

Book Reviews

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Cottrell, B. (2004). When Teens Abuse Their Parents. Black Point: Fernwood Publishing.

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Barbara Cottrell's book, "When Teens Abuse Their Parents," is an analysis of parent abuse based on research conducted by Cottrell. Throughout the book, Cottrell attempts to make the reader aware of the dynamics of parent abuse while also offering suggestions on how to overcome it. In order to address the topic of parent abuse effectively, Cottrell has included interviews with mothers who have been abused by their teens. The interviews offer insight into the feelings of despair and helplessness that are common in situations of parent abuse. Cottrell also explores society's resistance to the idea of parent abuse, suggesting that our society tends to blame parents for teens who behave abusively. She also argues that society has an influence on teen behaviour, and that it is unfair to blame only the parents when there are clearly other factors that lead to abusive teens.

Cottrell defines parent abuse as "any act of a child that is intended to cause physical, psychological, or financial damage in order to gain control over a parent" (p. 16). Cottrell's definition encompasses the three main forms of abuse that parents experience, and she has included several interviews with parents who have suffered abuse at the hands of their teens. All of the parent interviews that Cottrell includes in the book are conducted with mothers. Their stories vary greatly in content, and the women come from different life situations. Some of the women are well educated and appear to live comfortable lives. Others come from extremely abusive backgrounds and have very little education. The women who were interviewed also display differences in marital status, including their history of romantic relationships. Some are

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in healthy relationships and have very supportive partners, while others are single or have a history of abusive partners. Though these women appear very different from one another, Cottrell notes that “there is no single or simple profile of an abused parent. However, they do have one thing in common. It is not their age or culture or income level or their ability to be good parents. It is their despair” (p. 57).

The parents’ despair is experienced in a variety of ways, and Cottrell explores these situations throughout the book. Cottrell believes that mothers have strong emotional bonds with their children, and that this could in fact lead to abuse in certain situations (p. 47). Many of the mothers were afraid of losing the love of their children, so they are often afraid to seek help when they are being abused. After long periods of abuse, all of the women interviewed have sought help in one form or another, such as talking with councilors, school officials, or police. For many of these women, however, Cottrell found that the process of seeking help often makes the situation worse. Service providers did not know how to help, or there were simply no protocols in place to deal with an abusive teen. Cottrell also found that many of the women would experience blame and guilt when dealing with professionals who were supposed to offer help in such situations. Cottrell believes that it is unfair to give all responsibility for the abuse on the parents, and that “to suggest that the victims are solely to blame for the abuse they suffer is a gross over-simplification” (p. 101). Instead of blaming only the parents for the abuse, Cottrell points to society as being responsible for the teen’s behaviour.

Family dynamics are only a part of a child’s development, and Cottrell states that “every individual is situated within a family that is situated within a social culture” (p. 88). Even though there is clearly more to a child’s development than family life, Cottrell believes that there is a tendency in our society to blame the parents exclusively when children are not behaving

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properly. Parents feel they have been given an “impossible mission” and that “the way our society has evolved has made parenting more difficult” (p. 91). Cottrell discusses the impact of the media and other social pressures on parenting, suggesting that the messages portrayed to teens have given them a sense of entitlement. Parents are not free to raise their children in ways that may seem appropriate to them, and Cottrell believes that this has led to a power-reversal in families, suggesting that “we have become a generation who put our energy into making teens comfortable instead of responsible” (pp. 96-97). Cottrell identifies societal customs as one of many possible causes, but she stresses that the causes are not what is important. She asserts that solutions need to be found for the parents who are suffering from the abuse, because simply pointing out who is to blame will not help these families to recover.

Cottrell’s book is extremely accessible and reader-friendly. The interviews included in the book are full of emotion and offer a variety of perspectives, and would be easy for abused mothers to relate to. Cottrell suggests that the information available on parent abuse is lacking, and that the topic needs to receive more attention. Cottrell states that this book is “the what, who, how, and why of parent abuse” (p. 3), and it truly does present a much needed exploration and explanation of the phenomenon.

Cottrell has clearly written this book for abused mothers. Nearly all of the stories are told from the perspective of the mother, and much of the content refers to women. This is not surprising because, as Cottrell states, “without exception, significantly more women than men identify as victims, and both partners usually agree that the mother is more severely abused” (p. 45). For women who are suffering in silence, this book could be the push they require to escape the despair and seek help. Abusive teens may also benefit from reading this book as it may help them realize that they are in fact abusers.

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Though this book is an invaluable resource to women who have struggled with parent abuse, it may not be as helpful to abused fathers. Granted, Cottrell does include some examples of father abuse, but they are very brief. Cottrell often utilizes the term ‘parents’ instead of ‘mothers’, but this is misleading because the majority of abuse discussed in the book is aimed at the mother even if the father is said to be present. When Cottrell does discuss fathers, it is often as a cause of the parent abuse. Cottrell does discuss why fathers are not generally the victims of abuse, with one example being that most men take relatively little or no part in parenting (p. 45). While this may be true, one has to wonder about the fathers who are single parents. They may be few and far between, but there must be cases of father abuse. Because Cottrell’s book offers little in regards to father abuse, a more appropriate title for the book may be “When Teens Abuse Their Mothers”.

Even though Cottrell’s book lacks an adequate analysis of father abuse, it is still an important and informative addition to the topic of parent abuse. Cottrell’s book discusses how service providers can improve their understanding of parent abuse, and anyone who deals with these types of situations on a professional level would benefit from reading it. Friends and family of an abused parent would also benefit from this book because it may allow them to offer assistance to the abused parent in a less judgmental way.