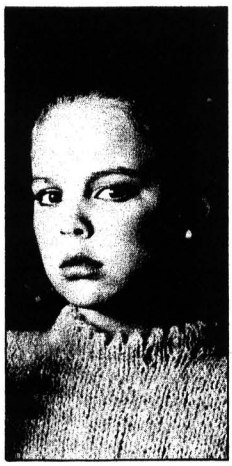
The Jaded Generation

They've got it all, except purpose. They want it all, except the struggle. No, the kids are not *all right. By Wendy Dennis*



She was once her daddy's little girl. But that seems so long ago now, so painfully far away, as she sits on the deck of her parents' graceful Rosedale home, butting du Mauriers into her parents' tiny perfect Wedgwood ashtray, affecting the world-weary ennui of a 15-year-old sophisticate. It is still possible to see, beneath the knotted green rag restraining a careless heap of fine auburn hair, beneath the splotch of coral lipstick and purply-yellow eyeshadow applied against a tableau of too much white pancake makeup, it is still possible to discern a face of absolute sweetness and innocence—the freckled, girl-woman face of a storybook princess.

But the tale does not promise to end prettily, for it no longer seems possible that she, with her Grade 8 education, will live happily ever after, although once upon a time, especially to her parents, it seemed that she would. The private school, the summer camps, the trips to Europe—all were a kind of rehearsal for an adulthood that would be rich and rewarding, a whetting of the soul's appetite for life's grandest feasts. For these were parents who had struggled for their prizes, who believed, above all, in the value of enrichment and the necessity of making a mark. They were not parents who, even while indulging in their murkiest parental fears, imagined their beloved daughter, their clever, charming, reading-at-3-years-old daughter, would one day swallow a fistful of aspirins, or run away, or have to make her home with the Children's Aid.

She is, she says, doing nothing with her life right now. Days stretch into an endless litany of lunches with friends, television, walks alone. At the moment, anyway, she's living at home, but that's precarious, that can change. Her parents cut off funds, but cash flow is no problem; she has lots of friends who will keep her in cigarettes. Next fall, maybe, she'll try school again, or maybe her dad will get her a gofer-sort-of-job in his office, but then again she's been thinking of moving to Italy because a friend of a friend knows a model in Milan who might be able to set something up for her over there. Or New York City. Maybe New York. New York has always held a certain appeal.

MOTHER:

"Her touch with reality is tenuous at best. She decides one day she's going to be a dancer; so we enroll her in dance lessons and she goes three times and that's it; she doesn't want to be a dancer if she has to put herself out for it. Then she's going to a singer, but without a voice lesson. Her whole attitude is instant gratification. Tonight my dream is to be . . . Tomorrow I'll be it "

DAUGHTER:

"School is important to me but I have problems with self-discipline. I never wanted to fail; it just happened. I wanted to excel in school. I just didn't want to go "

This is a story about teen-agers and parents and pain and about what once, when things were simpler, would have been called adolescent rebellion. It is a story told quietly over and over again in the living rooms of Etobicoke's sprawling bungalows, in the well-appointed dens of Forest Hill, and it is discreetly whispered, when the weather is kinder, over martinis by the golf club pools. It unfolds poignantly in the offices of psychiatrists who have devoted their lives to working with teen-agers, and in the chambers of family court judges who peer down at remorseless adolescent faces from the bench. It reverberates endlessly from the mouths of frustrated teachers and despairing social workers and anguished parents who, even when they summon their collective intuition, cannot seem to make much sense of what the story means. It is a distressing tale and it does not end happily. Which is why it is really about something a good deal harder to fathom than 15-year-olds who happen to be pissing off their parents, just the same way 15-year-olds have always done.

This is the story of a bored, jaded generation which never learned how to dream the grand dreams. By their 10th birthdays, they have seen it all, these children whom affluence has warped like welfare in reverse, creating an enormous listlessness, a weary sense of déjà vu. Unlike their parents, who earned privileges by degrees, they seem to have it all at once; they need never learn patience or yearning. Brooke Shields looms over their adolescence like some tarted-up Big Sister and they drift off to sleep dreaming of designer jeans. Some of them drink a lot. Some of them run away. But by their own admission and according to the testimony of the people whose lives touch theirs on a daily basis, a lot of these kids don't do very much of anything. They have trouble, they say, thinking of what there is to do.

