

JUNE 1992

PSYCH UP TO LOSE WEIGHT

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Why Good Kids Go Bad

NEVER IN MY LIFE DID I think I'd ever, ever, ever have to go through anything like this," says Elizabeth Golub, the mother of a convicted murderer, punctuating her desperation by gesturing toward a spot on the living room floor of her modest home in Valley Stream, New York. "That's where I was when I found out."

She'd been planning to take her 24-year-old daughter shopping for a wedding dress one Saturday in March 1989 when the police came to investigate the disappearance of Kelly Ann Tynes, a 13-year-old who lived just four doors away on their tree-lined suburban street. The police found the eighth grader's naked body in the Golubs' basement, beaten, stabbed, strangled, mutilated, and stuffed into a suitcase. A few days later, Golub's oldest son, Robert, 21 at the time, was arrested in connection with the brutal slaying.

How could a young man who grew up in an apparently loving, close-knit family be involved in, much less convicted of, second-degree murder? Sheila Plotkin, one of Golub's fellow P.T.A. members, remembers Robert as "an adorable little boy" whose mother "was very concerned that her children get the most out of life." Longtime school chum Johanna Yenna calls Robert "friendly, funny, respectable, polite—an overall gentleman." And to his mother, Robert is the son who went out of his way to buy thoughtful Christmas gifts for everyone in the family.

For years, mental health professionals have tried to unravel the criminal mind, to make sense out of senseless acts of



**They lie, cheat,
steal—even murder.
They are children
from "good, middle-
class homes." What
went wrong? And
how can parents be
sure it won't happen
to their kids?**

aggression. Some hold "bad seed" theories, speculating about mutant genes and anomalous brains. Some blame "bad soil," pointing to elements in the environment (from the temptations and perils of a decadent world to irresponsible or abusive parents). Most experts say it's a capricious blending of the two. Given the many variables that influence children from the day they're born, it's unlikely that anyone will ever unearth The Answer—which leaves parents on their own to contemplate the awesome question of how to raise their kids.

As the mother of a teenager and a 23-year-old, my heart goes out to Golub and to all the other parents of men and women who have been found guilty of violent crimes—like Phyllis and Bob Chambers, whose son Robert became the "Preppy Murderer," killing 18-year-old Jennifer Levin in New York City's Central Park; and Lynn Scott, a less celebrated mother living in San Francisco, whose son Malcolm became a pedophile, sexually molesting more than 100 young children over a 16-year period. And what of all those kids who get derailed, who become delinquents and land in juvenile-corrections institutions? Stories about teenage drug use and defiance—especially among kids from "good families"—hit close to home: *It could have been my child.* The thought sends secret shivers through every parent's soul. And we can't help wondering, *How could this happen?*

Nature versus Nurture

The thorny question of what makes a seemingly "good" kid go "bad" is not an

easy one for professionals to ponder, much less parents. For example, are juvenile murderers somehow "impaired" or are they just "normal" youngsters who commit abnormal acts? In his book, *When Children Kill*, Charles Patrick Ewing, Ph.D., a forensic psychologist, says young killers tend to suffer from various "personality disorders" characterized by distorted patterns of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about other people and the world in general.

However, labels can be misleading—and they change with the times. A person who has an "antisocial personality disorder" today would have been a "psychopath" in the 1940s. And some "emotionally disturbed children" or "acting-out adolescents" are also labeled as "biologically depressed" or "cross-addicted" to drugs and alcohol.

Labels notwithstanding, the root cause of such behavior is even more difficult to isolate. Clinical psychologist Stanton Samenow, Ph.D., author of a cautionary book for parents, *Before It's Too Late*, maintains that "destructive behavior escalates over time. Some kids use control and power for their own sake, have no concept of injury to others, and rely on deception, coercion, in-

timidation, or brute force." In fact, when a youthful offender is brought to Samenow for an evaluation and the delinquent blames his misdeed on an abusive parent, Samenow wonders what if anything the offender did to elicit the harsh treatment.

Samenow acknowledges that some people criticize his views. But Samenow is resolute: in the extreme cases children at age 8 or 10 already "think of themselves as the hub of the wheel and everyone else as spokes." No matter what parents do to or for these kids, it will not keep them out of trouble—because, ultimately, the child makes the choice.

"Some people say I let parents and society off the hook. I know certain kids are in abusive environments they didn't create, but it's still a matter of how people deal with their life situations." To prove his point, Samenow adds, "The majority of kids who are abused do not become criminals. It's just that we don't study them."

On the other hand, it's tough to argue with those who look to the environment for clues. The rising tides of substance abuse, divorce, domestic violence, and physical and sexual abuse wreak havoc on family life. While pov-

erty exacerbates many of these problems—and more incidents are reported at lower socioeconomic levels—high-achieving families are by no means immune, as cases like the Preppy Murder demonstrate.

