

amazon.com



YOUR ACCOUNT

HELP

SELL ITEMS

WELCOME

BOOKS

MUSIC

DVD &
VIDEOELECTRONICS
& SOFTWARETOYS &
VIDEO GAMESHOME
IMPROVEMENT

AUCTIONS

ZSHOPS

BOOK
SEARCHBROWSE
SUBJECTS

BESTSELLERS

FEATURED IN
THE MEDIAAWARD
WINNERSCOMPUTERS
& INTERNETCHILDREN'S
BOOKSBUSINESS &
INVESTING

SEARCH

Books

GO!

BOOK INFORMATION

Explore this book
buying infoSee more by this
authorall books by
[Laura Sessions Stepp](#)Share your
thoughts[e-mail a friend
about this book](#)**Our Last Best Shot : Guiding Our Children Through Early Adolescence**by [Laura Sessions Stepp](#)List Price: **\$24.95**Our Price: **\$17.47**

You Save: \$7.48 (30%)

Hardcover - 352 pages (June 19, 2000)

Riverhead Books; ISBN: 1573221600

This item will be published on June 19, 2000.

You may order it now and we will ship it to
you when it arrives.PRE-ORDER THIS ITEM TODAY
(you can always cancel it later)Shopping with us is
100% safe.
Guaranteed.[Add to my Wish List](#)(We'll set one up for you)
[View my Wish List](#)**Editorial Reviews****Book Description**

A Pulitzer prize-winning journalist translates the behavior of young adolescents and guides us through this pivotal developmental stage.

Young adolescence, between the ages of ten and fifteen, is often dismissed as a baffling period, mistakenly lumped together with the later teenage years. Yet is perhaps the most critical time in the human life cycle, a fateful juncture at which unmatched physical and intellectual growth, expanding creativity, emerging moral sensibilities, awakening sexuality, and maturing emotions powerfully converge. Unsure of what constitutes "normal" behavior, parents can fail to distinguish between behaviors that signal healthy growth and those that indicate real trouble. Without this knowledge, they are in danger of forfeiting their last best chance to affect decisive changes.

After writing a series of award-winning articles on young adolescents, examining the existing scientific literature, and conferring with social scientists and educators, Laura Sessions Stepp set out across the country to meet and observe young people and their families over the course of a year. Through the stories of average young people she met in urban Los Angeles; Durham, North Carolina, and rural Ulysses, Kansas, she helps us navigate the landscape of adolescence.

To be placed on the shelf alongside Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*, Michael Gurian's *The Wonder of Boys*, and William Pollack's *Real Boys*, *Our Last Best Shot* is a book parents and educators cannot afford to miss.

"This is the best book on adolescence ever written for the general public. Touching . . . deeply insightful . . . fascinating, and highly informative. A wealth of practical understanding and guidance for parents and others who care for our youth." --David A. Hamburg, M.D., President Emeritus, Carnegie Corporation of New York

About the Author

Laura Sessions Stepp is a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist, currently at *The Washington Post*. She is a former visiting scholar at the National Academy of Sciences.

Look for similar books by subject:

Browse other Parenting & Families titles.

- ☐ Family/Marriage
- ☐ Sociology Of Youth
- ☐ Adolescent Psychology
- ☐ Family / Parenting / Childbirth
- ☐ Family & Relationships
- ☐ Adolescence

Find books matching ALL checked subjects
i.e., each book must be in subject 1 AND subject 2 AND ...

- I am the Author, and I want to comment on my book.
- I am the Publisher, and I want to comment on this book.

Text Only

Top of Page

Amazon.com Home | Books | Music | DVD & Video | Toys & Games | Electronics & Software | Home Improvement |
Auctions | zShops | e-Cards | 1-Click Settings | Shopping Cart | Your Account | Help | Sell Items

Book Search | Browse Subjects | Bestsellers | Featured in the Media | Award Winners

Computers & Internet | Children's Books | Business & Investing

Amazon.co.uk | Amazon.de

Legal Notices © 1996-2000, Amazon.com, Inc.

Experts' comments on Stepp's forthcoming book, *Our Last Best Shot: Guiding Our Children Through Early Adolescence*

"An indispensable guide for parents seeking ways to help their children navigate the critical years of early adolescence. Stepp's sensitivity and insight offer worried parents not only hope, but also concrete ways to nurture their children and help them become responsible, caring, successful adults."

—Donald J. Hernandez, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Sociology and Center for Social and Demographic Analysis, State University of New York at Albany

"Laura Stepp has written a wise, moving, and timely book about young adolescents today. By getting inside the minds and lives of some engaging young people, she captures the special challenges of growing up in our postmodern society. Her analysis of the problem is acute and unblinking, and her recommendations for those who raise children (and don't all citizens have that responsibility?) are sensible and well informed by developmental theory."

—Dr. William Damon, Executive Director, Center for the Study of Adolescence, Stanford University, and author of *The Handbook of Child Psychology and Greater Expectations: Overcoming the Culture of Indulgence in Our Homes and School*

"Laura Stepp has done a masterful job of integrating scientific research on development in early adolescence with her insightful observations of teenagers. Her book rings with authenticity. Neither simplistic nor bogged down in academic language, it offers sound guidance to parents and teachers."

—James Garbarino, PhD, Co-Director of the Cornell University Family Life Development Center and author of *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*

"This is the best book on adolescence ever written for the general public. From its touching introduction to its deeply insightful conclusion, it is fascinating and highly informative. Stepp employs a novel mixture of ... assessment of research on adolescent development, and her own interviews and participant observation over one year with adolescents in their communities.... a wealth of practical understanding and guidance for parents and others who care for our youth."

