

How to  
Connect with  
Your <sup>Troubled</sup> Adult  
Children

ALLISON BOTTKE



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## **How to Connect with Your Troubled Adult Children**

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*Mom*

Who taught me compassion and character by example.

*Christopher*

No matter what, I will always love you, my precious son.

*Lori Jo Eleazer*

A living, breathing blessing from God.

*Parents and Grandparents*

The reason I write about broken hearts and lost dreams.

You will always be the wind beneath my wings.

Your faith, hope, and trust in God is what empowers and  
strengthens me.

Never forget...

*“With God all things are possible.”*

Matthew 19:26

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## This Isn't How Life Is Supposed to Be



**I**t may sound silly, but I can't tell you how many times over the years I've stood in front of a card rack trying—and failing—to find an appropriate card for my son.

You see, we live in a world where mass marketing rules the consumer landscape, so we are showered with Hallmark-moment images and words that determine how, when, and why we should convey our affection for people we love. There is, however, no card on the rack for those of us who have seriously troubled adult children whose dangerous choices and traumatic, sometimes toxic lives have turned our own upside down.

For these kids, there isn't a greeting card that works. Ever. The effusive words of pride, appreciation, and love just don't fit. On any occasion. Happy Birthday...to a son who has so many felony charges on his record that he will never be able to find a job, get a driver's license, or even vote—and blames everyone but himself? Merry Christmas...to a daughter whose drug addiction has cost her not only her marriage but the custody of her children as well? What card speaks of how you feel about a child whose legal troubles have cost you all your savings and most likely your retirement too?

It's been years since I've been able to buy a preprinted card for my

son. So I've resorted to sending humorous cards, or I buy the ones with blank interiors and write something as appropriate as possible, all the while aching inside because what I really long to do is buy the sweet, sappy, sentimental cards that a mom should be able to buy for her child. You know, the ones that say, *I'm so incredibly proud of you* and *You're the child every parent dreams of*.

I can't say those things—and sometimes I hate myself for feeling that way.

This isn't how life is supposed to be.

### How Did We Get Here?

It doesn't matter how long ago it was, a mother always remembers the day every one of her children is born. The same can be said for many fathers. Childbirth truly is an experience unlike any other, making the relationship between parent and child one of indescribable connection and profound possibility.

As a teenage mom, though, I had struggles with my own issues and demons, but when the delivery room nurse placed that tiny bundle in my arms, I was immediately connected to my son in a way I had never imagined possible. As the days, months, and years passed, what I wanted most was for my sweet boy to know how much I loved him and that I would always be there for him. I worked hard, played hard, and, through it all, provided everything I thought my son wanted or needed—including rescuing him whenever trouble called. After all, wasn't that my job as his mom?

Sadly, my own personal issues—including painful memories from a traumatic past—often drove me to make unhealthy parenting choices. Time after time, thinking I was helping, I bailed my son out of difficult situations, derailing many life lessons he might have learned from the natural consequences of his actions.

God has plans for all of us, and some of those plans involve pain. Pain we need to experience to learn the spiritual growth lessons God wants to teach us.

It took years before I understood that I was playing God every time I swooped in to rescue my son and, in essence, accept responsibility for

his choices. I wasn't helping Chris at all. I was merely enabling him to continue his increasingly inappropriate behavior without having to deal with any consequences. I didn't quickly make the connection that painful life experiences help to shape our character. And I certainly didn't realize that all my unhealthy rescuing was being fueled and motivated by a spiritual emptiness in my own heart.

By the time I realized how I had contributed to our dysfunctional parent/child relationship, my only child was in his thirties, already in and out of jail numerous times, and deeply in bondage to an IV heroin addiction.

I know many of you have similar stories—some less challenging, others far worse—and my heart breaks for each of you.

We are all doing the best we can. But I think with a shift in our perspective, our best can become better.

### **Hard Life Lessons**

My personal faith journey started late in life: I was 35. Since then, I've tried to do my best to view life and the lessons it teaches through a lens of faith in God. Yet there is one lesson I've been hard-pressed to learn despite the many opportunities God has given me.

This lesson I very much wanted to learn—and still want to master—is how to connect with my troubled adult son in a healthy way that is more helpful than hurtful, more empowering than enabling. In a way that will help him to see that he needs to make better choices—before it's too late.

