical dependencies are an excellent case in point. When a young person abuses alcohol or other drugs, he's likely to undergo personality or behavioral changes. The drug of choice comes to occupy a central place in his life. Over time, he'll do anything to repeat the experience the drug provides, including behavior that was once out of the question.

Profound shame can generate the same magnitude of distorted thinking, feeling, and acting. So can fear...and grief.

***RVP:** I've struggled with the American way of death, shaking my head at the craziness of dumping thousands of dollars into the ground with the body of a lost loved one. But then my father died, and my rationality went out the window too.*

Sometimes parents must attempt to protect kids from themselves—insisting they delay major decisions following a loss, heart-break, or tragedy. Healing takes time—but not *just* time. It's a crude analogy, but it might help to think about crisis as a broken bone. Proper healing requires immobilizing the breakpoint long enough for the wound to mend.

For an adolescent in crisis, a rebound romance, the sudden move to another household, walking off the team, or the snap decision to drop out of school or join the military all carry the potential for extending rather than resolving the crisis. This is not to say that fleeing a toxic environment may not be exactly the right choice to avert further crisis. It's only to say that crisis distorts rational, long-term decision making.

Crisis Paints a Gloomy Picture of the Future

People in crisis question whether things will ever get better. They doubt it. Emotional distress overwhelms their judgment. They feel helpless, hopeless, and hapless—*The Three Hs*.

- Helpless—*This is too much; I can't handle it*
- Hopeless—*There's no way out; this pain will never end*
- Hapless—*I'm unlucky and that's that*

In the grip of The Three Hs, it's difficult to embrace the ancient wisdom: *This too shall pass*. The work of identifying options is impeded by the conviction that the present crisis is unresolvable. The hopelessness shows up as an emotionless quality you can see in her face and posture, and hear in the way she sighs and speaks.

So, is what you're facing a crisis or isn't it?

The answer: *If it's a crisis for your kid, then yes, it's a crisis.*

And if your kid doesn't admit it's a crisis? *If your teenager is overwhelmed; if one circumstance awakens other unresolved life issues; if your child is paralyzed; if her thinking, feeling, and acting are distorted; if she has a persistent gloomy picture of the future...then, yes, it's a crisis—whether she's acknowledged it or not.*

Understanding crisis involves learning to spot when our kids are knocked off balance. It means mastering the listening and talking skills that create perspective; followed by hope; followed by concrete, forward motion to help them regain equilibrium. Understanding crisis involves paying attention to our own experiences in ways that enable us to express empathy for our children who are not better or worse or really all that different from us.

All that is just ahead in this book, but first there's this...