BOOK REVIEW


Using the authors’ own intervention model, Step Up, as a research-based example for addressing the crisis of adolescent violence in the home, Routt and Anderson have created an effective guide for understanding this growing social problem. The unique relationships that exist between parents and their children are often complicated with abuses, both emotional and physical. Although considerable literature and research currently exists regarding types of abuse between those in traditional relationships, embarrassment and shame have selfishly guarded shedding light on the problem of parental abuse. Safety nets that have otherwise been effective in identifying, addressing and establishing remedies within the social policy network have consistently ignored this unique form of abuse. As the authors point out, the lack of information regarding abused parents have helped to perpetuate stereotypes about ineffective parenting. This void further isolates the victims from reporting abuse and addressing solutions that could be successful. The lack of research in this field, combined with the experience in adult domestic violence with offenders and survivors, prompted the authors to create an intervention model that offers hope in rebuilding healthy relationships among parents and their children.

Routt and Anderson provide their response in two distinct sections. The first five chapters assist the reader in understanding adolescent violence in the home where the parents are the primary victims. This context is necessary in establishing the dynamics of family interaction and how it differs from other forms of violence. Definitions of both physical and emotional abuse are described, as well as specific factors that put adolescents at risk for utilising violence as a means of resolving conflict in the home. Routt and Anderson supply ample information for the basis of their work. Multiple sources of inconsistent and contradictory works are provided. Disagreement on basic demographics, prevalence and gender of primary victim (mother or father) are clearly identified. The authors further create a need for their work by questioning the way in which family functioning has been previously researched. They add further credibility to their argument by providing the limited information that does exist from abroad, specifically, the studies completed in England and Australia which have began to look at the problem of teen violence in terms of professionals who encounter these families. In general, the authors have done due diligence in spotlighting why more exploration was needed in this area.

The remaining five chapters provide the foundation for understanding the intervention model promoted in the authors’ personal practice. The restorative process has been identified and described as a method of changing abuse, violence, fear and powerlessness to nonviolence, empathy, safety and respect. The authors acknowledge that the restorative methodology incorporates evidence-
based cognitive-behavioural practices that are a staple of other programmes that attempt to address youth aggression or at-risk behaviours. Evidence of this link is provided through discussion of core restorative practice terminology including the social discipline window and restorative inquiry.

Personal narratives comprise much of the first several pages of the chapters defining both physical and emotional abuse toward parents. Assuming little understanding on the behalf of the reader regarding the comparison of teen abuse and intimate partner physical abuse, the authors cite several studies differentiating between the two. Further complicating this family crisis is the reality that teen violence towards parents is highly underreported when compared to other forms of domestic violence.

Routt and Anderson further assist the reader by providing insight as to how parents respond to their children when violence has occurred. Parent descriptions of the conflicting emotions, especially regarding emotional abuse, illuminate their lived experience. Denial, taking responsibility for their child’s violence, shock and surprise, avoidance and protecting other children in the family are a few of the responses that have been documented. The authors present multiple parent descriptions that address the underlying feelings of those that have been abused. In regard to emotional abuse, the authors describe a ‘thread that ties seemingly isolated events into a larger pattern of hurt’ (50). As in other forms of violence, this invisible consequence often makes the violence live just under the radar but can be as damaging as physical scars. The chapters that chronicle these accounts (Chapters 2 and 3) place the reader in direct touch with the emotions and essence of what it is like to live in a home with a violent adolescent.

In Chapter 5, Routt and Anderson provide greater insight into the teen mind from their own personal experience working with families. What makes this chapter unique is the interpretation of their findings in trying to provide an explanation of what makes teenagers violent. Genetic influences, cultural and social context, gender, media, previous exposure to domestic violence and trauma are a few of the topics addressed. Research studies that are cited help the reader to distinguish between some of the indirect effects of violence and those that put individuals at direct risk for aggressive behaviour. The discussion of reactive versus proactive aggression is particularly enlightening and helps to clarify the types of violence that teens commit. As those who study aggressive behaviour already know, youth violence has no single cause and is varied in identifying which teen may act out. Routt and Anderson summarise this chapter by explaining that previous trauma experienced by teens make it more likely that they will try and resolve conflict by employing unhealthy approaches already suffered.