—David A. Hamburg, M.D., President Emeritus, Carnegie Corporation of New York

"Nothing worries parents more than the thought of their children becoming teenagers. But as Laura Stepp's elegantly crafted book reminds us, rather than a time of parental helplessness, the adolescent years can, indeed, be our last, best shot at helping adolescents emerge on the other side of childhood as fully competent, capable, and caring adults."

—Wade F. Horn, Ph.D., President, The National Fatherhood Initiative, and coauthor of *The Better Homes and Gardens New Teen Book*

"A book that makes a difference. *Our Last Best Shot* is an indispensable roadmap for parents and educators who care about our children. Laura Stepp's insightful examination of what young adolescents are really going through may surprise you."

—Michael Gurian, author of *The Good Son* and *A Fine Young Man*

Copyright 1999 The Washington Post

The Washington Post

April 23, 1999, Friday, Final Edition

SECTION: STYLE; Pg. C01

HEADLINE: Why Johnny Can't Feel; Poor Relationships With Adults May Explain Youth Alienation

BYLINE: Laura Sessions Stepp, Washington Post Staff Writer

Picture Holden Caulfield, the 16-year-old social misfit of "Catcher in the Rye," watching his Pennsylvania prep school football team from afar and feeling totally dissed by the student body he was about to abandon. Then fast-forward 50 years later to real-life Littleton, Colo., where Eric Harris, an 18-year-old about-to-be murderer, is slouched in front of his home computer, perhaps designing a bomb.

Both belong to that tiny minority of teenagers who reject society's norms and feel rejected, in turn, by society. Almost all teenagers experience occasional bouts of nihilism or disengagement, but these periods generally last only weeks or months and most kids outgrow their defiance and go on to lead productive, even considerate, lives. But for youths like the fictional Caulfield and the real Harris, disaffection came to define their identities.

There are proportionately no more hard-core disaffected teens today than there were in the 1940s, say social scientists and therapists. But in that small group, the disaffection goes deeper -- and lasts longer -- than the feelings experienced by similar kids of past generations.

There's little in the way of statistical evidence here. Instead, these conclusions are gleaned from years of studying, treating and writing about individual kids. Still, the experts are almost unanimous in their impressions: When the disengaged teens come to therapy today, they exhibit more serious problems from the first visit. Many already are using drugs heavily. While treatment used to be confined to months or maybe a year, many of today's alienated youth stay in therapy for several years.

Until recently, these troubled teenagers "deplored conditions of the world, but they had a vision of how to make it better," says Jeffrey Arnett, a developmental psychologist at the University of Maryland and author of the book "Metalheads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation." Caulfield was the perfect literary example of this earlier mind-set, he says, "painfully eager to make the world better."

The kids Arnett interviewed for his book, most of them thoughtful and "very nice," he's quick to point out, had no such perceptions. "They had given that up," he says. "The only alternative was to live your own life the best you could. Institutions were corrupt, and the hell with it."

He remembers a young man from Atlanta who was estranged from his family and had spent time in a hospital for drug abuse.

When Arnett asked the youth to name the three people he admired most, he said, "Me, myself and I." When Arnett asked him what he saw himself doing in 10 years, he replied: "I don't know. I don't look that far ahead. My head spins if I do. That's when you get to depression."

"I don't think I'm ever going to get anywhere or make anything of myself without doing it myself," he said. "I keep pretty locked up for right now as far as feelings and letting anybody in to touch me. It's been a long life."

He was 18.

Wayne Wooden, a sociologist at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, found the same philosophy among some of the suburban middle-class teens he interviewed for his book "Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws." "Holden had an altruistic motive to try to save his generation and others like himself before they fell off into the abyss," Wooden says. "Today's group is full of gloom and doom, and

nothing is worth saving. Some have so internalized their bleakness that they strike out and back, using the very instruments of rage and power that the broader culture is using."

Pollsters such as J. Walker Smith, managing partner of Yankelovich Partners, say milder versions of this disengagement and angst show up in the general youth population. Smith likes to use the metaphor of the 1964 World's Fair. "For young boomers, life was always going to be better. We might have to fix things up, but we'd end up on the monorail. Kids today have no vision of 1964. They don't even know if they'll make it beyond January 1, 2000."

In a recent poll she supervised, Jean Johnson, senior vice president of Public Agenda, says more than half of teenagers said that young people would not make much difference to the country or would make things worse.

The factors making a child vulnerable to isolation, depression and anger have not changed, according to Rolf Loeber, professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh noted for his long-term studies of serious delinquents. We've heard them all before: physical abuse, poor supervision by parents, alcoholic or drug-abusing parents, living in a neighborhood with high levels of violence and crime.

But there are differences today that aggravate those factors. No. 1 on the experts' list is the small amount of time that kids spend with adults. Felton Earls, professor of child psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, says such "time poverty" applies not only to time spent by parents but also to time spent by teachers, police officers, neighbors and other authority figures.

Even when kids get time with an adult, it may not be helpful, Earls says.

"Adults are pretty uncomfortable talking to kids and often are dealing with personal problems that are complex and unresolved," he says. "When kids look to adults for advice about racism or attitudes toward other people, the answers they are searching for are not clarified even in the minds of the adults."

"As far as the Trenchcoat kids are concerned, who ever sat down and talked to them about why they were forming that group?"

Another factor is the easy availability of stimulants and hallucinogenic drugs, says Herbert Nieburg, director of behavioral science at Four Winds Hospital near Westchester, N.Y.