For 12 years, Barry Lowes has chaired the Training Schools Advisory Board, under the auspices of the Ministry of Community and Social Services, and for 25 years he has owned and directed Camp Timberlane in the Haliburton Highlands for the children of well-heeled Jewish parents. Lowes has devoted his life to working with kids, and it's clear when he talks about them he wouldn't have had it any other way, but he's profoundly troubled by a worrisome trend he first sensed nearly a decade ago: "These are kids without gumption heading into a world where the opportunities are simply not there. A lot will coast on their parents' money and positions for awhile, but over time they're going to nose-dive. We're starting to see it happen now. They just haven't had the disciplined upbringing that's going to be required to get them through these troubled times. We've accelerated their growing up but not their maturation. We've created a precocious generation that has the veneer and trappings of adulthood, but not the maturity that puts it into perspective and sets it on an even keel. They are so accepting, so quiescent; certain-

ly, it's unlikely they'll revolt. No one is digging up the cobblestones or manning the parapets. They're afraid because everything seems so tough to them. They're all just lying down belly up and whimpering."

More than all the other drugs, television blew their minds away. What began as a mild tranquillizer in their early childhoods became a necessary fix by their teens. It has so distorted their perceptions, many of them have no idea that what they find so transfixing—the semiliterate banter, the oversimplified problems, the pat solutions, the fervent urges begging to be instantaneously gratified—is unnatural or in any appreciable way different from what real life is supposed to be about. By no mere coincidence, their generation's biggest fad—its unifying symbol—is the Sony Walkman. Unlike the simultaneous musical orgasm furnished by a '60s rock festival, the Walkman experience is just musical masturbation. As such, it is an apt metaphor for their lives.

MOTHER:

"When she failed and we realized our standards for her were probably not going to be met, with respect to school and friends, we pulled back. So she's not going to be a lawyer. OK. We were willing to accept that. So then you give up your dreams that your kid is going to university and your dreams get smaller and pretty soon all you pray is that she'll just go out and get a job in a restaurant. Just let her do something *with her life"*

Wired to the machine, there is no need to untangle the threads of one's immediate environment—actually to stay tuned to what's going on. The Walkman is a perfect tool to keep the world at bay; it eliminates conversation (students wander now, headsets bobbing, from history to math class) and critical observation. Indeed, it is neatly finishing off the job that the tube began of lobotomizing a generation, for if television numbed these kids' sensibilities, the tiny cassette has merely made catatonia comfortable. Earphones safely attached, wearers announce Leave Me Alone to the world, which, by and large, is happy to oblige. Wired to one, on bicycles or with friends, kids can retreat again into that zombie-trance of television, which, in much the same way, asked them to return nothing.

When I quit teaching high school English in the late '70s, I told myself the decision was connected to the need for a career change, fear of burn out and a vague but uncomfortable feeling that kids were not what they used to be. This last sensation I attributed to the onslaught of time: if the gap between my students and myself was widening into a gulf, such were the inevitabilities of getting older. What disturbed me most was the realization that, at nearly twice their age, I seemed to have infinitely more energy and idealism than most of them. As the decade wore on, inspiring them—about anything—grew to be an increasingly arduous task. What I only sensed then in an obscure way, I've since crystallized by writing this article: too many kids are indeed not what they used to be; they are a good deal less than they ought to be, and they seem to exist in a world where very little, in the end, matters to them.

Time and again during my research, I was assured by a solid battery of mental health professionals that adolescents cry out for something to believe in, that they are ripe targets for charismatic leaders and that parents are neglecting their responsibility to offer them touchstones outside themselves against which they can safely measure their dreams. Lacking such a gauge, they subsist, achingly vulnerable to all the wrong heroes. But what the parents I talked to anguished over—parents who, by the way, had obviously poured a lifetime of their own sweet ideals into their kids—and what reverberated palpably from the teen-agers I met, was not the need for some larger-than-life model against which to test their values so much as the distinct lack of any worthwhile values at all. And where those dreams, values and ideals should have been percolating was nothing but a nihilistic void. Far from yearning for a place where their reach could exceed their grasp, most of them possessed at best only a dim, hedonistic sense, and at worst, no sense that they weren't already grasping it all. Unless, of course, grasping more meant stockpiling their bedrooms with yet another ear-splitting stereo component, and their closets with the latest in teen swank. They seemed neither to want nor to need heroes, nor could they articulate what a hero was, beyond the pathetic line-up of neo-Nazi punk rock stars or sports "celebrities" who alternately grunted, cursed or shoved middle fingers in the air across their television screens. That revelation, together with what I had already gleaned from teaching at a nice suburban middleclass school, coalesced into an alarming realization: if you have enough kids wandering around in a moral vacuum, cloaked in appalling ignorance about the world beyond *Dallas* or Bruce Springsteen, then you've got trouble on your hands.

