



*Help! My Kids Are Hurting: A Survival Guide to Working with Students in Pain*  
Copyright ©2005 by Marv Penner

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# contents

Preface	6
Introduction	8
Section One: Understanding the World of Hurting Kids	11
Chapter 1: Five Things You Can Count On	12
Chapter 2: Eight Unique Challenges of Working with Kids in Pain	15
Section Two: Becoming a Person Who Can Help Hurting Kids	21
Chapter 3: What Do Hurting Kids Want from Us?	22
Chapter 4: What about Boundaries?	24
Chapter 5: What's Your Style—Hugger, Teacher, Preacher, or Surgeon?	29
Chapter 6: Sorting Through Your Own Baggage	39
Section Three: The Nuts and Bolts of Helping Hurting Kids	43
Chapter 7: It's All about L.O.V.E.	44
Chapter 8: "L" Is for LISTEN	47
Chapter 9: "O" Is for OFFER	54
Chapter 10: "V" Is for VALIDATE	62
Chapter 11: "E" Is for ELIMINATE, EMPOWER, and EXPECT	69
Chapter 12: Mistakes That Can Destroy Your Ministry with Hurting Kids	76
Section Four: When You're Out of Your Depth: Rules for Referral	83
Chapter 13: Why You Should Refer a Hurting Student	85
Chapter 14: When You Should Refer a Hurting Student	89
Chapter 15: How You Should Refer a Hurting Student	97
Section Five: Tackling the Tough Stuff—10 Topics You Need to Understand	99
Chapter 16: Eating Disorders	100
Chapter 17: Adolescent Suicide	104
Chapter 18: Rape, Acquaintance Rape, and Sexual Assault	109
Chapter 19: Adolescent Pregnancy	113
Chapter 20: Substance Abuse	117
Chapter 21: Grief and Loss	122
Chapter 22: Self-Injury	127
Chapter 23: Family Breakdown	130
Chapter 24: Pornography and Sexual Addictions	134
Chapter 25: Adolescent Depression	138
Final Thoughts	142

# 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.