

# **Kids' Bad Decisions Do Not Mean We Are Bad Parents**

by Norma Bourland

I want to preface what I'm going to say with a couple of personal beliefs, so you know where I'm coming from. First of all, I believe God is present here this afternoon. I believe God is present in each of us. I also believe that each one of us is irreplaceably unique. We each have our own feelings and sensibilities, our own understandings and experiences, our own needs and dreams and no one can replace us. This is important because I want you to know I don't speak to you today because I assume my experiences or insights or perceptions are the same as yours or should be. I share only hoping there will be something from my life that will help you see yours more clearly. And something from me that will relate to you and give you hope in the midst of your pain. Because we are each one irreplaceably unique, there is no need to try to impress one another or no need to feel inferior. We come together to share a common disappointment and challenge. I give each one of you permission to relax and take whatever you need from this time. I also give each one of you my love.

My topic is "My Kids' Bad Decisions Don't Mean I'm A Bad Parent." I'm certainly not an expert on kids and how and why they make the decisions they do. And I know I'm not an expert on parenting. So the only thing I can do is to share my story.

Our second son Steven started using drugs when he was 14 years old. We had just moved to Boston from California where we had lived only one year after living in England for 13 years. Two really big moves in two years. A lot for all of us in our family to handle, but especially a lot for a young 13-year-old boy. His high school was huge in Boston with about 3,000 students. He was the youngest one on his soccer team and very skilled because he had been playing since birth in England. He still had a bit of a British accent and was unsure of American ways so he kind of stood out. The community was very affluent where we lived and predominantly Jewish, Irish Catholic or liberal Protestant. We lived on a limited budget and my husband was the pastor of a small evangelical church.

In the early years of Steven's drug use I certainly didn't suspect he was using. I just thought he was having difficulty adjusting to high school and the non-Christian values of his new friends. I prayed and talked with him about being a good testimony to those he was with at school. I talked to him about how he could influence his friends in a positive way. A good opportunity for him, I said. I thought for sure these little rebellious moments, broken curfews and drinking parties would be used by God in Steven's life as a good learning experience for him. I completely expected some day for him to be a giant of a Christian preacher. Slowly I became confused and frustrated as habits and patterns of behavior developed. I tried to make sense of the chaos in his life that was emerging. I preached to him great passionate sermons. I punished him with endless groundings. I shamed him with my tears and my pleading. I tried hard to get my husband to "do something." I became desperate and angry and very, very, very tired.

Four years later a turning point came for me. A point of beginning to regain a bit of sanity. When we finally knew for sure and accepted the fact that Steven was using drugs and abusing alcohol, it was a relief to begin to stop trying to figure out what was wrong. Why couldn't we get through to him? Why did he continue this destructive behavior? Why wasn't he listening to us? Why was he doing all the things we were telling him not to do? We were able to let that all go as we realized, "Oh, its drug and alcohol abuse." We were able then at that time to get a little help for him. We took steps to address the real problem instead of all the symptomatic behaviors.

The year following Steven's high school graduation we sent him to a very expensive private prep school in Maine with great hope. When he returned home at Christmas we determined he was using heavily. In fact, it turned out he was using cocaine heavily. He was deeply depressed and lethargic. We confronted him in a very, very difficult long afternoon session in our living room. We were able to get him into an out-patient treatment in our neighborhood. Also, Gene and I were able to receive some counseling there. Meanwhile while all this was going on, Gene decided to take a new position as pastor of counseling in a church in Minnesota. This move had the promise of a new beginning for all of us and offered some relief for my husband from his senior pastor responsibilities and the scrutiny of a small church.

Shortly after the move, we discovered that Steven, who we thought was progressing in recovery, had in fact escalated his use. We found crack cocaine and other drug paraphernalia in our car one day after he had used it. We didn't waste much time confronting him. We called around and found that we had accidentally moved to the drug recovery mecca of the United States. One of the centers in Minneapolis admitted Steven. The program for him also included a family week where the whole family had to come and sit through drug education classes and very painful emotional group sessions with other families. All of this was going on while we were just settling into a new pastorate. Our new church family was trying to be welcoming and hospitable to us and get to know us.