The thing is, I did everything I knew how to do, and I know you did too. We have all tried to be really good parents, but the way our children have changed and the things they've done have left us shocked, embarrassed, angry, guilty, hopeless, and feeling so alone.

We cry out to God, but sometimes it's hard to hear His voice.

### **A Painful Reality**

So let me share a lesson I *have* learned: It's impossible to move forward if we're tethered to something that's holding us back.

Many of us, for instance, are hanging on to what could have been.

We had so many dreams for our young children; we saw their incredible potential.

But as they grew up, something went wrong. In many cases, horribly wrong.

What happened to our kids?

Pain happened, and it came in many ways, from many sources, in a variety of settings. Then sin happened as our children desperately attempted to relieve the pain. And, finally, drugs happened. Alcohol happened. Emotional instability and mental illness happened. Incarceration happened. Traumatic situations and circumstances happened. Drama, chaos, and crisis happened. And sometimes, character void of conscience happened.

Layer by layer, our kids were being buried—along with our hopes and dreams for them.

The painful reality is that the children we once knew are gone. Much like a tornado that touches down, roars forward, and tears up everything in its path, many of our troubled adult children have left a wide path of damage and destruction in their wake. We've been reacting to their poor choices for so long that we've run out of patience, compassion, money, and faith that they will ever change. We will always love them, but as things stand now, we don't like them very much.

If we want to learn how to connect with our troubled adult children, we must let go of our old dreams for them and our unreasonable expectations. We can't go back and re-parent all over again, hoping for a different outcome. Instead, we must find a way to push through the pain and go forward. It's time to change our perspective on our lives and adjust our expectations as we formulate an honest appraisal of both who our adult children are today and of their ability to live independently in the future.

Most important, we need to understand what role God is calling us to have in their troubled lives.

## **White Flags**

One distressed parent of a bipolar daughter—who refused to take medication and disrupted the lives of everyone she came in contact with—said to me, “Allison, I'm ready to wave a white flag of surrender.



I can't take this anymore. It's killing me. This isn't how life is supposed to be!"

She's right. God didn't intend for us to live this way. That's why it's time for us to take a new approach, to change the lens through which we view the connection we have—or don't have—with our troubled adult child. There does come a time when we need to surrender—to stop, step back, and reassess the entire situation. A time when seeking professional advice and wise counsel may be needed. A time to chart a new course and develop a different plan of action. And a time to prayerfully consider what God wants our parenting role to look like now and in the future.

Parents, the time is now! It is time for us to willingly surrender and release our children—even if we feel as if we've done this again and again through the years—so that God can do in their hearts and lives what He does best: rescue and redeem. And please hear me when I say this: To surrender does not mean you've given up. When you reach this point and realize what you're doing isn't working, the important truth to remember is that God will never stop working.

Perhaps He's just been waiting for you—and me—to get out of the way.

### **A Mother's Fear**

With dinner finished and the dishes done, Brenda was tired. She desperately wanted to get off her feet after what had been a long day. She worked part-time through a local temp agency, and while most of the assignments she took were secretarial, last week and this one were different. She was up at 4:00 a.m. to make a 5:00 a.m.-to-noon shift at a potato chip factory in Minneapolis.

"It's a two-week assignment," her supervisor said. "Are you interested?"

"Absolutely!" Brenda said without hesitation. The pay was unusually good, and she needed the extra money to help her daughter. However, standing on her feet every day for eight hours in front of a conveyor belt was harder than Brenda anticipated.

*Lord, I'm feeling every one of my 55 years this week. Please help me get through this.*

Brenda felt a tightness in her lower back as she bent over to pick up the toys scattered around the living room. “Girls, please help Grandma clean up before your mommy gets here!”

At five and six, her granddaughters were definitely old enough to pick up after themselves, but Brenda was finding it increasingly difficult to enforce rules at her home that the girls weren’t required to follow in their own. Her daughter, Carla, had a hard time taking care of herself, let alone two active youngsters, and the only structure the girls had was here at Grandma’s house.

Life had always been hard for Carla. Painfully shy and insecure as a child, she had also struggled with depression. Even early on Brenda felt certain Carla had other emotional and mental health issues as well. When Carla started acting out as a teenager, Brenda first suspected drugs were the reason, but now she wasn’t sure. Although she didn’t have proof, Brenda suspected the volatile mood swings and periods of deep sadness were quite possibly bipolar episodes. For years, Brenda begged Carla to see a doctor and get help, even offering to pay for both the visit and any medication that was prescribed.