A Toronto high school in November is a bleak and cheerless place. The breeze is chill, the trees are eerie skeletons, and nothing much except a vague, pervasive depression is in the air. Football season is over, Christmas is still a distant dream, but classes have been going just long enough for the truth to be faced: this year will be no different than the others.

It is Period 4; the Grade 12 students lumber into class.

"Let's not do *Hamlet* today. Let's have a discussion," says Mike, who usually begins these things.

"OK. About what?" asks his teacher.

Silence. No one can think of what. Maybe it's a sour day. Maybe it's not.

"Take some time and write down something that really bugs you, or makes you sad, or curious."

The fluorescent lights overhead start to buzz and someone makes a move to turn them off. It's quiet except for the insistent wail of a fire engine somewhere in the distance. A few pens move in cursory scrawls, but mostly the room is still. Minutes pass.

"All right. Suggestions?"

Nothing. Silence. Blank stares.

"But you said you wanted to have a discussion. . ."

Mike again. "Why don't *you* give us something to talk about?"

"I'm not going to give you something to talk about. My God. It's *your* discussion. You said you wanted to have it. I get to choose every other day."

Movement from the middle seat, third row. Leo wonders if they can talk about lowering the drinking age.

"Well, I suppose, if no one has a better idea."

"I have a better idea," says Robert. "Let's talk about disco."

"Nah," says Frank. "Disco sucks."

Another day. Another class. This time something's up. Period 8's usual lethargy has yielded to commotion and they're filtering into class in animated clusters. The teacher, unaccustomed to such liveliness, figures it must be that sadist Calhoun, hitting them with another surprise math test. Nothing else would move them so. But it's not. As it happens, they watched *The Holocaust* on TV last night and they're agitated–some argument is raging and they want to talk. Not one to miss a situation ripe with possibility, their teacher asks what's on their minds. Hands are up, fast. John–inert, detached, just-try-and-impress-me-John, is first off the mark.

"Did you want to comment on *The Holocaust*, John?" his teacher wonders.

"Yeah," he answers. "I don't believe it ever happened."

One autumn day in the late '60s when I was visiting the University of Michigan, I saw in the campus' central square a classy bit of graffiti–classy because it represented a lot that was intelligent, committed and witty about the period in which I was lucky enough to be growing up. Scrawled urgently across the weathered brick in day-glo paint were the words: L B J PULL OUT LIKE YOUR FATHER SHOULD HAVE. I recall it only because the graffiti I tend to see these days, carved onto students' desks or the washroom walls at the El Mocambo, fixates interminably on yet another crashingly boring musical debate, or the need to eliminate "fags." I also see a lot of swastikas. And in 1979, the year I left teaching, the most riveting student issue, the one that had the student body as worked up as I had ever seen them, was the urgent need for better French fries in the cafeteria. Today, at York Mills Collegiate, I'm told if you run for student council, edit the newspaper or join a club, you earn the distinction of belonging to a group known around the school as The Losers.

The winners, presumably, drink. In the '60s, alcohol was déclassé because booze was the drug that parents used to forget their troubles. Their high-minded kids had better things to do than get blotto and retreat from the world; on the contrary, they wanted a heightened, clearer vision of it. Dropping acid and smoking grass were political statements, as political as growing long hair or staging a sit-in.

Alcohol is big again. Getting blasted on Friday night and reliving it in home form on Monday morning is big again. And if you talk to the kids who drink, they say they do it because there's really not much else to do.

MOTHER:

"Nothing is ever her fault. She can't get a job because nothing's available. She only held a sales job for two weeks because some manager took a dislike to her–some personality thing. Not her fault. She failed school because the teachers were ridiculous. Not her fault. I don't know where she gets this attitude that the world owes her a living. Her father is a super-achiever. I've always worked. We've earned this house partly because we were lucky but mostly because we worked damn hard for it"

DAUGHTER:

"I don't think I really deserved all the advantages I had. If you give someone everything all her life, she'll find it hard to take responsibility for things. Any little rich kid will be like that. I can't take responsibility for my life"

Bill was 14 when the police first brought him home. He was very drunk. With some others he had slashed some tires and smashed some street lights and his parents could not understand it because their other kids had been model children. They lived through the lying and the stealing and the nights he'd stumble in so drunk he could not see, until some thugs beat him to a pulp in a boozy brawl and they found him asleep at the Scarborough Bluffs, eyes swollen shut, only a thousand splintered fragments left of his nose. He had promised them he'd never drink again.