I had received an invitation at the beginning of each month from the church's hospitality committee who wanted me to come to a newcomers coffee morning. I had just put them off. Finally the third time I just couldn't think of why I couldn't go and I ended up saying, "Yes, I'll be there." Very reluctantly I pushed myself out the door that day and went to this beautiful suburban home of the hostess. I walked in and everything was absolutely perfect. The

hostesses were wonderful and very welcoming. I sat down in a small circle with a group of ladies of varying ages and just started to relax when I suddenly heard the hostess say, "Norma, why don't you start by telling us a little bit about your family and yourself and we'll just go around the circle."

I just died inside. I thought, "I don't want to tell them about my family and myself." But I took a deep breath, smiled and said, "Well, we have just moved here from Boston. My husband is your new pastor of counseling. We have four children; the oldest Peter, is at a Christian college, Westmont, in California. Our second son, Steven, is 18 and he's in drug treatment at St. Mary's. Our daughter Dana is a junior in high school and David is a seventh grader." And then I turned suddenly to the woman on my right and smiled and hoped she'd go on quickly so nobody would have heard what I said.

Then I just froze as it went around the room. I really did not know who was there or what they said until the last woman sitting directly across the table looked at me as she said, "My name is Carol and I, too, have four children and my second son was also in drug treatment at St. Mary's." I didn't hear any more. I couldn't believe it. I just felt like I was probably going to die from this horrible thing I was going through and here was a woman my age who was well manicured and very well put together. She looked fairly sane and sensible. She must have lived through this somehow. She seemed to be functioning quite normally.

Something sort of just physically mounted in me and I felt hope. I thought, "Maybe I can get through this somehow." You know how God does work sometimes just in a moment's time. Suddenly I heard my mind thinking of the verse in Job that says, "I know the way I take you, says the Lord, and when you are tried you shall come through as gold." And I saw my new friend Carol sitting there as gold. This woman became a friend at a very desperate time in my life.

One of the ways I cope with anything in life as my family can tell you is to talk about it. I talk it through and then I talk it thoroughly and then talk about it again. So I was talking about Steven to everyone and anyone who would listen to me. I seemed to need reassurance somehow. I needed longtime friends to listen to me and tell me how they remembered what a good mom I was and what a sweet boy Steven was and what a great family we were. I need to be reassured that the past I remembered was what really happened. I guess I was hanging on to pride. I didn't really want to face the issue that maybe I or our home life had anything to do with Steven's drug use. My friends were really patient with me.

Slowly my disillusionment turned to anger and especially when I heard Christians say things like, "I don't know where my kids would be today if it weren't for my prayers." As if I hadn't prayed or I hadn't prayed enough or I hadn't prayed the right prayer or God didn't like me as much as them or my kids. And I got angry and I got really angry with God for not protecting our kids and not answering my prayers for them over the years. We had dedicated each one of those kids to God when they were little and I never expected them to be in this kind of destructive situation. I stopped reading Christian books and magazines and I avoided group prayer meetings. I turned off the Christian music and the radio. I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach. Our family life felt like an unreal mockery to me. I screamed out within myself often when I heard the public's view of a drug addict on t.v. or radio when they were classified drug users or addicts as losers or scumbags and the declaration of punishment like they should be put away for life or given the death sentence or shipped out of the country. I wanted everyone to stop it. I wanted everyone to know that one of those losers was my son whom I had nurtured in my arms every night with stories and songs of "Jesus Loves You, This I Know." I was really angry. Things had not turned out like I thought God had promised they would. My long-term friend, Susan Vawter, remembers all that anger because she patiently listened to it.

My new friend from the hospitality morning took me to Al-Anon. It was there that I listened to my anger through the mouths of others. Al-Anon was painful for me and I didn't like it either. Every time I went I left saying, "I'm not going again." I just didn't understand what "letting go" was. I really didn't appreciate having to share my personal feelings and stories with people who would only give me their first names. But each time I went I repeated the serenity prayer: "Lord grant me the grace to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference." And I listened to others read the 12 steps. From day one I began slowly, very slowly, to realize the decisions my kids make are not mine. They do things for their own reasons. Even though our decisions affect each other, we are not the source of each other's happiness or peace of mind. I cannot change my kids or control their choices. I can only change me and control my own choices. Some days I had to work real hard not to allow their well-being, especially Steven's, to be the focus of my life or the source of my happiness. My well-being has to be my own decision every day. This releases me from being enmeshed in Steven's choices. When I finally realized this, I told Steven one day, "You are not the source of my happiness, Steven." He seemed shocked and a little disbelieving and said, "You've never told me that before." And I hadn't. He's right. I'm sure all the tears and the ranting and the sermonizing and the punishing over the years had told him otherwise.