Still another is that public high schools have gotten larger. In schools with thousands of students, cliques usually form among kids seeking some sense of community, leaving students who don't easily identify with groups feeling painfully rejected.

Even normal kids find high school a tough place these days, says Public Agenda's Johnson. In the survey she did two years ago, a majority of students said neither their peers nor their teachers treated them with respect. Only one out of three said they had teachers who cared personally about them.

Rejected students can easily find others like themselves, however, on the Internet. Although not all the experts agree with him, Wooden believes computers allow the alienated to "hide out in their rooms, away from parents and any meaningful social interaction," feeding on one another's frustrations.

Of course, the same might be said of television -- or even books.

Isolation also feeds paranoia. Michael Peck, a Los Angeles psychologist who works with suicidal teens, says his clients tell him that society is not to be trusted, and they point to the mass media for support. "From watching TV, something like The 'X-Files,' you come away with the impression that the government is conspiring to do horrible things to you every minute."

It's only a short hop from the government to other institutions and groups, he continues: "They're trying to get us; we better get them first." This is a particularly dangerous line of thinking if your parents believe it also, or aren't around to convince you otherwise.

The fear of bad things happening -- shootings, for example -- is growing among all kids, says Walker of Yankelovich. And so is the amount of stress that teens say they feel. If the alienated sit on one end of the youth spectrum, the other end is inhabited by teens who lead overly scheduled, academically pressured lives. The two groups usually coexist peacefully in high school, but sometimes the pressure builds. "And when you squeeze this balloon hard enough, Walker says, "the place it's going to break is the weakest spot."

Jeffrey Arnett, left, author of a book on "metalheads"; and Michael Peck, who works with suicidal teens.

Copyright 1998 The Washington Post
The Washington Post
June 28, 1998, Sunday, Final Edition
SECTION: OUTLOOK; Pg. C03
HEADLINE: A LOOK AT . . . Adolescence; What Do Teens Want? To Be Heard

BYLINE: Laura Sessions Stepp

About 18 months ago, I was sitting in a restaurant eating pork barbecue and fried chicken with a 13-year-old girl and her mother, when the daughter casually asked: "Mom, would you take me to buy some new clothes this weekend?"

Her mother sighed and sipped her Dr. Pepper. "I just took you shopping two weeks ago," she replied. And then, to her daughter's wide-eyed disbelief, she turned to look at me and continued, "Sometimes, I wish I had never had children."

Sound unlikely? What's striking to me about this scene is not how exceptional it was, but how typical. In the two years that I've spent researching a book about 10- to 15-year-olds--an age group that psychologists consider especially vulnerable--I've witnessed dozens of such painful exchanges. Many adults say demeaning things in front of adolescents, even if unintentionally. They also ignore them and dismiss their needs.

I've observed this behavior in extended visits to three U.S. communities--Durham, N.C.; Ulysses, Kan.; and Los Angeles. In each city, I lived alongside youngsters at home and in school, attended their parties, hung out in their favorite shopping malls and ate more pizza than I care to remember. Sure, I was there as an observer, but I also gradually became part of the communities, a familiar figure to the kids and their parents. Most were average students, black, white and Hispanic, from working-class and middle-income families. They were lively, interesting kids, who were, without exception, struggling to communicate with their elders.

Take one 11-year-old boy I got to know in South Central Los Angeles. I remember a particular day I spent with him and his family when his father started teasing him about girls. "Have you kissed a girl yet?" his dad asked.

"First kiss? Not yet," replied the boy, a skinny creature who barely came up to his father's ample waist.

"You ain't kissed no girl--that girl you liked, she didn't give you no kiss?"

"Nope."

"Do you look at their bods?"

"Their what?"

"Their booties. Have they got nice booties?"

"This is nasty. I don't want to talk no more."

"I think he's scared of girls," the father suddenly said to me. Then turning back to his son, he asked, "You scared of girls?"

This line of questioning didn't appear to be mean-spirited, but it continued for several minutes despite pleas from his son to stop. Finally, the boy left the room and returned seconds later, tears in his eyes and a blue tissue in hand.

"He's temperamental," his mother told me.

Most of the young people I talked with tried not to reveal how hurt they feel, but some confessed that they nurse a very private anguish over parents, teachers and club leaders who once doted on them and now act as if they are the enemy. "We used to have these long conversations," one girl said about her uncle. "Now it seems he's always on my case. He no longer knows how I really feel."

In fact, by the time their children reach adolescence, many adults seem to have lost pride in them. Compare how differently some parents react to the explorations of a toddler and a teenager. When a toddler says his first words, they applaud and run for the baby book. When she walks across the room, they call grandmother. When she tumbles from the tricycle, they reach out to comfort and then urge her to try again. But when a young adolescent uses his new reasoning skills to question a decision, he's called impudent. When a girl skips class to see her boyfriend, she's reprimanded. It's not that one shouldn't discipline young people who break family rules, but there's no need to interpret all the changes of the early adolescent years as bad; they're also evidence of new-found intellectual and social skills.

Few adults choose to focus on these positive trends, though. Instead, many I've spoken with recently think teenagers are out of control--and have offered as proof the highly publicized slayings of classmates in Oregon and Arkansas. Similarly, schools have moved to step up surveillance, legislators have proposed charging the offenders as adults, and the media have pumped out stories about a generation of kids without a conscience.

