

## **WHEN PARENTS HAVE PROBLEMS**



### The Runaway

Once when the snow of the year was beginning to fall,  
We stopped by a mountain pasture to say, "Whose colt?"  
A little Morgan had one forefoot on the wall,  
The other curled at his breast. He dipped his head  
And snorted at us. And then he had to bolt.  
We heard the miniature thunder where he fled,  
And we saw him, or thought we saw him, dim and grey,  
Like a shadow against the curtain of falling flakes.  
"I think the little fellow's afraid of the snow.  
He isn't winter-broken. It isn't play  
With the little fellow at all. He's running away.  
I doubt if even his mother could tell him, 'Sakes,  
It's only weather.' He'd think she didn't know  
Where is his mother? He can't be out alone!"  
And now he comes again with the clatter of stone  
And mounts the wall again with whited eyes  
And all his tail that isn't hair up straight.  
He shudders his coat as if to throw off flies.  
"Whoever it is that leaves him out so late,  
When other creatures have gone to stall and bin,  
Ought to be told to come and take him in."

ROBERT FROST

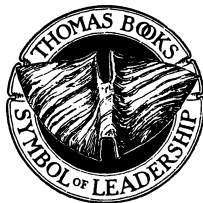
**Second Edition**

# **WHEN PARENTS HAVE PROBLEMS**

**A Book for Teens and Older Children  
Who Have a Disturbed or Difficult Parent**

*By*

**SUSAN B. MILLER, PH.D.**



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*In memory of my aunt, Rose M. Wovell*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Susan B. Miller** is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She works with young people and adults in psychotherapy and also spends time writing fiction and non-fiction. She is the author of a novel, *Indigo Rose* (Bantam Dell, 2004) and three books on psychology: *The Shame Experience* (The Analytic Press, 1985), *Shame in Context* (The Analytic Press, 1996) and *Disgust: The Gatekeeper Emotion* (The Analytic Press, 2004). Favorite pastimes include natural areas stewardship and time spent with kids and animals.

## PREFACE

In writing the second edition of this book, I have made changes throughout in order to update and to refine my ideas. I have also added two chapters. The first addresses parents who have difficult personalities. These parents are not openly abusive or obviously neglectful to their kids, but they present them with many challenges. In this new chapter, I talk about over-protective parents, parents who are perfectionists, and immature parents. Other examples of parents with difficult personalities could have been given. Some readers will supply their own. The second new chapter addresses parents in poverty. Some families are poor by any standard, and some are poor in relation to their community. Either type of poverty is difficult for a child. The problems of poverty may be different for a teenager than for a younger child. I look at a range of challenges associated with poverty.

Many books have been written for adults who grew up coping with troubled parents. Often the adults who read these books say, “I wish someone had told me that when I was a kid. It might have helped me so much.” Unfortunately, not much has been written for the kids who are coping *in the present* with difficult or troubled parents. In part, that’s because kids may be hesitant to read books about tough subjects, so publishers hesitate to invest money in publishing them. It’s also because kids sometimes get their books from parents and troubled parents seldom recognize their own problems or encourage their kids to read books about living with those problems.

It’s also true that kids with troubled parents sometimes feel funny about recognizing their parents’ shortcomings. They may feel even more uncomfortable about bringing home a book that talks about troubled mothers and fathers, or keeping a book like that in a school locker. Some kids or teens would feel guilty or disloyal reading such a book, even though it’s a smart, sensible thing to do and it isn’t something that will hurt their parents. So there are lots of reasons few books have been written for young people who have parents who are ill, are alcoholic, are abusive, or are troubled in some other way.

There are also some very good reasons to write such a book and to encourage young people to read it. Difficult childhoods often lead to unneces-

sary pain and struggle later in life. This book is written with the idea that intelligent kids can use sound ideas to improve their lives, either on their own or with the help of healthy adults. In this book, I try to offer help in sorting out whether a difficult situation may be a result of a parent's problems.

The idea isn't to belittle or undermine your parents or to blame them for things that are your responsibility. The idea is to be realistic about the sources of a problem and, if a parent's difficulties is one of those sources, to help you deal better with your situation. I try to give you an idea of the kinds of problems or challenges your parent's troubles can cause for you. I also give you ideas on how to deal constructively with your parent's problems so that you can keep on track with your own growing up.

You may agree with some of my ideas and disagree with others. Some you'll find useful and others may not be of value to you or relevant to your situation. But I hope reading the book and considering the ideas will help you take some steps along a road worth traveling.

S.B.M.



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Many people were helpful to me during the writing of this book. I would especially like to thank my father for the support he has given me for my writing, over many years, even when little success was coming my way. My thanks also to my sisters, Lisa Sablosky and Laura Eligator, who are my constants. My aunt, Rose M. Wovell, has died since the publication of the first edition. She was a special source of love and wisdom, and a person of courage to whom this book is dedicated. I am also grateful for the support and editorial help of friends during the writing of the second edition of this book. Those friends include but are not limited to Judy Gray, Julia Davies, Nancy and Irv Leon, Lois Dowling, Rose Diliscia-Everett, and Judith Saltzman.

The idea for this book came from my work with a bright young woman who was finding it hard to make sense of her life with a troubled parent. As I began to think about writing this book, many other young and older people came into my thoughts, all of whom had told me their stories of growing up. My thanks to them for sharing portions of their lives with me. Finally, my thanks to Charles C Thomas Publisher, for their willingness to publish this book on a difficult topic and their responsiveness throughout the process.