For about a year now he's spent his days pumping gas. It was a job he found, and it's the longest commitment he's ever made. His parents admit it's too soon to tell whether things will fall apart again; if they do, however, they're ready to say what a pity and try to carry on. They did what they could.

Like so many of their generation, what they knew how to do, they thought, was raise kids. Not that it was all going to be rosy. After all, they knew about adolescent angst and rebellion. What they did not expect was that their children's journey across the minefield of adolescence would sweep them inexorably into the outstretched arms of the police, the courts, the addiction centres, the shrinks, and the Children's Aid. Most middleclass parents never in their wildest nightmares imagine that one day they'll stand shoulder to shoulder with their child before the bench, begging the court to put him in a detention centre because they can no longer endure his abuse. Those horrors happened only to other people's kids who, by some freak accident of birth, played out their nameless pasts and nowhere futures on the other side of town. But it is happening. In spades. Over the last decade, the courts began to bulge with adolescent offenders. More of them than ever before hailed from the city's well-to-do enclaves.

"There was more of a moral climate when we were young," says Judge Michael Caney, a family court judge who has written formal bail orders for 10-year-olds. "One didn't do things because one didn't want to let people down. There seem to be more kids today with no conscience."

The Youth Bureau of the Metropolitan Toronto Police admits it is seeing more juveniles committing more serious crimes at an earlier age. But once a child reaches the magic age of 16, very little can touch him. If he is 16 and broke, the police are not empowered to arrest him for vagrancy; if he is 16 and has run away, the police are not empowered to bring him home. While the cops stress that by far the majority of teen-agers are solid citizens, they confess it's no longer an eyebrow-raising event when they rap on an imposing oak door in Moore Park or pull up in genteel neighborhoods like it from one end of the city to the other. Psychiatrists who treat adolescents, and whose practices are littered with a strange new breed of emotionally wounded, also acknowledge the disturbing trend. More antisocial behavior. More loneliness. More runaways. More suicides. Dr. George Awad, senior psychiatrist at the Family Court Clinic, whose study of 2,000 kids from three social classes, all of whom had been assessed at the clinic, revealed that middleclass kids tended to choose drugs, alcohol, running away or serious theft as demon-

strations of their greater loneliness and confused thinking, says his clinical observations confirm the situation is worsening. "I don't think you can write it off as the good old neurotic conflict any longer," warns Awad. "We're definitely seeing more disturbed kids."

When parents first bump up against the monolithic mental health/social service bureaucracy, they believe in their heart of hearts, in that sweet liberal middleclass way, that it is there for no other purpose than to help them get through this awful time. For the North American educated middle class is largely a trusting bunch who faithfully believe that a little money and a lot of expert help will cure anything.

They soon learn otherwise. Indeed, the story of these sad, aimless kids cannot fairly be told without some mention of the litany of despair chanted by parent after parent forced to endure heartbreaking incidents of professional indifference, incompetence and arrogance in pursuit of expert help for their children. Almost without exception, they harbor a hard-edged bitterness; for many, even years of weekly encounters within the bureaucratic maze have failed to yield more than a handful of worthwhile results. For some, the disillusionment is devastating: "After our son had vandalized, we went to the Lakeshore Psychiatric Centre [now the Humber Bay Family and Child Clinic] to get an assessment, and were told it would be useful for him to attend. So we began a family discussion group, where we tried to explain what we thought the problem was. But in that group, they let him feel like a million dollars. The whole attitude was that he was a maligned victim of rotten parents. Everything there was designed to pull us down even more. That was the most destructive, debilitating phase of the whole process for us. We were prepared to admit we'd made mistakes. We were looking for experienced people to help us cope. In fact, what we got was our noses rubbed in it, while he merely had his feelings confirmed. And adult authority, what little we had left, was lost. So then we tried a group home, but that was a piece of absolutely rotten social work. We had this image that he'd be cared for by some wonderfully warm foster mother who had the infinite patience to cope with kids like this–who'd be able to do a job where we had failed. Instead, we discovered that she was just someone in a dirty old house who gets money for taking in kids and doesn't even feed them properly.

"We were so naive about the professionals. We started off thinking we'd get help. But you never really do. You just replace your original set of worries with another set of worries. They don't seem to care; they're never there; you can't get information; they don't appear to understand your kid. We felt there was incredible buck-passing going on. The group home would blame probation; probation would blame the court. We were the ones who always called the meetings; nothing ever seemed to be happening. Everyone had his own plausible tale, and no one ever got closer to solving the problem. Meanwhile our son's life was passing by."