The shootings have served to reinforce myths about adolescence that have hung around since the turn of the century. From the clinical work of psychologists G. Stanley Hall in the early 1900s to Erik Erikson in the '50s, we've learned to accept that psychological problems are to be expected among adolescents, that turmoil between parent and child, teacher and child, is the inevitable byproduct of "raging hormones."

More recent research suggests something quite different. Indeed, Daniel Offer, a professor of psychiatry at Northwestern University, argues that if you look at normal (as opposed to clinical) populations, these assumptions about adolescence are grossly exaggerated. Of course, children at this age are going through a period of rapid change: Between the ages of 10 and 15, their bodies and brains grow fast. By sixth grade, most kids are able to comprehend fully what people think of them--and they alter their behavior accordingly. Research suggests that the way adults react to puberty most affects how a normal adolescent behaves. When parents back their children's decisions to take on new challenges and responsibilities, adolescence often proceeds smoothly, with only a few bumps along the way.

Given a chance, the young people I observed embraced their new responsibilities. One 11-year-old girl, whose mother was particularly supportive of her daughter's new ventures, told me proudly, "Because I'm a lot older I can try out more things, go places by myself, do more jobs like babysitting. I'm more responsible, and I think more people can trust me." This ability to take on new challenges shouldn't be so surprising when you think that, earlier this century, adolescents worked alongside adults on the farm, in the factory and in the family business.

But these days, girls in particular seem hindered by limited expectations. A 12-year-old California girl told me she never joined her younger brother in the family's carpentry business after school. Her father simply hadn't thought to invite her. She tended to spend her afternoons on the telephone or wandering around the local shopping malls with her friends. And midway through seventh grade, when she decided to search for volunteer work mentoring a younger child, she was told by various youth organizations she contacted that she was "too young."

As that incident reveals, institutions often fail kids as much as individuals do. This was evident in the middle schools I visited. Increasingly able to analyze and synthesize, draw conclusions, and reason about right and wrong, adolescents want to exercise more control over their environment. Yet once

they reach middle school or junior high, they often encounter a rote curriculum and more rules than in elementary school. Restrictions--from dress codes to assigned seating at lunch--may be designed to protect kids, but frequently alienate them unless the kids feel a strong, positive connection to the rulemaker.

Several teachers I observed acted as if they wanted to be anywhere but with their students. At a school in Kansas, one young sixth-grade teacher, who was standing in the hallway watching her students file back to class, whispered to a colleague, "Maybe we could just stay out here." Her favorite period of the day, she later told me, was Sustained Silent Reading, a 15-minute span of time when her students read privately and she was able to sit down, at least briefly, with her latest John Grisham novel. Like many of the teachers I watched, she seemed frustrated by too many pupils, a curriculum that boxed her in and her lack of understanding of how to relate to adolescents.

Several students I met said their schools don't respect the way they like to learn. Ask a teenager what class he or she remembers most vividly and odds are it will be one in which students worked together on projects involving discovery, reflection and presentation. Frequently they receive this kind of group instruction in elementary school, only to be assigned in middle school or junior high to class lectures, memorization and drills.

I'll never forget watching one North Carolina sixth grader writing out the answers to questions in her social studies book. When she finished the assigned chapter, she started on the next. "Don't go any farther," her teacher barked. "We're doing this in unison." That same girl, in an English class taught by a different teacher a few weeks later, wrote and acted out, with three other students, a folk tale of their choosing. The group evaluated their own performance and then the teacher evaluated them. Guess which exercise--and which teacher--this girl remembered in fond detail six months later?

Teenagers know only too well that they don't make a good impression. I asked a ninth-grade English class in that same North Carolina community which adjectives adults would use to describe them. The answers spilled out quickly:

"Weedheads."

"Sex-crazed."

"Thugs."

Can we change our attitudes and behaviors so that young people think better of us, and of themselves? If not--if we continue to belittle their potential and berate their actions rather than respect and help develop their new skills--we shouldn't be surprised if they seek relief in ways we don't approve.

Laura Sessions Stepp, who is on leave from the Style section of The Post, is working on a book about the interaction between adults and adolescents.

Copyright 1999 The Washington Post
The Washington Post
September 2, 1999, Thursday, Final Edition
SECTION: STYLE; Pg. C04
HEADLINE: Far Beyond 'Just Say No'

BYLINE: Laura Sessions Stepp, Washington Post Staff Writer

The federal drug czar and his deputies have a message for parents this fall. Go out for a pizza with your kid.

In a barrage of new public service announcements, videos, brochures, and even suggested filler for annual financial reports, the Office of National Drug Control Policy will tell parents and other adults that it's not enough just to talk to kids about drugs. Parents also need to discuss Kosovo, listen to their kids' favorite CDs, ride bikes together--in other words, stay involved.

Gone are the days when anti-drug campaigners told kids to "just say no," putting the burden for solving the drug problem on the shoulders of those younger than 18. Today, the campaigners have joined other social reformers in touting parent responsibility. Phrases such as "parenting skills" and "personal efficacy" roll off their tongues as easily as THC, the active ingredient in marijuana.

"Kids don't have problems, adults have problems," said drug czar Barry R. McCaffrey, a retired Army general. "If we do the right things, chances are they'll be all right. They don't want to self-destruct."

The campaign's message arrives at a time when many parents apparently question their influence, even if their kids do not. In a recent survey of parents and teens by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, almost half of the parents said they believed their children would try illegal drugs in the future. At the same time, a similar proportion of teens who had never used marijuana credited their parents for that decision.

The conclusion? Parents have more power than they think.

