

HOW TO MAKE THE TOUGH DECISIONS

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I am a child crying for Mommy and Daddy, lost in the desert, and not hearing or seeing them. Please answer my cries. Pick me up in your arms, like I was a baby, and carry me home. . . . I never realized that life could be so painful and lonely without people that you love and that love you.

—Heather Stone, March 12, 1996

Hot tears stained the pages of that letter from my 13-year-old daughter as I read her plea. My heart ached from guilt. How could I have done such a thing to her? She was barely a teenager, and I had sent her to shovel cow manure and endure 10-mile hikes at a teen rehab facility in the desolate desert of Utah.

Then I came to my senses, wiped the tears from my eyes, and reminded myself why I sent her to such a forbidding place. For 13 years our oldest daughter had epitomized the model preacher's kid: straight-A student, leader in her youth group, obedient to our every request. Almost overnight, however, she morphed into a rebellious, bent-on-doing-the-opposite-of-what-we-asked hellion. Our family endured the turmoil of house arrests, 9-1-1 police calls, drugs, alcohol, terrible boyfriends, rehab, expulsions from schools, 15 counselors, and countless fights.

Like many parents in similar situations, my wife and I didn't know what to do. We wanted a better relationship with our daughter, but our hurt and anger often overwhelmed us. Somehow, we survived those six

tumultuous years, and our relationship with Heather did not die. In fact, God dramatically restored it. She now lives with us, and together we are writing a book for dads and daughters with relationship struggles.

Running Out of Options

Our renewed relationship with Heather didn't come without pain, though. We made several tough calls during our six-year journey. The decision to send her to the program in Utah proved invaluable in sustaining our strained relationship but it was gut wrenching.

Before we sent Heather to Utah, we sought help from teachers, friends, school counselors, a lawyer, church leaders, the police, a Christian counselor, psychologists, psychiatrists, and a local rehab unit. But even their help could not prevent the events that prompted our final choice.

Two Christian schools expelled Heather because of her negative influence on other students. After the last expulsion, tensions reached a boiling point when one day she threatened me.

"I'm going to ruin you! I'm going to tell others that you have abused me," she growled.

I immediately contacted our counselor and our lawyer in case she followed through with her false accusation.

As she continued her downward spiral, we discovered she was planning to run away. That prompted our decision to again place her in the local rehab facility. My wife and I stood at the door of Heather's room and told her the bad news.

She exploded with rage and spewed, "I hate you! I'm going to kill you!" Next, she tried to lunge out of the second floor window to escape. As we restrained her, she fought back and grabbed a knife from her desk. We immediately dialed 9-1-1. A few minutes later the police arrived and calmed her down so an ambulance could transport her to the local rehab hospital.

Two days later, we placed Heather on the plane to Utah.

For the next few days, both anguish and relief filled our hearts. I prayed, read the Bible, and tried to process our decision. My thoughts often drifted to one of Jesus' most famous stories, the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. Although Jesus spoke it as a parable, some scholars believe He based it on a well-known true story.

As the story unfolds, the younger son yearns for a life free of parental authority and restraint. One day he shocks his father by demanding his share of the inheritance. In that culture such a demand conveyed gross disregard for the feelings of a father, much like what we felt from Heather.

The father faced a tough choice: If he said no, he could spare his son a lot of heartache. If he said yes, he knew his son would experience the consequences of unrestrained freedom and wild living.

We don't know how long the father deliberated to make his decision. Maybe he consulted wise friends. I'm sure he prayed. He then made a tough decision—he would give his son his inheritance—the very thing that would ultimately result in his misery. Possibly the father sensed that only through the painful consequences of irresponsibility would his son come to his senses.

My wife and I had to make difficult choices that brought great pain to Heather. We hoped Heather's painful stay in Utah would bring her back to God and to us. Several years later

Heather did come back and we experienced firsthand the promise of Hebrews 12:11.

No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the fruit of peace and righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

tal illness lies at the root of extreme rebellion. In those cases, your teen may need medical treatment as the first option.

4. Have I considered the juvenile system? After we sent Heather to Utah, we discovered that our local county government provided services for difficult teens.

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Guiding Questions

You may not encounter the intense rebellion we faced with Heather, nor the situation the prodigal son's dad experienced. But if circumstances force you to make tough decisions about a child, ask yourself five guiding questions.

1. Have I prayed for wisdom about the difficult options I face? James 1:5 promises, *Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives to all generously and without criticizing, and it will be given to him.*

2. Does my child engage in destructive behavior or simply make life difficult for me? Most teenage problems don't warrant placement in a special program. Some difficulties, however, can move your relationship into the red zone and require action. Red zone behaviors are:

- violence or threats of violence against you or others
- criminal behavior, such as shoplifting
- threats to accuse you of abuse or molestation
- drug and alcohol abuse
- attempting suicide
- running away or sneaking out at night
- refusal to attend school or repeated suspensions.

3. Have I sought professional help? Find a good Christian counselor to give objective advice. A counselor can help you consider the benefits and the drawbacks of rehab programs and can also recommend a qualified psychiatrist to determine possible physiological reasons for your teen's behavior. Sometimes men-

Our lawyer explained that we could file charges against Heather to seek the court's intervention. This would make her accountable to the court for her actions and take some pressure off us to keep her in line. Had we known this early on, we probably would have chosen this route first.

We eventually did file "unruly teen" charges against Heather. The judge ruled in our favor and placed her under house arrest. He required her to wear an ankle monitor to alert the authorities if she ran away. He also assigned a probation officer to meet with her weekly.

5. Have I done my homework? An Internet search of phrases such as "wilderness therapy programs," or "at-risk teens," will yield hundreds of Web sites. One non-profit, neutral Web site, <http://www.wilderness-programs.org>, is a good place to start. It lists and rates dozens of programs. A Web search also will provide names of fee-based companies that help parents evaluate programs that are best suited for their teen. Choose wisely. Research the program, ask for references, and visit the facility if possible.

Our painful decision to send Heather to the Utah desert seemed harsh at the time. Without it, though, Heather may have never experienced what she wrote in her journal that forlorn day in March: "I never realized that life could be so painful and lonely without people that you love and that love you."

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