It is an oft-heard refrain. And while the characters change, the plots rarely do: when Rhonda is 13, she cloisters herself moodily in her bedroom and begins to pick at her knuckles with a pin, so that her flesh is scraped and raw. Her parents see the school guidance counsellor, then a psychiatrist, and Rhonda visits four times, but it is the end of term and the psychiatrist is satisfied that nothing much is wrong, that perhaps everyone's making too big a deal of all of this, and he suggests bringing her back in September, if they still wish. Two weeks later, Rhonda cuts her wrists. Her parents wind up back in the psychiatrist's office but he's still not overly concerned, so finally Rhonda's father, who can't take one minute more of this professional help that seems to be neither professional nor helpful, explodes and begs the psychiatrist to stop exchanging pleasantries, to please do something because, after all, his 13-year-old daughter has just carved two neat cuts in her arms and she might very well be dead by Christmas.

The psychiatrist begins to see the father's point. Indeed, he acts very quickly after that. No one can accuse him of falling down on his job. After a few phone calls, he tells them that in an hour and a half Rhonda will be going to live at Thistletown Regional Centre for Children and Adolescents. He does not think it necessary to tell them much about the place, but they are scared and relieved and they don't ask too many questions. Although they do not know it now, they will have plenty of time to consider what efforts are being made on their daughter's behalf. They will have time to consider once they hand over to the care of professionals a young girl who had never kissed a boy but who, within a few months, had had sex with one, and within a few more months had learned to steal and run away and sleep in a car on Yonge Street. Indeed, they will have ample time to consider what they have done for their daughter when they go faithfully for weekly family therapy sessions that Rhonda attends sporadically and at her whim. They will have plenty of time to consider if she is receiving proper treatment as they wait for her to emerge, which she doesn't for nearly two years.

MOTHER: [redacted]
"That the most important things to her are how you look and where you're seen and how your hair is done are not unusual things for her age. What is unusual for her age is that those concerns take the place of everything else "

DAUGHTER: [redacted]
"I'd never take a job where I had to change the way I dress. The way I dress is myself. I can't change that. I could never work at Harvey's or take a job I really hated, even temporarily, because it's menial. There's no mindwork. At Harvey's, you're dealing with hamburger people, people who want fries, who wear polyester. I couldn't do it. It would be too much of a sacrifice "

The loss parents like these feel is twofold. First, all the neat notions of liberal childraising evaporate: then, trusted liberal saviors turn a deaf ear to their prayers. Deserted first by their children, whom they no longer recognize, they are betrayed yet again by their principles.

Very little survives to get them through the night: "I have no idea why kids go wrong, why they develop without some kind of moral centre. It leaves you lost and heartbroken and emotionally in a heap, how someone so very dear to you, suddenly, through a kind of mind switch, can do things you couldn't believe. It happened like a thunderbolt for me. Some things are understandable, how a child in junior high can encounter ridicule because she's overweight and then fall into

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severe dieting that turns into anorexia. First you pull her through that, and then, in order to ease that terrible problem, she starts to smoke heavily and then to drink and, of course, the drinking makes her euphoric on an empty stomach. It starts with her taking nips from the family bottles. That's discovered easily, because the bottles are going down. So then you mark the bottles, and they get watered down, so it looks like you're drinking rosé when you pour the wine at dinner. Then you start hiding bottles under the bed and just when you think you've reached a point as a grown-up person where you've managed to create some atmosphere you want to live in, you realize you're reduced to hiding bottles under a bed. And that atmosphere and the hopes you had of creating it get devastated. And pretty soon she starts taking her mother's clothes and getting heavily made-up and can pass in the liquor stores herself.

"Everything goes to rat-shit. She's drunk at school in the morning and it gets so you reach a point where every time that telephone rings you think it's going to be her teacher phoning to say she's drunk again. And then the truancy starts and things start to get more and more bizarre. And any enlightened response, which any enlightened person can use to try to convince her of the consequences of no education, fails, and things just begin to come apart.

"So then you send her to the teen clinic at Sick Kids and the therapist there sees a very good-looking middleclass kid with a bit of a drinking problem and he's got lots of kids with lots worse problems. Kids can be great con artists, even with experienced therapists, and so she goes for some appointments, and the therapist doesn't think there's much of a problem really, and it's maddening, because he's not taking the whole thing seriously enough. Oh, we get certain jargon like 'She's acting out,' but, I mean, we know what the theories are... They immediately assume the mother is a tyrant or the parents have screwed up or something like that.