“Don’t be silly! I’m fine,” Carla used to laugh. Now, any mention of her suspicions to Carla caused such rage and anger that Brenda was afraid to say anything. So she did what she could to keep things on an even keel, fervently praying that God would open her daughter’s eyes to the bad decisions she was making and the ominous trajectory of her life.

In addition to her role as prayer warrior, Brenda was her daughter’s go-to babysitter. The girls had been coming to Grandma’s house for years, and their visits ranged from overnight stays to weekends. The last time Carla was in rehab, though, the two girls spent the entire summer with Brenda. Then there was the time that Brenda hated to think about: Carla was in jail for six months, and the girls shuffled between Brenda’s house and the homes of relatives on their father’s side.

A side note: Five-year-old Tiffany and six-year-old Brittany had different fathers. One was sporadically in the picture, and the other was serving a 15-year sentence in a federal correctional facility in Arizona. Carla was never married to either man.

Things, however, were looking up for Carla and the girls since she completed beauty school and recently got a job at a high-end salon in the nearby Mall of America. Brenda was excited and hopeful that this new job might be just what Carla needed to turn her life around.

“Grandma, Tiffany pulled my hair!” Brittany shouted.

“Liar! I did not. *You* pulled *my* hair!” Tiffany shouted back.

“Girls, please! Stop it right now and get your backpacks ready. Your mom will be here any minute!” *Dear Jesus, You know I love these babies, but I just don't have the energy or patience I used to have...* Brenda silently prayed.

She had agreed to pick the girls up from school that day and keep them until 7:00 p.m. because the salon was sending Carla to a training program.

“Where's Mommy?” Tiffany whined. *Good question*, Brenda thought. Her exhaustion was now being overshadowed by a growing headache... when her phone rang.

“Hi, Mom. Sorry I'm late. Tell the girls I'll be there in a half hour. I got tied up.”

*A half hour? It was already after eight, and the girls had school in the morning.* Brenda herself had to be up in a few hours.

“Carla, you said you'd be here at 7:00...”

“I know that, Mother, but I said, I got tied up! I'll be there as soon as I can, and I've got good news! Bye!”

*Good news...* Brenda hoped it was something work related, but the high-pitched tone and rapid-fire staccato of her daughter's words sent red flags flying.

When Carla finally walked in at 9:30 with a young man whom Brenda had never met, the evening quickly went even farther downhill. Carla was high or drunk or maybe both. Brenda couldn't tell, but she was afraid for her daughter and hated for the girls to see their mother like this.

“Mom, this is Ben. We've been dating for quite some time, and we've got some good news...”

“Quite some time” turned out to be less than three months, and there was nothing whatsoever good about the news Carla shared.

Brenda listened quietly as her daughter announced how “crazy in love” she and Ben were and that they planned to marry when he got a job, which he planned to do the very next month—as soon as he was officially off parole.

Brenda was speechless as Carla, clearly in an increasingly manic state, rambled on while Ben stood by nodding in agreement, like one of those bobblehead dolls.

The girls had just been drifting off to sleep when Carla arrived, and Brenda could see their groggy confusion being slowly replaced by fear as their mother continued her high-energy proclamation of undying love for this stranger standing nearby. Appalled by the scene unfolding right in front of her, Brenda watched Carla grab Ben’s hand and practically drag him over toward her daughters, who instinctively backed away as she introduced him.

“Don’t be afraid, sweeties!” Carla said as she knelt in front of them and grabbed their little hands. “You’re going to love Daddy-Ben! We’re all going to have so much fun!”

“And guess what else, girls? You’re not just getting a new daddy. You’re also getting a new baby brother or sister too! Isn’t it just wonderful!”

Carla’s euphoric announcement left Brenda speechless.

*A third child, a third father—and who was this man anyway? What was Carla thinking?*

Clearly, she wasn’t. As Brenda watched her daughter gather up the girls and their backpacks and head out the door, she didn’t see the point in correcting Carla’s assessment that the tears streaming down her mother’s cheeks were from joy. They were tears of utter despair.