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## **WHEN PARENTS HAVE PROBLEMS**







## Chapter 1

### GETTING STARTED

I've written this book for kids whose parents have problems. Of course, all parents at times have problems, but some parents have problems that are serious and lasting, which makes them poor parents a lot of the time. This book is especially for kids whose parents have major, lasting problems. If you are one of these kids—whether a younger child, a teenager, or even a young adult—you have special challenges in growing up since your parents often are unable to help you; sometimes they stand smack in your way. I've tried to write this book in plain language so it will be within reach of kids not older than ten or eleven, but the ideas presented hold true for people of all ages.

Troubled parents are not all the same. Some parents are abusive or neglectful; their kids may find them cruel or uncaring. Some parents suffer a great deal because of a mental illness or a painful loss or a difficult set of experiences they've not been able to overcome; their children may pity them and feel helpless about their suffering. Other parents have dangerous habits such as drug or alcohol abuse, shoplifting or gambling; or they do distressing things such as carrying on extra-marital affairs. You wish they'd stop what they're doing, but they don't, no matter how much they hurt the people around them. Though troubled parents come in many forms, they present some shared challenges and difficulties for their children.

You may be wondering why you should read a book like this. Thinking about parents' problems isn't pleasant. Many kids work hard to believe their parents have no serious problems, even when the evidence points in the other direction. You may love your parents very much, or want to love them, and feel it's not right to think of them as

troubled. But, unless you're an ostrich, it's best not to stick your head in the sand. Seeing what's true—even if that truth isn't pretty—helps you to cope better with the real situation you're in. Seeing an unpleasant truth is never a reason to feel guilty. Recognizing what's there doesn't make you disloyal or unkind; it doesn't mean you're trying to hurt or shame your parent. You're not creating the problem; you're just seeing it, which is better than closing your eyes and your mind.

Another approach kids may take to their parents' problems is to try to live as if their parents mean nothing at all to them and as if they need no parents. That's an understandable strategy if your parent causes you pain and difficulty, but it has its limitations. All kids need parenting. Nature made us that way. We grow up gradually, over many years, and we need a great deal of help along the way.

Depending on the particular parent you have, some parts of this book may be more meaningful to you than others. For example, if you have an overanxious parent who is generally kind and attentive, the part of the book about mistreatment may not speak to you as much as other parts will. If you have an abusive parent who terrorizes you or your brothers or sisters, the parts of the book about feeling sad about your parent's suffering may not be what you need, since you may feel much more angry than sad. On the other hand, some kids with abusive parents do feel sad for their parents, and also angry. If some of the sections don't seem to apply to you, you can skip them or you may want to read them anyway. Maybe they'll help you better understand a friend.

You might wonder why I got interested in writing this book. One reason is that I am a psychologist and my work has given me many opportunities to see how often kids with troubled parents can make good use of a little advice and a little support. I'd like to offer those things to more kids through this book. A second reason is that I myself was one of the many kids who grew up having to cope with a troubled parent. I know how confusing it can be and how much a young person can use some help sorting things out. Kids with troubled parents have strengths they can use to cope with their situation. I'm hoping this book can help you make fuller use of your strengths.

I want to say a bit more about the particular kinds of problems parents can have. Sometimes a parent's problems show up most clearly as behaviors a child wishes the parent would stop, but the parent doesn't stop. For example, your mother drinks too much and gets nasty or sex-

ually inappropriate when she's drinking. Or your father gambles and wastes the family's money so there's not enough for rent, school expenses or good food. Or maybe your father or mother has affairs, making for lots of tension between the two adults on whom you rely. Often they seem to hate each other and you may wish (but fear) that they would just divorce. Or your mother uses drugs and may be spaced-out or doing irresponsible, frightening things like feeding your baby sister food that's not good for her or driving recklessly; maybe she gets arrested or she makes you angry by lying in bed all day.

Parents' problems can come in other forms as well. Some parents are always unhappy and they complain to their children about how miserable they are. Kids worry that their mother or father might go on feeling sad forever or might commit suicide. Some parents feel very anxious and jittery, or they can't go out of the house without getting panicky. And some parents have a mental illness so they can't function at all normally; they have odd experiences, like hallucinations, that their kids don't understand; or they talk a mile a minute about crazy-sounding things and stay up all night; or they're convinced against all reason that the neighbors are trying to poison them. A mentally ill parent may have too much on his mind or too much wrong with his mind to take care of you. He may neglect you entirely, or confuse your needs with his own or your brother's, or he may attend to you but give you bad advice that's due to his mixed-up thinking. For example, a paranoid parent may tell you to wear a disguise if you have to go to the neighbor's to borrow the lawn mower, or to watch out for the woman that lives in the green house because she's trying to kill your family or to listen in on your thoughts. Or a manic parent may insist you go out shopping with him at four in the morning. Or he might want to spend hours showing you sexy pictures on the Internet and think that's incredibly funny and fun but then snap at you if you're not amused.

Some troubled parents have no obvious illness, but yet something is something wrong with them. They may get along poorly with other adults. Maybe your mother gets into arguments and is rude to people so that you feel nervous and embarrassed when you're out in public with her. She may blow up at a waitress over some tiny thing or insult your schoolteacher. Some parents show their problems by being over-critical of others. They may get down on everyone around them; or they may pick one child or adult on whom to harp, for no good rea-