

# STRAINED RELATIONS



*Help for Struggling Parents  
of Troubled Teens*

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M a r c i a   S t e i n

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# Strained Relations:

Help for Struggling Parents of Troubled Teens

Marcia Stein

I would like to extend my gratitude to the families who shared their time and stories and the professionals who provided insights into family dynamics.

Most of all, I appreciate my family and am thankful they believe in me and support this project. My love and thanks to Bill for encouraging me and being my partner in crime. I owe a special thank you to my dear Aunt Polly, the Editor.

This book is written with love and hope for all of our families.

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## Nothing Changes

“When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.

—MARK TWAIN

“Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers.”

—SOCRATES

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## Introduction

I have a son from my first marriage and we have a difficult relationship. As I spoke with friends and acquaintances, I learned that many other people had relationships that were troubled, some much worse than mine.

It was moving to know that these parents, good people who love their children and used to happily share information about them, were suddenly reluctant to talk about their kids and seemed isolated. The stories of friends and acquaintances included frightening instances of teens being taken to jail, parents worrying about estranged children, teens out of control and ruined relationships.

There are numerous books about parenting babies, but fewer good books about parenting teenagers. There isn't the smiling support of "Mommy and Me" classes for parents of teens.

I wondered: What was the difference between a normal teen rebellion and these out-of-control teens? Was it your own family history? Having dinner together at night? Was it due to divorce? Does adoption complicate matters? Are some of these kids diagnosed with different types of conditions? Does location make a difference? What are the best

parenting practices? How do you implement them with these different types of personalities? How do families pull through these situations, and how do parents cope? Where do you find help?

It was helpful to hear other people's stories, and to know that I was not alone. I decided to write a book about these relationships, and I interviewed and transcribed conversations with professionals.

I took notes when speaking with parents, and wrote their stories as narratives, changing any and all identifying information including names, children's ages and occupations. It was important to protect their privacy.

Some relationships do repair over time and become rich and rewarding. In some cases, parents and children are cordial, and friendly, but they're not close. In other cases, parents and children become and remain estranged. In either the case of a cordial outcome or estranged one, parents must learn how to cope. A friend told me her daily mantra: "Didn't cause it, can't control it, can't cure it."

Having a difficult relationship with your child is not an indicator that you are a bad person, and you're certainly not alone. There are resources and support for you and your family, some of which I have included in the Appendix.

If you or someone you know is in this situation, I hope these stories and resources will be helpful.

You are welcome to contact me at [mstein@ourhrsitesite.com](mailto:mstein@ourhrsitesite.com) or visit me on the web at [www.ourhrsitesite.com](http://www.ourhrsitesite.com). I'm just a click away.

—Marcia

## CHAPTER 1

# Estranged



**Cathy:** *We have that empty room.*

*Cathy and her husband, Robert, adopted a son at birth; she and her husband later divorced; she remarried, he did not. The family is estranged from twenty-year-old Josh, and Cathy writes about learning to accept and deal with this fact.*



Before I talk about our current situation, there is some important background information that I hope will show how much we wanted our child, how much we went through to get him, how devastated we are with our current situation.

Robert and I wanted to have a family and tried for several years, having miscarriages and going through embarrassing fertility tests and sometimes difficult and expensive procedures.



When you're trying to have a baby and nothing is working, it hurts when people laugh it off and say you should just relax. For some people, that doesn't work. I avoided going to malls on rainy days when it seemed everyone in the world could have a baby but me. I never considered that some of those babies were probably fertility treatment babies or adopted.

Seven years of hoping and being devastated left us emotionally battered. At a certain point, I turned to Robert and said: "I want to adopt. I want to build a family. I want to be a mom, and it doesn't matter where the baby comes from. We have love to give and a home. We're stable, good people, and I do not want to deal with this infertility issue anymore."

We quickly learned that agencies felt we were too old. How can that be when they had kids who needed homes? It seems that parents' age is not an issue if you're interested in foster care or adopting an older child, but there is a premium on babies, with one hundred couples ready to adopt versus one baby waiting for a home.

We were in our mid-thirties when we started looking at open, independent adoption, and we went to an adoption attorney. An "open adoption" is when you meet the birth mother and sometimes the birth father and you can agree to let them into your life. You can have regular contact in person, letters once a year, or something in-between. It seemed like a good idea; we would be able to tell our child about his or her heritage, a little of the health history, and maybe help the birth mother endure such a difficult decision.