Today, Brenda has legal custody of Tiffany and Brittany, and their baby sister, Grace, is being raised by Ben and his parents in Arkansas. Sadly, shortly after Carla gave birth to Grace, she overdosed on a lethal combination of heroin, fentanyl, and oxycodone. She was 27 years old. Brenda does her best to tell the girls good stories about their mother—pleasant stories from the times before her daughter changed, before substance abuse and mental illness turned her into a stranger.

“This isn’t how I pictured my life,” Brenda says. “I try not to think about what I should have done differently to help Carla. I just don’t

know how all of this happened...how we got here. I prayed for her all the time...What did I do wrong?"

While it's important to learn from our past, it's equally important that we don't get caught up in the guilt, anger, and self-blame that often accompanies those explorations. Most of us parented the best we could in the moment with the information we had at the time.

It's time to get better information.

## **A Hard Truth**

When emotional and/or mental illness is part of a troubled adult child's life, we parents find it hard to know when to speak up and when to shut up. We walk a fine line as we try to determine how and when to broach subjects that need to be discussed. We are too aware that among the possible outcomes are emotional meltdowns, histrionic tantrums, and even psychotic breakdowns. Furthermore, if we have children with anger issues and character disorders, there's always the possibility of violence. The fact that some of our kids frighten us is a hard truth to admit.

Despite all the bizarre behavior and all the warning signs, there's another hard truth many well-intentioned parents have been trying to diminish or, in some cases, even deny. That truth is, these aren't just out-of-control, rebellious kids. The issue is no longer a strong-willed, button-pushing child who wants to see how far he or she can go. The truth is, many of the adult children we are desperately trying to "help" are suffering from mental and emotional illnesses that often go undiagnosed and/or untreated or—because of the stigma still attached to these labels—are frequently ignored.

Our *challenging* adult children have become *troubled* adult children, and they are fighting depression, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorders, anxiety disorders, PTSD, and schizophrenia, to name a few. Many have been in and out of jail or prison more than once, and the ramifications of both incarceration and a criminal record have seriously impacted their ability to reintegrate into society. Let's not forget those adult children who have serious anger and denial issues, some of whom are antisocial to a psychotic and dangerous degree. Angry, bitter,

and aimless, many of our adult children cannot hold jobs, and quite often their financial struggles lead to disastrous choices.

Others have been so damaged by life that they want only to end theirs. In desperation and despair, some have frequently threatened and even attempted suicide; sadly, many have succeeded.

Clearly, the consequences of the choices our troubled adult children are making have been ratcheted up through the years.

### **A Frightening Fact**

Yet another malevolent influence threatens the lives of those we love: Countless adult children are caught up in our country's devastating epidemic of drug addiction.

Heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, opioids, and "club drugs" have turned our children into strangers. They will do almost anything for that next high—that next fix—and nothing we say or do can break through the drugs' demonic hold on our kids.

We live in a world entirely different from the one in which most of us grew up. Today, parents around the country are barely hanging on to their sanity as they struggle to effectively help adult children who are dealing with serious, life-threatening issues due at least in part to the drug-abuse scourge bringing death and destruction to cities and towns across the country.

Unless you live on a tiny desert island off the coast of some faraway land, it's a sure bet that you know someone sucked into the quicksand of an opioid drug addiction either as a user or a seller. And it's frightening to think that more than 175 Americans *will die today* of drug overdoses.<sup>1</sup> And consider these numbers:

Drug overdose is now the leading cause of death for Americans younger than 50. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that more than 64,000 Americans lost their lives to a drug overdose in 2016, including 15,446 heroin overdoses. The total is more than 20 times the number of Americans killed on 9/11.<sup>2</sup>

As we go to press, America's opioid epidemic is on track to claim 1

million lives by 2020,<sup>3</sup> with the president of the United States declaring it a “national crisis.”

Of course, this combination of substance abuse, emotional and mental illnesses, and character disorders clouds our adult children’s judgment—and guilt, fear, anger, unreasonable expectations, and frightening consequences cloud our own.

And if all these facts aren’t enough to send us parents into rescue mode time and again, we can’t forget that many of these struggling adults are responsible for the care and safety of their own children, of our grandchildren. Is it any wonder we feel the weight of responsibility on our shoulders and in our hearts? Is it any wonder we repeatedly come to our children’s rescue? Is it any wonder we cry out to God, “Please help my child!”