"Then you have one night like long ago that's just fine, where you sit around and have a warm talk and you think you've got something back again, and the next morning she goes off to school and everything is fine and then she doesn't come home and for nine days you can't find her and you're tearing your hair out because she drinks and she's totally incapacitated when she does. So you go through all the usual nightmares and then a girl friend finds her on the street and she won't come home, and then you discover that if she's 16 and she says she's not going to come home there's not a damn thing you can do about it.

"So then you call up the therapist who's been sloughing you off for the past couple of months and now suddenly she has serious emotional problems and you had better get her in there right away. Do you have any idea how it wrenches your heart out to have to contemplate committing your daughter? All your touchstones, all your ethics, everything you believe in, evaporate. Something like this happens and it leaves you totally emotionally wrecked. Then one day she comes home and gets her clothes and marches across the street and gets in a car with some goon and she's gone.

"She's pretty well lost touch with her mother but stays in touch with you because she thinks you're always good for some money, and you probably are. The guy she's running around with has got his father's car and pretty soon you get a call from Los Angeles that she's been picked up for boosting—so you wire a few hundred dollars and they're back and you keep urging them to get work. They're living in the car and being watched by the police because the cops are sure they'll soon be up to something.

"We have good friends who say if there's ever anything they can do, so we ask them if she can stay with them; she stays for two weeks and because our friends are wonderful, liberal, generous people they invite her boy friend to come in from his parked car and sleep in the rec room. When they leave, my friend's wife discovers some silver missing.

"I can't stress enough how much I think there is more to this than mere adolescent rebellion. I think she's lost all touch with reality. She always wanted to go to teachers' college so she presents this fantasy where her goal is to be a teacher, yet she's not willing to do anything to become one. She seems to be fantasizing that she's still on her way there when everything she's doing is making the goal hopeless. There was a tremendous drive we had as kids to make something of ourselves; we knew we had the inner drive to reach some level of accomplishment. That seems to be missing in her. She thinks everything is her due. It's all there for her taking.

"Everything that's happened in my life so far I've been able to meet head on. That's what I've always done. What does it take? Persistence? Guts? Maybe a little guile? You have the resources, whatever it takes, to conquer a situation. But in this kind of a situation, there's *nothing* you can do... Every theory leads into a new kind of guilt load. Her mother and you can talk endlessly trying to examine every corner of it and, of all times, this is when you have to be mutually supportive. You examine all the theories, but the problem is that most of the current thinking about kids just blows up right in your face. You can find a rationalization for everything. If your kid starts to lie you say, 'Well, all kids lie. I had to lie with my parents. Kids lie for survival.' I mean honest, liberal, humane, somewhat enlightened thinking takes you down so many garden paths. I can even find a justification for living in a car. When I went to college, the book everyone was reading was Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*. We all wanted to bum around the country in cars. I could come up with any incredibly false thinking that could end up excusing anything.

"Like most people of my generation, I believed that I didn't want to put my kids through what I went through, like corporal punishment. I believed the best way to lead was through example—you *show* them, you give them sympathy, you let them know that as hard as they're putting out, you're putting out harder.

"Right now I'm questioning everything that we've done—the liberal upbringing, everything I thought was important in the business of living. I have no idea what would have happened if I had been a sergeant-major. There's no answer. But you can't just go on and on wondering what might have been if you had done things another way. It's a dead end. And, of course, the other incredible factor in the equation is no more or no less than love—everything in the house—music I hear—everything—reminds me of her. We were very close, you see.

"The whole experience has been totally shattering. All the anchors and touchstones and sureties are all gone. It takes everything away from you that you had. You try to pick up some kind of life. That's all you can do. There is no answer to it. I hope that, with help, things will turn around and there'll be a future for her. I hope that's what will happen."

One of the few optimistic voices heard above a depressing chorus of Cassandra-like prophecies on this subject is June Callwood's. Callwood has had a great deal of experience with teen-agers (besides raising four children of her own, she helped found Digger House—a '60s retreat for migrant and drugged-out kids—and is currently chairing a community-based support program called Jessie's, for teen-age mothers), so it's difficult to dismiss her clear-eyed certainty about the safety of these youngsters' futures. Callwood has seen teen-agers scaring the shit out of their parents before, and she's not too worried about seeing them do it again because she figures in all but 5% of the cases, a child's identity is going to wind up closely allied to his parents', only neither of them knows it yet: "Ever since Plato, kids have been getting out of line. It's their way of saying I'm yin and you're yang. It's valiant and desperate and essential, but it isn't likely to be incorporated into lifelong behavior. The radicals of the '60s are all Tories today. It's one of the ways to become an adult, and unfortunately for parents, it's probably one of the best ways. Your kid may just be saying, 'Look, I'm going to become a bigot just because you're not, or a sexist because you're a feminist.' But through it all, you must preserve the special aspect that you love this child, because the feeling that you value that

child is his or her lifeline. You've lost everything if you lose that. If you've instilled a solid value system, you'll get your kid back. You won't win by getting over-controlling and hysterical and throwing blame around.