There are a couple of quotes that have been profound to me that I want to share them with you. One from a young man named Evan Hodge who is a preacher's son and was involved in drug and alcohol abuse. The other young man is named Todd Smoke. He also is a preacher's son who was also involved in drugs. This is what Evan said: "I first started because my best friend was trying marijuana. I'd always heard drugs were bad but I was never able to

equate the anti-drug commercials or the D.A.R.E. programs with the stuff we were smoking behind the grade school. After all my friends were doing it and they were fine.” And this is what Todd said: “Alcohol and drugs worked for me for years. But the fun was over long before I realized it. I was trying to chase the fun times even after they were long gone. I couldn’t quite grasp that my life was unmanageable. Even when I was sleeping in garages or cars or when I was unemployable I was just being adaptable. It took a long time for me to become hopeless, to give up and take direction. I needed a God. I was always afraid of that great paradox ‘give up my life to get a life.’ “Thy will not mine be done” is a scary concept for a self-centered person. (Please note that both Evan and Todd have talks on the Website under the category, “ The ‘ PK ‘ Addicts Talk.”)

Somehow I had bought into the idea that I was responsible for my children’s choices. It hadn’t dawned that I make my own choices for my own reasons. Perhaps they make their choices for their own reasons, too. I thought that if I taught them well enough and disciplined and trained them the way I was supposed to they would avoid all the evil trappings of the world. They would be blessed by God and be Christians who were able to live above the circumstances and experience only joy and goodness. It was what was required of me as a parent. Good kids had good parents, bad kids bad parents. I was diligent and committed and determined in this task of parenting. Everything seemed clear cut to me. Black and white. If I did what I was supposed to do they would be good. So of course I was very, very disappointed and I took it very personally when my kids did something I considered wrong.

One day I was sitting in a training workshop in the midst of all this going on in my life. The speaker walked to the podium and without introduction said, “God is God and I am not.” And then was just silent. And I thought, “God is God and I am not.” In a brief moment something happened. I heard nothing else. Those words seemed to sink very deep within my heart and I felt free. In that moment I gave God back His job of saving my children and making them into Christians. And I took on the job of mom loving them as best I can for who they are, not for being who I was trying to make them be. And that moment began a process of my trying to live this out on a daily basis. Letting go doesn’t change the circumstances. The circumstances can be really tough and painful but letting go frees me from trying to fix or control things or others. It allows me to experience peace in the midst of chaos.

At one point when Steven was nineteen he became discouraged with trying to recover and ran away. He was gone for about two years. During these months we didn’t know where he was. I couldn’t find him. There was nowhere for him. I had exhausted all my resources. I even had a former FBI agent looking for him. I thought he could find him. I felt depressed most of the time during that period. I had to force myself to get up every morning. I cried a lot. I cried every time I talked about Steven. I cried every time I tried to pray. I cried when I heard beautiful music in church. A journal entry during this time that I had written said, “Each I day I wake feeling an urgent need to do something and then I realize there’s nothing I can do. The emptiness just has to be.”

Steven had been gone almost a year without a word. His birthday came around. Sometimes I would sit in my bedroom chair. That was my “safe place” and still is. I begged God to prompt Steven to call. I used to beg God to do something and make Steven call and make him come home and make him stop using drugs. And on August 31, his birthday, Steven called. He was in Florida. He was in jail. It was the first time we had heard from him in a year. He said he had been thinking about his childhood and how good it was. He thanked us and said he didn’t want us to think we had been bad parents. We were so amazed and so glad and felt reassured that God was working in Steven’s life wherever he was. Even in that Florida jail. I got up and stopped crying and made his favorite cake, his birthday cake. I called a few friends and we had a small party.