An overview of the model developed by Routt and Anderson can be found beginning in Chapter 6. In general terms, the model utilises a restorative approach and emphasises family safety as a non-negotiable tenet which must be described, discussed and constantly revisited by all participants. Components of the practices described for the reader are admittedly not new, however, the combination is described as being unique and unusual. Particularly helpful in understanding the role that these various practices play are the bullet-point references
that are identified (89), and several figures which present a visual explanation of how these approaches are interwoven.

Key components of the model include safety of family members, restorative practice, respectful communication, understanding cognitive, emotive and behavioural processes, emotional regulation and skill support. Additionally, the authors provide rationale for delivering their model in group format and ways in which this format was developed. Tips for interviewing prospective participants and prerequisites that were required of the teen candidates narrow the focus of the model and are provided for maximum success. Routt and Anderson include a thorough description and detailed explanation of the importance of safety in every component of the model. A significant section of Chapter 7 is dedicated to defining what it looks, sounds and feels like to be safe at home and throughout the group and family sessions. It is obvious from this emphasis, and self-admitted mistakes along the way, that under-valuing the importance of this key component led to creation of a communication contract and the practice of immediately addressing disrespect and abuse in the various sessions. The explanation of the safety plan (p. 118) further underscores this crucial element of their model.

Restorative practices, which the authors define as the thread that connected the elements of their intervention, is thoroughly described in Chapter 8. Utilising traditional definitions, and related visual supports, the authors provide a thorough appreciation of the role that restorative process plays in evoking empathy, taking accountability for harm and demonstrating responsibility for restoring family relationships. Specific tools for addressing these obligations, including restorative inquiry, check-ins and making amends through the writing of empathy and responsibility letters, guide the participant in identifying portions of their behaviour. The authors provide actual examples of these with an understanding of how powerful these tools can be in generating awareness of words and actions that previously might have led to violent acts by the teen participants. Simplistic, yet certainly not simple, Routt and Anderson surmise that the basic premise for changing harmful behaviour relies on the teens’ awareness of thoughts, beliefs and feelings and how they can turn hurtful moves into helpful ones.

The book concludes with a chapter dedicated to providing hope to those in which Routt and Anderson originally set out to support, the parent victims of adolescent violence. By addressing their hope in helping parents re-establish their leadership role, the authors complete the blueprint for success that they have researched and put into their own practice. Including the reader in the journey also provides struggling parents an honest view as to what the process entails. Patience and celebrating small steps are encouraged as the problem of adolescent violence is not easily remedied, however, the book’s final summary, too brief and limited in scope, was not an effective recap of the quality and detail found in the preceding chapters.

Adolescent violence in the home by Gregory Routt and Lily Anderson is a straightforward, easily read manual that would appeal to practitioners working with violent youth and their families, as well as, researchers interested in practical uses of restorative methods. The authors excel in defining the nature of the
problem and the lack of information available to address the growing crisis. By adopting several different approaches and integrating the strengths of each, Routt and Anderson successfully describe what lead them to develop the Step Up curriculum. It is evident that they consider restorative practices the linchpin that ties the process together.

However, there is an area in which this book felt underdeveloped. In regard to other types of youth support agencies, only the role of the juvenile justice system was mentioned, briefly. Perhaps other social institutions such as local schools, churches, youth development programmes, etc. could have been included. Many of these are fully engaged in similar endeavours as they realise the harm that youth violence has created. A natural outreach of using restorative practices is the inclusion of as many community individuals as possible so that no one works in isolation. The model utilised in this book might find support throughout other systems that reach into the lives of families and hope to strengthen relationships. A more inclusive discussion, with these practitioners, would intensify the essential undertaking that Routt and Anderson have initiated.

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