About half of the federal campaign's \$ 185 million budget this year focuses on kids, and that effort claims the lion's share of media attention. A campaign-financed, bright blue bus with eight teenagers, for example, toured shopping malls and drug rehab centers along the East Coast last month, attracting TV crews eager to show the young reporters interviewing other teens about drug abuse. The "Straight Scoop Road Tour" will be aired later this year on MediaOne cable.

Pushing the 'Anti-Drug'

But the rest of the budget is devoted to parents and other adults, falling under a new theme: "Love [or Truth, or Honesty or Communication]. The Anti-Drug." One page out of a three-ring binder that staffers carry around like coffee explains: "The goal of this advertising is to reinforce to parents that they are the number one deterrent to drug abuse. They can make a huge difference and we will equip them with the skills they need to succeed."

The campaign already posts tips for parents on its America Online Web site (keyword Drug Help), garnered from a panel of experts with whom it consults. A videotape for parents is in the works, as are brochures for parents as well as teachers, coaches and chief financial officers. "We're saying to CEOs, 'Here's information for your newsletter or your annual report,'" said Alan Levitt, McCaffrey's senior adviser.

The campaign also solicits McCaffrey, a straight-talking father of three, to speak to groups of parents. McCaffrey says his most difficult task on such occasions is to convince his audience "that their children are listening to them. Kids are waiting for Mom and Dad to say, 'In this family, we don't drive

drunk, smoke dope or have premarital sex.'

"I don't think you have to talk about drugs a lot," he continues. "The best anti-drug message is kicking a soccer ball with your daughter, or sitting down and eating dinner together."

McCaffrey turned to the "Straight Scoop" kids this week to ask what they had heard about parents from the dozens of teens they had interviewed. "Do you think some parents give up on kids?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah," several said in unison.

But don't confine your concern to parents, the kids told McCaffrey.

"We talked to a number of kids who felt betrayed by adults, including coaches who gave kids drugs after basketball games," Dela Grantham from Richmond said. Later, she elaborated: "Kids see a lot of two-faced adults, partying and drinking and not paying attention to them."

Barry McCaffrey, U.S. drug czar, talks with teens who interviewed their peers about drug use on the "Straight Scoop Road Tour." A new prevention campaign focuses on parents.

Copyright 1999 The Washington Post
The Washington Post
May 08, 1999, Saturday, Final Edition

SECTION: STYLE; Pg. C01

HEADLINE: The Boy Who Learned to Count on Love; Mayor Anthony Williams Recalls an Early Life of Neglect, and the Family That Changed It

BYLINE: Laura Sessions Stepp, Washington Post Staff Writer

There is something that D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams wants you to know. Something that may help explain his natural shyness and his affection for the absurd, as well as a recent passion for pulling children into political conversation, as in: "This city is like a little precious baby that keeps getting its butt kicked."

Forty-seven years ago, Williams was a precious little baby abandoned by a teenage mother. As he tells it, he spent the first three years of his life languishing in the home of a foster family that didn't talk to him, sing to him or even turn him over in his crib.

Then Virginia and Lewis Williams swooped him up and he found love. He also found brothers and sisters, strict Catholic schools, a host of after-school activities and a frame bungalow to grow up in that remains in the family to this day. These people and circumstances helped fill the holes in his heart and enabled him to eventually ask the residents of the nation's capital to make him their leader.

Williams has never hidden the fact that he was adopted out of less than happy circumstances. But he has not discussed any specifics, perhaps because he hasn't allowed himself to think about his past. "I'm thinking of these things very consciously now, for the first time," he said in an interview in his office yesterday, the day before he was to co-host a benefit for Prevent Child Abuse of Metropolitan Washington, an agency for children and families at risk.

Neither he nor his adoptive mother ever felt the need to research his birth or foster care records. But they say he was turned over to Los Angeles social services while still in the hospital in July 1951. Social workers contacted a white family, who took him in, assuming their light-skinned baby was white. During that first year it became clear that he wasn't, and social workers started looking for a new family that would adopt him.

Copyright 1994 The Washington Post
The Washington Post
January 30, 1994, Sunday, Final Edition
SECTION: FIRST SECTION; PAGE A1
HEADLINE: Sniffing Fumes: A Growing and Deadly Trend Among Teenagers

BYLINE: Laura Sessions Stepp, Washington Post Staff Writer

It started out like any other Saturday night for the vivacious 15-year-old: lounging on the couch at a friend's town house, catching a movie on the VCR with several classmates from school. Twice, according to one friend, she stepped outside for a "huff" and popped back in a couple of minutes later. The third time, she didn't come back.

"Jen's passed out!" someone yelled and several teens rushed out, having heard a loud thump as if a body had hit the deck. There the girl lay in her blue jeans, peach shirt and blue Vans sneakers, unconscious, a propane tank hose by her side.

Jennifer Leigh Hoover, a sophomore at Lackey High School in Charles County, died that night last fall of cardiac arrest after inhaling propane gas from an outdoor grill. In search of a two-minute high, she added her name to a growing number of young, often middle-class teenagers who sniff the fumes from aerosol sprays, paint thinner, gasoline and other ordinary household products for cheap, and sometimes deadly, thrills.

Sniffing has been around as long as model airplane glue and gasoline pumps, but the last few years have witnessed what an article in the New England Journal of Medicine calls abuse "of epidemic proportions." According to a 1992 study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, an estimated 338,000 U.S. youth ages 12 to 17 reported sniffing inhalants within the 30 days before the study, and twice that many reported using inhalants in the previous 12 months. While general drug use among teenagers has declined since 1975, inhalant use has climbed, according to another federal survey: Among high school seniors, it rose from 10 percent in 1975 to 17 percent in 1992.