Finding a birth mother was not easy. In our state (it might be different now) you could advertise for a surrogate mother to carry your baby but you could not advertise to find someone already pregnant. We advertised in other states and endured a series of prank calls and flaky people, the occasional scam artists who wanted money up front.

If you adopt like we did, you're responsible for paying for the medical expenses, pregnancy clothes, missed work, and things like that, but you can't technically pay for the baby. You also pay the birth mother's lawyer's fees if she has an attorney, which is highly recommended so she doesn't claim duress later.

The birth mother called us from another state and we flew to meet her and her mother. She was twenty-two, impulsive, had spent time in drug rehab once and had no idea who the birth father was. She'd had a wild life.

We traveled there for the birth and because she was not insured we paid for her C-section and five days in the hospital. I kept track of the costs, as my husband went crazy over the expenses, it was over \$22,000 for this adoption in 1988.

Josh was beautiful and because I had avoided babies for such a long time, each thing he did was interesting and adorable. I joined Mommy and Me classes so we could learn songs and games, and so he could meet others from a young age and grow as friends. I also wanted all the parenting information I could find. I didn't know what to expect from a boy.

He was restless, didn't sleep well, had a temper, didn't digest food well and always dribbled and dripped leaving

a constant mess down the front of his shirt. He was also smart and fun with lots of energy. I thought it was all normal, just being a boy and having that temperament, and I didn't have anyone to compare him to. The kids I saw at the baby classes each had a unique temperament and some were similar to Josh. I asked the doctor about it but he seemed to feel all was normal. I asked the teacher and she said to keep an eye on his temper and if it increased maybe there was something we should check out or look for a different doctor.

When he was six, my husband and I separated. I don't want to go into specifics about why we separated, but it seemed to be the best thing for Josh and for me. Robert had joint custody and saw Josh regularly.

A couple years later, I met a wonderful man. Lev and I married when Josh was ten. He loved Josh and tried to form a relationship with him by taking him to the park, doing activities, and showing him things in the workshop.

We started to see patterns at school where, although it was noted he was very bright, he was failing subjects, not doing homework, lying about work to us and his teachers. The principal suggested we have him tested for ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). We took him to a specialist and we also followed the school procedure of evaluation. Josh was diagnosed with ADHD which meant that his brain wouldn't let him pay attention for long periods.

It's odd that he and other ADHD kids can play video games for long hours at a stretch, but pay attention in

school? No way! We did not want to give him any medicine, but when he turned ten, he started taking Ritalin. It's speed in people with normal body chemistry, but if you have ADHD, it calms the brain and enables your concentration skills. The first day he took it we saw a difference at home. Suddenly he was cooperative and pleasant, it calmed his impatience and temper, and he told me he could enjoy reading. I had read to him at night and he loved it, but now he could read and enjoy it himself. It was like a miracle.

Around this time I heard from Josh's birth mother, and she told me she had actually been in and out of rehab twice before his birth and several more times afterward. She also said she was diagnosed as having ADHD and recently started taking medicine. That was why she had called, to let us know to watch for this as it might run in families.

Because Josh knew about the adoption from an early age, we had a series of discussions about his birth mother and her circumstances. We also talked about her addictions and how that might be genetic, that drinking and drugs might be doubly dangerous and addictive for him.

He had more trouble over the years with lying, stealing, refusing to take his medicine and then failing classes. Starting in seventh grade we learned he was drinking. He had a huge temper and no one could reach him. All he wanted was for us to leave him alone.

If he got in trouble at our house it didn't matter at his dad's house. He then knew that all he had to do was to cause havoc at home on a Friday and he'd still play computer

# Quick Order or Request Form

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# Do You Have A Troubled Relationship With Your Teen?

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Every day, thousands of parents face the fear and frustration that comes from dealing with a troubled teen. Good, loving parents facing the hardest questions of their lives... Is their child experiencing normal teen-age rebellion? Are the temper-tantrums and challenges at school a sign of bigger problems? How do they stop their child's downward spiral? What are they supposed to do next?

Marcia Stein offers an array of powerful and comforting insights from coaches, therapists, experts and parents who have been there. *Strained Relations* offers tools and resources for struggling parents of troubled teens. Find answers and draw strength from professionals on the front lines and stories from the mothers and fathers who got through it.

**Marcia Stein, PHR**, owns a human resources consulting practice and is the founder of the Silicon Valley Women in Human Resources and Friends group, a large networking, mentoring and educational group for professional women. Marcia was inspired to write *Strained Relations* after living through a challenging time with her own son. She lives and works in the Silicon Valley. [www.ourhrsite.com](http://www.ourhrsite.com)



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