"I'll tell you a bizarre story. While I was at Digger House, I used to get a lot of calls from parents of 14- to 17-year-olds who were distraught about their kids, and I had a very glib response for them: keep the door open, I'd say. And then, years later, I got a letter from a woman who said thank God you told me to keep the door open. Her daughter had hooked up with a motorcycle gang, had shot heroin, had had several abortions, had lived in Rochdale, had contracted VD umpteen times, had stolen, had been in jail, but when the woman was writing, her daughter was in university and she was all right. And this woman kept thanking me for urging her to keep the door open, because the girl's father had finally given up, but she kept visiting the kid through all this trouble, and in the end the kid turned around. Well, I don't know how she did it. I mean, I'm sure I would have thought it was hopeless. I don't think I could have kept the door open through all that. But she did it. Talk to any kid, because any kid goes through it, and it's just more or less pathological, depending on the kid. Adolescence is pain. You get a reprise of it in your 30s and 50s and 70s but the first hit and the most painful hit is adolescence. But adolescence is also one gorgeous second sweet chance at parenthood. Your first chance was in their childhood, and if you haven't been the greatest parent up till now, you can try again. It's both a wonderful and an awful opportunity. But if you blow it, it's the last chance you're going to get."

Dr. Harvey Golombek is a psychiatrist whose business it is to glue together some of the splintered psyches of the teen-agers who are having their difficulties surviving these troubled times. He practises in a book-lined office at the extreme end of a narrow corridor at The C.M. Hincks Treatment Centre on Jarvis Street, where ponderous sound-proofed doors affixed with block-lettered black and white signs announce to visitors seeking family therapy or play therapy where to enter. When he talks about adolescents, Golombek exudes an aura of quiet wisdom. He is not in the habit of answering quickly, and humbly admits that after 15 years of probing kids' heads, he is still trying to figure out what's inside them. What Golombek will offer are a few educated hunches about why teen-agers seem to be so sadly disaffected: "So much of what adolescents experience has to do with the historical moment in time they come of age. Their environment at one specific moment helps shape their psychosocial identity dramatically. As well, there is a strong collusion between what the kids are expressing and what their parents are feeling.

often you can understand kids' behavior by understanding what's going on inside their parents. The anxieties kids feel, they pick up at home. In the early '70s, for example, there was a lot of anger in the educated, liberal segment of society. It was the parents who felt angry towards a system that had let them down, but it was the kids who went out and destroyed the computers. Kids were excessively rebellious then, organizing and petitioning, staging sit-ins and so on, but that idealism is narcissism today, because there are a lot of disappointed 40-year-olds around who were raised in the '50s to believe an advanced education would ensure happiness and security, a lot of teachers and doctors, for instance, who are now bitterly disillusioned. I think their kids are experiencing their cynicism. As for 'permissiveness,' I don't see any problem with the thoughtful liberal or the thoughtful conservative, the person who has given thought to his principles and rationally decides where they're useful and where they're not. I think when people use ideology as a defence, for instance when they neglect their children and then fall back on liberal rationalizations, when they misapply the theoretical framework, that's when they get into trouble. Any studies that I've read have shown that if the parents are strong and committed and consistent and logical about their philosophical approach, the outcome is good, be they very liberal or for that matter, very conservative.

"Another complicating factor is that we're not yet out of the Me Decade where society as a whole has been encouraging people to explore their own consciousness. But people only have so much energy. And with the families I'm seeing—families with disturbed kids—most of the parents' energy has been directed towards themselves. So their kids are feeling more lonely and isolated than kids once did; they feel that those around them don't have the time to understand them."

There will be no fast answers. What took 15 years to shape will not dissolve overnight. But there is cause for some hope, however tenuous. And it lies in the consensus that there really are very few incorrigible kids, that often they do turn around at 18, and that most people, in the end, rarely turn out much differently from their parents.

Tom Elliott is sitting in the dishevelled living room of a recently purchased bungalow in downtown Toronto he and his wife Geri are trying to renovate. The Elliotts are busy these days, what with their renovation and their careers (he's a counsellor in the Toronto Board of Education's Early School Leaving Program; she's a professor of social work at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute) and the telephone that does not stop ringing. The calls are from frantic parents whose kids are coming off the wall and who are anxious to hear what the Elliotts' consulting service, training weekends, or 10-week night course offered through the Toronto Board of Education are all about. After gingerly negotiating a path for himself between bursting cartons and decorator rug samples, a broadly grinning Elliott proffers his business card: Toughlove Associates Home Improvement and Repair.