"[Inhalants] are becoming a real popular form of chemical abuse," says Scott Ellis, a drug counselor in Lincoln, Neb., who worked with three 5-year-olds caught sniffing gasoline they had put into baby food jars. "A lot of kids and their families don't see it as doing drugs, but it's like riding a bike down the hill without your brakes. You may make it and you may not."

Jennifer's parents, Nancy and Berk Hoover, didn't see the crash coming. They say they talked to Jenny several times about illegal drugs, especially after she started smoking an occasional cigarette. "Oh Dad," she'd say to Berk, "I wouldn't do anything like that." She even joined the high school chapter of Students Against Drugs, where students discussed the hazards of alcohol, cocaine and LSD.

"We never even thought there might be something right in the home," says Nancy, sitting in the cozy kitchen of their small house in Indian Head. "After they're 10 years old and can read the labels, you don't talk about the stuff under the sink."

"I just don't understand it," Nancy continues, her eyes filling with tears. Only Patrick Hoover, Jennifer's older brother, offers a clue: Jennifer was a curious sort; "she probably saw someone else do it and it didn't kill them so she thought she'd just try it."

According to Sgt. Robert Cleaveland of Charles County, the detective who is investigating Jennifer's death on Nov. 6, she had recently started hanging out with a group of about 20 boys and girls, some of whom began experimenting with propane gas last summer. Propane was only the latest in a number of gases some students had tried, according to several Lackey classmates.

"A lot of kids do Freon," one boy said during lunch in the school cafeteria a couple of weeks after Jennifer died. "You put it in a plastic bag and breathe in. If you take a hit out of a can, it'll freeze your lungs."

"I've used propane a little," said another boy. "Also Freon, nitrous oxide. ... I did it just to experiment."

Lauren Diedrich, who drove Jennifer to the town house that ill-fated night, said her friends get high on inhalants because "it's fun, like getting drunk or something." Jennifer told her she liked propane because "it makes you laugh," said Lauren, who also said she'd never tried it. "I don't think she knew it could kill her."

Inhalants are popular because they're cheap, accessible and perceived as safe. Sniffing often begins innocently, says Lawrence Brain, a psychiatrist who specializes in adolescent drug abuse at the Psychiatric Institute of Washington. "A kid gets hold of gasoline from a mower and starts inhaling that, or magic markers... ."

The same youngster may walk into a hardware store, open up a can of paint thinner, put some of it on his jacket and leave, says Officer Tony Werner of the Anne Arundel County police. "You don't need a bag, you can just walk around pretending you're wiping your nose."

The youth then may proceed to inhale the potpourri-scented propellant from an air freshener, which if he can't find one in the house pantry, he can acquire at any grocery store for \$ 1.35. A cigarette lighter containing butane can deliver the same effect, for \$ 2.39. Convenience stores in Anne Arundel County report that on Friday nights they often sell out of the fluid, says Werner. When a 15-year-old Glen Burnie cheerleader collapsed and died after sniffing butane, county police tried to discourage store owners from selling the fluid to minors, Werner says, "but we couldn't make them because it's legal."

"[Inhalants] are kids' way around illegal drugs," Werner continues. "Kids don't have to worry about going out on the street, or getting shot, they can just walk in a market and get it."

And if they are caught, they have a ready excuse -- "I smoke" or "I'm working on a model airplane" -- says Fairfax police officer Bill Baitinger, former liaison to Chantilly High School. The past two school years, he says, butane and glue were the inhalants of choice there.

Peter Tretick, another Lackey student, says he knows a park where a tank of nitrous oxide is readily available. "Whippets" of nitrous oxide, manufactured for whipping-cream dispensers, also can be purchased at retail stores and are passed around freely at concerts and all-night dance parties. Trent Tschirgi, assistant director of the office of substance abuse studies at the University of Maryland School of Pharmacy, says he was searching for a seltzer charger at a specialty store in his neighborhood mall when he spied six rows of nitrous oxide bottles. "Mostly it's teenagers who buy this stuff," a clerk told him. "They put it in a balloon at a party and snort it and it doesn't hurt anybody."

"In my own heart I didn't feel it was all that dangerous," says Terry Valdez of Henderson, Colo., who one evening confronted her 17-year-old son, Shannon, with a can of fabric protector that she had found in his bedroom. Shannon said, "Oh, Mom, you have to use it a long time before it's dangerous," and cited a friend who had been sniffing the same type of aerosol for more than a year. The next day Shannon died in an alley, a can of fabric protector in his hand.

Young people also seek out inhalants because they feel they can control them, says Neil Rosenberg, founder of the International Institute for Inhalant Abuse: "They can sniff just enough and get high, or a lot and hallucinate." "It's like having several drinks but it hits quicker and goes away quicker," says Tschirgi.

Lauren Diedrich, 17, says Jennifer told her that when she inhaled propane, she'd see "checkers or polka dots." Another student says that after a prolonged whiff, the huffer hears "Pac-Man sounds ... 'Wah, wah, wah.' "

What's happening to those huffers, says Tschirgi, is that the chemicals are replacing oxygen in the blood, making the heart beat irregularly and altering breathing. Death can occur instantaneously (called "sudden sniffing death") the first time one huffs or the 50th, because of cardiac arrhythmia, respiratory failure or as a result of a sudden release of adrenaline. More than 60 American youth died last year from sniffing, according to the inhalant abuse institute.