Jerry Miller, who directs the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, a juvenile-justice advocacy group in Alexandria, Virginia, decries the theory that some people are biologically predisposed toward criminal behavior. "We retreat to genetic explanations when we don't want to peek at ourselves. Kids aren't involved in crimes when they are loved and well cared for—unless it's a fluke or accident, something that got out of hand."

No matter how serious the misdeed—from truancy to murder—by far the most widely accepted explanation takes into consideration both biological and environmental factors. "It's not a matter of nature versus nurture," says retired New York City guidance counselor Sandra Sonn. "It's the fact that the two continually collide."

Most experts agree. Professor Dorothy Otnow Lewis of New York University Medical Center, an expert on violence, points out that "neurological

impairment, learning disabilities, or psychosis alone does not cause violent behavior." Rather, it's the combination of these vulnerabilities, especially when compounded by abuse and family violence, that seems to stack the deck against a child.

This random but lethal combination was probably at work in the Chambers family. Linda Wolfe, the journalist who wrote *Wasted: The Preppy Murder* and interviewed several mental health experts, as well as more than 100 adults and teenagers who knew both the Levin and Chambers families, speculates that Chambers fit the profile of someone with an "antisocial personality disorder." From the age of 10, Chambers was known to experiment with drugs and alcohol, lie, steal, lack empathy, blame others, and say he "didn't mean to do it" when he got caught. But, Wolfe observes, the behavior of both parents also influenced Chambers. "His mother was strict, but whenever he'd lie, she'd ignore it. She unwittingly promoted the attitude that he could get away with anything." Wolfe adds, "He also had an alcoholic father who wasn't there for him when he was growing up."

The following, a less extreme case, al-

beit a serious and potentially dangerous situation, also exemplifies a collision course between nature and nurture: the story of 15-year-old Kevin's* downward spiral into crack use. His mother, Mary,* remembers that her oldest child "was always pushing the limits. He was just a noncompliant kid—like when we were having family pictures, he'd run up a tree." Mary now realizes that her own "sense of inadequacy and fear" made her frightened of Kevin. She also admits, "Tony* [his father] and I just didn't know what we were doing. We didn't set appropriate limits."

Complicating the picture, Mary and Tony constantly locked horns over discipline. So, while Mom and Dad were busy arguing, Kevin slithered through the cracks. He set fires, started using drugs, and stole the family car when he was only 13. At 15, he landed in the adolescent unit of a psychiatric hospital and, finally, Mary and Tony enrolled him at the DeSisto School, a last-resort boarding school in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, for kids in trouble.

Typically, teenagers at DeSisto and at other therapeutic schools have been chronically truant, disruptive, or too depressed to attend a regular school;

they've been involved in drugs and alcohol; they've been arrested for arson, petty theft, assault and battery. They're certainly not big-time criminals—although less privileged kids who commit the same crimes usually end up in jail. These children, represented by both socioeconomic groups, were probably born more vulnerable to life's hard knocks than most. They have something else in common: no one stopped their escalating acts of defiance.

Pitfalls for Parents: How They Unwittingly Enable Their Kids

One reason parents let their kids slide when they get into trouble is that their first reaction to a problem is denial—a common defense mechanism that protects them from seeing a too-painful reality. Michael DeSisto, outspoken director of the DeSisto School, believes that children act as "the family's infra-red light," exposing inconsistency, conflictual marriages, family secrets, and unresolved problems that parents refuse to face.

Denial not only obscures the obvious problem, it prevents parents from taking the appropriate actions. Family therapist Ronald Taffel, Ph.D., the author

* Name has been changed.

of *Parenting by Heart: How to Connect with Your Kids*, also points out, "It's much easier to ignore the child's behavior, bail the kid out, rationalize, minimize, excuse." Paradoxically, such "enabling" behavior allows children to continue doing exactly what the parents are trying to stop.

Parenting Is Tough

It's easy for an outsider to criticize Mary and Tony for ignoring what hindsight makes painfully obvious, or to judge the Chambers for letting their son "get away" with so many minor transgressions until he finally killed someone. But even if these parents had been more vigilant, would it really have mattered?

The truth is, we can't predict whether a recalcitrant teenager is on the road to a lifetime of trouble or simply going through a troubled phase. Phrases like "roll of the dice" and "luck of the draw" are sprinkled throughout even professionals' conversations. Also, as one DeSisto parent remarked, "These kids don't come with directions." There's no question parenting is a tough job and that the children who need supervision and control the most are often the hardest ones to rein in.