It is no joke. Last summer, the Elliotts imported to Canada a self-help movement for distraught parents of troublemaking teens that sprouted in a backwater Pennsylvania town five years ago and quickly grew to national proportions. Toughlove is a sort of homespun amalgam of good old-time discipline and current behaviorist thinking. Phrases like making kids "set a bottom line" and "take their medicine" get bandied about a lot. It is a no-nonsense approach to child-rearing that holds that kids do what they do because it feels good and not necessarily for all kinds of deep-seated motivations.

The Elliotts are interested not a whit in lengthy soul-searching explorations of who did what to whom and why. Tender loving care may be laudable, they agree, but the legions of walking wounded parents hobbling broken-heartedly to their door have sounded the death knell of a bleeding-heart approach that no longer works.

What will work is a hard-line insistence on changing behavior first and talking about it later. In a variation of the Alcoholics Anonymous theme, Toughlove parents seek out other converts in the neighborhood to help them get through the night they finally decide to throw the bum out. Parents are encouraged to hurl down their crutches and finally and forever to say no means no. And to stick it out—even if that means conquering their middleclass inhibitions about letting their kid languish in a jail cell. Elliott knows that Toughlove rather brazenly dismisses about 30 years' worth of fashionable child-raising dogma, but he's not worried. He used to believe in the touchy-feely approach too. As a school counsellor for 15 years, however, he's seen parents so terrorized by their youngsters that they pander to their manipulative behavior or become paralyzed into inertia. So, six years ago, Elliott started preaching Toughlove, long before the word ever became a movement. If he uses the phrase "mother, you're a schmuck" frequently, it's because he's seen too many otherwise reasonable parents victimized by muddled thinking when it comes to their kids, like the parents whose son smashed both cars in a joy ride. When they held back the first car until the second was repaired, the outraged boy climbed onto the roof of his house, threw a rather loud tantrum and so mortified his parents they caved in. Then he peeled off and smashed car number one. The Toughlove manual would call them "softies and suckers," and Elliott pities such people, door mats all, who can't bear to hurt their kids' feelings. Toughlove preaches the gospel

of consequences for actions. You do it. You pay for it. Says Elliott: "These kids are a lot like that kid in the old joke who kills both his parents and then throws himself on the mercy of the court because he's an orphan."

What impresses parents about Toughlove is that it helps. And these are, in many cases, parents who have paid a high financial and emotional price for help and have not received it. These are parents who desperately needed something to succeed.

It worked for 15-year-old Laura Mercer of Malton, whose busy little life since age 13 has included getting very glassy-eyed on whatever happened to be available and running away and stealing a van and breaking into a store where she took things that didn't belong to her. Her mother Karen discovered Toughlove last year, flipped through the manual and set to work. Nothing major. She just cut off Laura's allowance and insisted she earn it by doing chores around the house, and promised to bolt the door one night if her daughter checked out for a midnight fete. Shortly after Toughlove came to the Mercer home, Laura stopped causing her parents grief. Laura thinks the approach works a whole lot better than conventional therapy, which she underwent for a year, because Toughlove actually happens at home, with the family, every day. And very shortly after her mother toughened up, Laura confessed she actually sort of preferred the rules.

One happy ending does not a movement make. But Toughlove is indeed a movement, because variations of the Mercer story are reverberating in community centres and kitchens across the country. And though the testimonials sometimes sound amazing, the transformations too sudden, *that is often how the parents say it happens.*

More answers are needed—and needed soon. Ironically, this is a generation that profoundly lacks a sense of purpose, when courage and mettle will be desperately needed to interpret a future in which the centre no longer holds—a future rendered indecipherable by family breakdown, inflation, demographics and computer technology. Even a decade hence, it is not possible to predict what their lives will be like. True, their parents had maps that made more sense; true, they have less to go on. But while readying for tomorrow will be trickier for them than for those who have preceded them, no generation has started with more than they. Or brought less to the challenge. Of all the poignant moments shared with parents who opened up their lives for this story, and there were many, none was as unsettling as the moment the despondent mother of a 15-year-old drifter fixed her gaze on a point in the middle distance, sighed a tired sigh and wondered aloud: "Will she ever be a decent parent? I've got to face that." It's something we've all got to face.