"To some [kids] the danger is the challenge," says Sgt. Cleaveland, "to be able to say 'I beat the test.' " Those who don't die can suffer serious damage, however: After six months of regular use, the brain, lungs, nerves, liver, kidneys and bones may be permanently damaged, according to Rosenberg, a neurologist who has examined dozens of brain scans of serious sniffers. Abusers may mimic victims of Alzheimer's disease, suffering from "chronic memory problems [and] major difficulties with reading, writing and arithmetic," he says. In terms of coordination, "they look like a staggering drunk." They suffer vision problems and hearing difficulties, and it's not unusual to see abusers in their twenties wearing hearing aids, Rosenberg says.

Rosenberg has taken his message into some schools and wishes he could reach more. But while school officials may mention inhalants in their drug abuse curriculum, they are reluctant to go into detail, he says, for fear of encouraging abuse. After Jennifer's death, Lackey students say they expected an assembly about inhalants. Principal Richetta Acker says one is scheduled for February though she doesn't have a firm date.

Because the presence of inhalants is not picked up in the routine screening following a death, inhalant abuse "has gone largely unreported" in the United States, an article in the New England Journal of Medicine reported in December 1990. "Our research ... leads us to believe that abuse of these readily available inhalants has reached epidemic proportions," authors Earl Siegel and Suman Wason wrote, "indicating an urgent need for preventive efforts directed at teenagers and their parents, with an emphasis on the risk of sudden death from sniffing."

Three years after that article, Nancy and Berk Hoover are standing at the grave of their only daughter, who is buried between her grandmother and cousin at a family plot in Suitland. It is Christmas, blistering cold, time to go home, but something holds them there. "How unfair," Nancy Hoover mourns. Berk picks up: "We knew the rest of the kids, their lives were going on, they were having their Christmas. Jennifer wasn't having any holiday... ."

Faithful Catholics, they take one measure of comfort on this day. "I was thinking, at least we'll always know where she's at," says Berk Hoover. "She's safe now."

Copyright 1996 The Washington Post
The Washington Post
February 05, 1996, Monday, Final Edition
SECTION: STYLE; Pg. C05; STYLE PLUS
HEADLINE: Ritalin: 'In the Wrong Hands, A Dangerous Medication'

BYLINE: Laura Sessions Stepp, Washington Post Staff Writer

Rita Rumbaugh, coordinator of a drug education program in the Montgomery County public schools, is worried. Methylphenidate, better known by its brand name -- Ritalin -- is being abused, she says, both by the hyperactive kids for whom it's prescribed and by others who get it illegally.

"What we're hearing is that young people are crushing it up, inhaling it, using it in combination with alcohol," she says. "It's not hard to get."

Rumbaugh and other drug counselors say most parents of young people taking Ritalin aren't aware of the potential for abuse.

That was the case of a mother in Herndon, whose high school senior would stash a few pills every morning. Later, the young man would sell them at school or parties for \$ 5 a pill, he says. When the bottle was empty, "My mom would just get it refilled."

He probably sold 150 pills over six months. Didn't his mother notice that his pills were disappearing too quickly? "She never paid attention to things like that," says the youth.

Big mistake, says Seneca Valley High School principal Wayne Whigham. "In the wrong hands, this is a dangerous medication."

If snorted or taken in larger-than-therapeutic doses, methylphenidate can cause tremors, hypertension, even stroke, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Children taking prescribed doses usually do not become dependent, but those taking it illegally can become psychologically dependent, says the DEA. And there's a small possibility that they may move onto other drugs, including cocaine.

The DEA attributes the reported rise in abuse partly to the drug's phenomenal popularity in the legal market. The number of children for whom the drug is prescribed, at least 2.4 million according to the DEA, is more than twice what it was in 1990. The amount filled by pharmacists is six times what it was that year.

The buyers are hardly urban: The top 10 states for amounts prescribed per 100,000 residents include Idaho, New Hampshire and Alaska. (Virginia ranks 16th; Maryland, 47th, and D.C., 50th.)

Wade Horn, former executive director of Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD), says parents go for the Ritalin too quickly when their children are disruptive or start failing in school. Methylphenidate is highly effective for many children, says Horn, a child psychologist, but it is "far too popular and kids are being over-diagnosed. Parents shop for the diagnosis [of ADD]. They get mad at you if you refuse. I've never seen anything similar in all my years of psychology."

Insurance companies contribute to this, Horn says, because they're more willing to reimburse a parent for a prescription than for a comprehensive psychological evaluation.

Those who work with children taking methylphenidate say parents need to keep a tight lid on when and how the pills go out.

"Are you monitoring how many pills are in the bottle?" Whigham asks. If it's dispensed in the morning, "are you standing right there to make sure it goes down the throat and not under the tongue?"

If the student needs a second dose during the school day, talk to the school nurse and make sure she watches the drug being swallowed, Whigham recommends. Even better, bypass the school altogether, says Tony Tommasello, director of substance abuse studies at the University of Maryland-Baltimore. Administer a timed-release pill in the morning.

If you suspect your child may be abusing methylphenidate, ask your doctor to run a blood test checking levels of that particular drug.

You also might want to switch to an antidepressant that is less likely to be abused, says Sally Eller, a social worker who runs the Phoenix II alternative school in Gaithersburg.

Finally, talk to your child about methylphenidate abuse and suggest what to do if he or she is approached by another child asking for a pill. In some states, it is a felony to distribute methylphenidate.

CHADD does not mince words in its most recent newsletter: Children "need to understand the danger of someone taking their medication without medical supervision and that it could have serious consequences for them, as well."