How did we—and how did our kids—get to this point? What went wrong? We are hardworking, honest, God-fearing Christians who have always tried to do the right thing, the best thing, the most helpful thing for the children God entrusted to our care.

This isn’t how life is supposed to be.

## **What Can We Do?**

Our adult children, some of whom are seriously troubled, need professional help. But, sadly, we don’t know how to make that happen—or we may be in denial about how serious their situation is. So we pay their bills, cater to their needs, bail them out, make excuses for them, and do everything possible to “help” them.

However, please hear me when I say this: *Our actions are not helping!*

The time has come for us to develop a different strategy for battle, to deploy a new arsenal of weapons, and to change our vantage point and therefore how we view not only our adult children but also our role in the relationship. We can restructure our thinking, learn effective strategies, shift our perspective, and begin to view our adult children, their challenging situations, and our responses to them in new ways—ways that just might make a difference in their lives. And in ours.

Are you ready to try?

*“But, Allison, if you had any idea how hard we’ve tried...how many*

*chances we've given our child...If you only knew what life has been like for years...*"

Well, folks, I do. I do know what it's like.

### **A Mother's Journey**

When I wrote *Setting Boundaries with Your Adult Children*, my only child was serving a seven-year sentence in federal prison, of which he served five years. A great deal has happened in the years since.

While my son's heroin addiction is a thing of the past, years of IV drug abuse have affected his circulation, and a very serious motorcycle accident left him with metal pins and plates in his body. Add an unsuccessful back surgery to the equation, and he is in constant, chronic pain. Sadly, heroin has been replaced by a combination of prescription pain pills, opioids, and street drugs. Yes, addiction again.

My son has been in and out of jail and prison several times since, and the years have not been kind to him. PTSD plagues him as a result of years of substance abuse, street living, and incarceration. Sadly, painful memories of his past often bleed into his present, and separating the two is sometimes hard for him. He isolates himself from those who could truly help, and periods of depression and distorted thinking drive him deeper into the euphoric escape of drugs and criminal activity.

Like many of our troubled kids, he has above-average language skills and can masterfully manipulate a conversation—yet his social skills, decision-making ability, and coping mechanisms are below average. He is a grown man who struggles every day to survive, and my heart aches for him. After all these years, I still want him to find his purpose and live the life God has planned for him.

Yet it seems I want this for him more than he wants it for himself. And so, like many parents, I've had to learn how to let go—to love my son with open arms and trust that God is in control. I'm certainly not.

Thousands of parents have reached out to me for help over the years—generous, loving, caring, and often hopeless parents. Grasping at straws yet fearful of the truth and its consequences, they are desperate to know what to do. Many lack the resources—financial and emotional—or the



knowledge of what to do. They feel alone, yet statistics prove that is not the case. There are so many of us brokenhearted parents of broken kids.

### **Next Steps**

But when we put our hope in God, we will never be disappointed. Hope is always based on the guaranteed promises of God, and hope is something we can give to our struggling adult children. After all, “[God] helps us [parents] in all our troubles, so that we are able to help others [our adult children] who have all kinds of troubles, using the same help that we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4 GNT).

Hope and healing can miraculously replace fear and pain when we make the transition from “This isn’t how life is supposed to be” to “This is how life is. Now what does God want me to learn and do?” This transition starts when we can begin to see our troubled adult children for who they really are rather than who we *wish* they were.

For many of us, this shift in perspective is going to require genuine fortitude as we revisit some of the painful situations and circumstances that have brought us to where we are today. It’s never easy to look at illnesses and issues that have caused considerable damage not only to the life of our children, but to our relationship with them as well.

Over the course of this book, we’re going to talk a great deal about the issues and illnesses impacting the lives of our troubled adult children. Realize, however, that despite all this discussion about our offspring, the journey we are about to take together is ultimately about *you* and *your choices*.

It’s a journey that will change your life.

And—God willing—the life of your troubled adult child.

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## **EFFECTIVE STRATEGY**

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As we get started, I’d like to encourage you to keep a notepad or journal as you read through this book. From time to time, I’ll suggest you jot something down for future reference. Don’t worry. Your notes

will be for your eyes only; you don't need to be a writer, and no one is going to grade your work.

When it comes to addressing the health and safety of our struggling children though, I've found that our emotions can sometimes get the best of us, and the physical exercise of writing can bring more clarity to our thoughts.