

INTERVIEW

Stella O'Malley's bible for parents raising troubled teenagers

The psychotherapist on her new book 'What Your Teen Is Trying to Tell You'



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By Mary McCarthy Sunday March 19 2023

Because of her previous books the psychotherapist Stella O'Malley is regarded by parents as a lifeline of support for her advice on avoiding an overprotective approach and dealing with childhood bullying, but her latest, *What Your Teen Is Trying to Tell You*, is the one that will cement her reputation. She wanted to help parents of teens because from her work she knows that parenting a distressed teenager is very tough. "They hate me, I hate them, we never stop screaming at each other" is the kind of sentiment popping up in her clinic. She found that many parents felt bewildered and unable to put a foot right and she wanted to help them decode their teens' behaviour to help them become functioning adults. Stella O'Malley's bible for

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Speaking on Zoom from Co Offaly, where she moved to ten years ago and where she has her clinic in the basement of her home in the town of Birr, she explains why being a teenager is harder today. "In the playground parents laugh when a toddler misbehaves, but there is a taboo around how bad teenagers can be," she says. "Parenting gets more complicated, and when teenagers are distressed parents tend to close up. I see the teens in the clinics, I hear the long and complicated stories, it's heart-rending. Often parents are completely at sea. Sometimes there can be very abusive behaviour from the teen and I wanted this book to be a support for parents, to help them help their children."

O'Malley says teenagers today are more disappointed because since the 1990s childhood has become increasingly commercialised and there is more pressure on them when they reach their teens. "We underestimate how great an experience childhood is these days and how bitter a pill the teenage years can be in comparison," she explains. "Happiness can fall from a cliff when kids hit puberty, when they go from wishing on a star to being slapped into a hard, brick wall of reality because the world is harsher than the average child has been led to believe."

"I'm 48 and my generation didn't expect so much from their teen years. Today's teens think something is wrong with them if they are unhappy. The mental health industry is telling them there is something wrong with them, and sometimes that's right but often the real problem is that life is difficult. "There are great moments of joy and satisfaction but the general human condition is pretty angry and that's what they are grappling with."

These days most of us live in slight anxiety. We're not living this happy 'orange juice life' and when some teens realise this sunshine life A still of her, left, as a child from the 2018 Channel 4 documentary Trans Kids: It's Time to Talk, which she presented CHANNEL 4 they thought was within reach is not happening, they think something is wrong with them. "And adolescence is harder now because it has become so uniform. When I was a teenager some of my peers left school after their Inter Cert. There was not the presumption everyone had to continue in education, but for a large proportion of people the academic world does not suit them. "I did my Leaving and left my school in Blanchardstown when I was 17 and went to work. I didn't go to college until my thirties. This idea of school, then college and that's how you know you have parented well — it's a self-made prison."

A big idea in O'Malley's book is that parents should have more confidence as they are the experts on their child. "I say this as a psychotherapist, but I love it if parents, when their teen hits trouble, read around the specific issue rather than going straight to the professionals," she says. "There has been a culture of 'professionalising parenting'. It used to be 'mother knows best'. Parents had a status — you said yes or no — but now there's a huge fear of mental health and as a result parents are disempowered because they are afraid of conflict. "All this talk about mental health has not gone well. My book Fragile went into that. Teenagers can think they are having an anxiety attack and that they need a diagnosis to understand what's wrong with them, but perhaps they are feeling sad because life is hard." In her new book O'Malley says parents need to lead by example by having a fulfilled life and showing the trade-offs to becoming a functioning adult are worth it.



A still of her, left, as a child from the 2018 Channel 4 documentary *Trans Kids: It's Time to Talk*, which she presented
CHANNEL 4

"If you live a satisfied life, your teens learn more from that than the 'don't do what I do, I am miserable' message. You need to first get your own shop in order," she says. In her introduction O'Malley writes that a third of teens find adolescence relatively benign, a third challenging and

the rest find it a nightmare, and that this book is not for those parents whose kids are sailing through. But there is no parent who would not benefit. It's such a comprehensive heads-up on being a teenager in the 21st century, from explaining the perils of sexting — the lack of intimacy can lead to problems — to O'Malley's observation that it's often the younger teens that are more likely to get into trouble with posting inappropriate content. And every parent will benefit from finding out how best to communicate with their teenage children, whether they have clammed up or turned into a drama queen. "I'm very big into the idea that you don't have to meet big emotion with big emotion. "Brains are not fully formed until you reach your mid-twenties, so teens don't react in the same way adults do. Don't interrupt an adolescent in the middle of mayhem, don't get into the madness with them. Six hours later or six days later help them with self-awareness. You could say, 'I wonder if you got it right but the scale is not right,' " she says.

O'Malley is an empathetic instructor who never hectors. There are strategy boxes and take-away bullet points on a list of topics but she urges parents to follow what makes sense to them. It feels as if she is in the trenches with them as she has two teenage children herself and she knows she's as flawed as everyone else. "I don't write this to say I'm this great mother — I'm very quick to anger — but I'm writing this to remind parents that it can be difficult and that we are not always proud of how we react but let's forgive ourselves and our teens. I have studied enough to know this is essential for happiness," she says.

Her book is peppered with illuminating case studies loosely based on scenarios she has encountered in her clinic and examples from her own troubled teens — it is an honesty that parents will appreciate. There is a powerful anecdote with her dad that illustrates why parents need to keep plugging away. "I had a difficult relationship with my father when I was a teen," she says. "One day, when we were sitting in the car together, he handed me a printout of Philip Larkin's poem *This Be the Verse*. The opening lines set the tone: 'They f*** you up, your mum and dad./ They may not mean to but they do.' "I read the poem and then, in a spiteful gesture, I allowed the page to fall from my hand to the footwell of the car as if I found it boring. I did this because I wanted to hurt him. Nobody could have guessed at the time that his attempt at authentic connection moved me deeply and I've never forgotten it.

"I was very dismissive then but I included that anecdote to remind parents to keep trying to reach their teen. It's like pebbles in a barrel — you don't know what's working. Don't go looking for the Hollywood movie-style connect, there will be thousands of mistakes. "We parents can feel so disappointed by the teen years, we can feel there is no point in trying, but here and there you will get it right."

What Your Teen Is Trying to Tell You is published by Gill Books on Mar 23 at €17.99