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

May 8, 2000

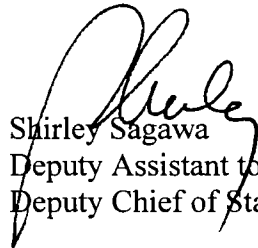
Laura Sessions Stepp
2448 North Pocomoke Street
Arlington, VA 22207

Dear Laura:

I wanted to thank you personally for agreeing to speak at last Tuesday's conference. I learned a lot from your presentation and have heard a great deal of positive feedback about your remarks. We will send you a copy of the conference videotape when it becomes available. In case you missed the C-Span replay Tuesday night, you can see the morning session on the C-Span website.

Again, thank you. I hope our paths will cross again soon.

Sincerely,



Shirley Sagawa
Deputy Assistant to the President and
Deputy Chief of Staff to the First Lady

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

April 25, 2000

Laura Sessions Stepp
Staff Writer
The Washington Post
1150 15th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Laura:

On behalf of President and Mrs. Clinton, I am writing to invite you to speak at the White House Conference on Teenagers, to be held Tuesday, May 2, 2000, from 10 am to 5 pm. The conference, subtitled "Raising Responsible and Resourceful Youth," will explore:

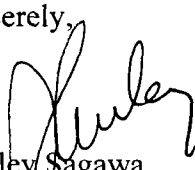
- Evidence that the preteen years are as important as the first three years of life and set patterns for adult behavior and success;
- Perceptions and realities about the role parents play in the lives of their teenage children;
- The risks, challenges and anxieties faced by today's teens;
- The impact of new media on youth and parenting; and
- What parents, communities, and young people themselves can do to avoid risk behaviors to build a safe and successful path to adulthood.

The opening session of the one-day conference will take place in the East Room with an audience comprised of parents and teens, educators, youth workers, foundation leaders, researchers, and policymakers. The opening session will be followed by lunch, breakout sessions hosted by Administration officials and members of Congress, and a closing reception.

We would like you to speak as part of Panel II. The tentative order of speakers is enclosed for your information, as is a fact sheet for speakers providing logistical information.

We very much appreciate your willingness to speak at the conference and look forward to seeing you May 2.

Sincerely,



Shirley Sagawa
Deputy Assistant to the President and
Deputy Chief of Staff to the First Lady

Outline of remarks by Laura Sessions Stepp at White House conference May 2, 2000

Parents matter to teenagers – a lot. When I began researching my book, *Our Last Best Shot*, I intended to focus on the importance of non-related adults. The kids themselves kept leading me back to their families.

--Two examples: Shannon and Rodney

Parents who raise healthy teens take the same three steps. You might call them the 3 Rs of parenting. These parents show respect for the remarkable growth of their kids' bodies and minds, give their kids an increasing amount of responsibility and work at keeping a close, if redefined, relationship to their kids.

Showing respect: Jack's mom Gay

---How easy it is to disrespect teens: Jack's father Phillip

---Why it's important to show respect in a society that would rather slam-dunk teens than high-five them: Kids in Ulysses in search of a teen center

Giving them responsibility: Edwin's father Edd (Eldon in book); Mario's parents Jay and Joyce Rawlings

---How fear holds parents back (Melissa's mom Janice)

---How parents successfully manage their fear (Edwin's dad Edd)

---Parents who allow for mistakes, both their child's (Jack and the clubhouse fire), and their own (Marcy Hoover)

Keeping a close relationship: Libby's mother Rebekah

---Emphasizing communication over control: Questions, not accusations (Rebekah)

---Communicating on behalf of their kids to their other relatives, teachers, neighbors, friends, church members (Edwin's dad Edd)

---Plugging into the kid's world: A hobby (Jack's mom Gay); school (Edwin's father Edd); music, movies and TV (Myself). Sipping from their cup but not gulping it down

---Playing with them. One-on-one time. (Edwin's mom Dorothy)

Closeness is earned. The most successful parents I met made tangible sacrifices for their kids. The most involved parents had the most fun.

2448 N. Pocomoke St.
Arlington, Va. 22207
May 8, 2000

file

Ms. Shirley Sagawa
Deputy Chief of Staff to the First Lady
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Shirley:

Congratulations on putting together such a splendid conference on teenagers, and thank you for including the Speakers and me in it. I was amazed at how prepared everyone was, how smoothly it ran and how chock-full it was with good information. You and the rest of the staff were incredibly helpful and good-natured throughout the preparation process, a true accomplishment given the short amount of time you had to put everything together.

Unlike other conferences about youth that I have attended, which have been weighed down with problems, this one was characterized by an upbeat, can-do spirit that infected all of us. The best compliment I heard came from Roxanne Spillet, president of Boys & Girls Clubs of America. She told me, "The conference made me wish I could be a parent of a teenager again." You don't hear that very often!

The conference will help all of us do a better job at communicating the promising lives that teenagers can lead and the positive role that parents can play in ensuring that promise.

Best regards,

Laura

Laura Sessions Stepp

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

July 18, 2000

Laura Sessions Stepp
2448 North Pocomoke
Arlington, VA 22207

Dear Laura:

Thank you for sending a copy of your book for Mrs. Clinton. I will see that she gets it. You must be very gratified to see your work completed. Everyone here who has read it has found the book to be both helpful and readable. I'm glad we could highlight it at the conference.

With best regards,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Shirley', is written over the printed name.

Shirley Sagawa
Deputy Assistant to the President and
Deputy Chief of Staff to the First Lady