Two weeks later on September 14 I had a very vivid dream. I don’t often remember my dreams, but in this dream Steven was bound in chains surrounded by all of us who were at his party. It was dark and scary and there were evil things floating around in the air like a horror movie. All of a sudden a light came, the chains fell off and someone said, “He’s free. Steven’s free!” And beautiful peace and light and soft music just flooded the room and flooded over me and suddenly I realized I was awake. And in fact I was speaking. I said, “He’s free, Steven’s free!” out loud. Through this dream I laid there for a minute. I felt very assured in a strange way that God was speaking to me. He was in charge.

Not many days later we received a letter from an old friend we hadn’t heard from for a while. He did know that Steven had run away. This friend lived in Indiana. He wrote a note saying he had begun praying August 29 for Steven and prayed for seven days. He said he prayed Steven would remember his youth and his home and would repent and call us. When the seven days ended he decided to pray seven more days and fasted a couple of days, too. He finished praying September 14; the same day I had the dream. This was weird to me. God used this friend to encourage us just when we needed encouragement. God seems to know what we need when we need it and goes to any length to give us what we need.

Well, Steven finally came home a little over a year later. It was Christmas time. He brought his girlfriend who was six months pregnant home with him. They had met on the road. She was from Virginia. They lived with us for three months while they got some things sorted out. Then they moved into their own apartment. After their son Stevie was born we watched their roller coaster life begin to affect our little grandson. And eventually we had Stevie live with us on two different occasions because our Steven was either in jail or because they weren’t able to take care of Stevie.

Stevie is now nine years old and has a baby sister. Our son Steven has been sober, we think, for several years. But the consequences of his past continue to be challenges for Cindy and him. He started using at age 14 and is 30 now. He used for over 12 years. He lost some valuable growing up years and has had to catch up on learning some of those basic life skills that normally one learns during those adolescent years when you are still living at home with your parents.

I couldn't have honestly faced the question of what was my part in Steven's drug use while I was hurting so badly and feeling so disillusioned. In fact it's only been recently that I've been able to ask myself this question. I had to go through my emotional responses before I could separate myself from Steven. As long as I was enmeshed emotionally with him this question of what was my part in Steven's drug use felt like an accusation. It was too close to me. Once I let go and let God work in Steven's life and in mine and take care of my own well being I was able to see Steven more clearly as a person. I saw what a heavy burden it must have been to be the evangelical pastor's kid in an area where that wasn't a very popular affiliation. It was difficult for me as an adult even. It must have been difficult to feel my pressure as his mom to be a testimony to his friends; to be happy and okay with moving as often as we did. I began to see that I hadn't had much empathy for my children's feelings or even given them the permission to have their own feelings. I began to see that there was reason for him to rebel. Not that there is only one way to rebel and his choosing to use drugs was not at all justifiable but the point is and this is what I want you to hear is that I began to feel compassion for him and began to want to hear his story and want to support him in whatever it was that he was feeling. Not for my own purposes but for his. My pain identified me with his and led to compassion and spiritual growth for me.

All this to say our children are also irreplaceably unique persons. They make their own choices for their own reasons, as do we as parents. Parents are not to blame for their children's temperament, personalities, characters or choices. But parents do contribute. It is our choice how we will contribute to their development and even when we are intentioned to do the best job ever which I was, we fall short. We make mistakes. We don't know everything when we need to know it sometimes. You know God has trouble with His family too.

Eventually the anger in me was quieted and the disillusionment eventually is turning to ongoing insight. This is 12 years later. The deep hurt has turned into hope and anticipation and also appreciation for the journey that it's taken us on. But I still often sit in silence in the presence of God in my bedroom in my chair letting God hold me and quiet my fears. I often squirm in His lap like a two year old but He doesn't let go. He reminds me that He looks upon me with compassion as a father does a child, not dealing with me according to my failures or repaying me according to my sins. But separating my sins from me as far as the east is from the west because He knows what I am made of. That's where I find... "the courage I need to accept the things I cannot change, the grace I need to accept the things I cannot change and the wisdom to let God be the Savior even of my precious children." Thanks for listening to me.