Nevertheless, discipline is a vital aspect of parenting. "It's a tremendous commitment," Taffel says. "None of the steps are easy, and kids usually don't immediately comply." When kids are grounded, their first response is intense, if not dramatic ("You're ruining my life!"). Or they try to manipulate through guilt ("I'll never be popular"). Inevitably, the child acts surly or broods, trying whatever might make the parents regret their action. But, no matter what he does, "you have to let him know you're going to be there for him," stresses Taffel.

All the experts stress that disciplining children is loving them, although many parents get the two confused. "There's an awful lot of overindulgence—both emotionally and financially," Ewing observes.

Interestingly, several recent studies have shown that the best way for parents to mold their children into empathic, caring adults is by setting limits for them and encouraging self-sacrifice. Buying children things won't build character; cheering them on to meet new challenges and solve problems will.

How to Spot Trouble

Low self-esteem—a consequence of, among other things, never having learned to overcome difficulties—is often cited as the singular most important factor relat-

ed to why kids "go bad." High self-esteem, which shows up as confidence and self-assurance, comes from inside. It's not a matter of how pretty, smart, athletic, or well-dressed your child is.

How do parents know if their children are suffering from low self-esteem? A child doing drugs or cutting school certainly won't admit that he or she is not feeling confident enough to cope with life. But erratic grades, changes in eating or sleeping patterns, requests for extra allowance (or money missing from the cookie jar), sudden mood swings, and unexplained violence or depression are signs that something is really wrong and that you may well need professional assistance. You may not notice—but outsiders will. Taffel warns, "When you find that other people seem more worried about your kids than you are, pay attention."

Particularly in families with a history of alcoholism or other types of addiction, domestic violence, sexual abuse, mental illness, neurological problems, and learning disabilities, parents should be especially vigilant—of their own and their child's behavior.

Taffel also advises parents to be on the lookout for "a sudden shift in the degree of connection with your child." If she or he is suddenly isolating, acting secretive and withdrawn, not bringing friends home, refusing to join the family for dinners out, find out why. Parents have the right to question where kids are going and who they'll be with. Also, look at your children's friends. As Taffel puts it, "If their pals are doing it, they're one step away." The most serious danger sign—which inevitably occurs after other red flags have been unfurled—is when a child doesn't seem to care about anyone else.

By far, parents' best insurance is be-

ing there. Children have a better chance of surviving anything if, as Mary put it, "their parents can be strong enough to hold them, to stay involved and connected." So don't believe kids when they beg you to back off. No matter how grown-up they insist they are or how blasé their attitude, teenagers who act out are frightened children unconsciously begging for parents to rein them in. As parents, we have to nurture and support them so they gain enough self-esteem to love themselves.

Of course, no one can be a perfect parent, especially in a painfully imperfect world. But being a conscientious parent is possible—and it pays off. When my then-belligerent 16-year-old threatened to run away three summers ago, I warned him I would stop at nothing to get him back. He put me to the test. Eighteen days and 157 phone calls later, I tracked him down in California, where he had attended an Anarchist's Convention, and insisted he fly home to New York. When I met him at the airport, he said his intention was to leave home forever and enroll himself in an "alternative" high school. He also told me I was a rotten parent. I told him he was grounded. It wasn't my happiest August.

Three years later—after continually making honor roll at the school he "hated"—he can tease me about "stealing" his money to pay for his airline ticket from Sacramento to New York (I had confiscated the money he had made at a summer job to cover the cost). He's 19 now, enrolled at Reed College, and of all things wants to study child development. Our relationship has never been better. □

Melinda Blau is a contributing editor at New Woman. She is currently writing a book about coparenting after divorce.

Help for Desperate Parents

"Being isolated is the worst thing that can happen to a parent," says a mother who, with her husband, attends the mandatory parent support groups sponsored by the DeSisto School in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. "The school changed our lives," she says. Luckily, you don't have to send your child to an expensive therapeutic boarding school to find other parents dealing with similar problems:

■ **TOUGH LOVE INTERNATIONAL.** The oldest national support group for parents, it was started around 11 years ago. A regional representative, David Rabb, says "parents who come to us are desperate and in a lot of pain. Not

knowing what to do, they feel helpless and hopeless." Call (800) 333-1069.

■ **FAMILIES ANONYMOUS.** A national support group based on the 12-step format of Alcoholics Anonymous, it's for families of adolescents with behavior problems, which often include substance abuse. Call (800) 736-9805.

■ **CENTER OF SUPPORT FOR PARENTS OF ADULT SEX OFFENDERS.** Lynn Scott, the mother of a pedophile, says she started this support group to transmute her experiences into something positive: "I've got this lemon—but I'm going to make lemonade!" Write Box 460126, San Francisco, CA 94146. Call (415) 435-5022.