

NEGOTIATING THE

What are the symptoms of a troubled teen and how can you help stop your child going off the rails? **Cheryl Critchley** reports

IT IS every parent's worst nightmare. Your daughter is off the rails, sleeping with AFL footballers, openly taking drugs and publicly releasing compromising videos of public figures.

Rubbing salt into already raw emotional wounds, she then tells the media her parents have washed their hands of her.

What on earth do you do? All parents have watched the AFL nude photo scandal unfold with growing horror.

The troubled 17-year-old who allegedly had sex with St Kilda players and now claims to have had a relationship with 47-year-old player manager Ricky Nixon could be anyone's daughter.

The scary thing is her antics, including sexual promiscuity, alleged drug use, posting explicit photos online and parental estrangement, are not uncommon.

Some indiscretions are played out publicly, like party teen Corey Worthington's trail of destruction and the Xavier College students caught stealing in New Zealand.

The vast majority happen in ordinary families as most teenagers will rebel, hate Mum and Dad or experiment with sex and/or drugs at some stage. But how do you know when things are out of control and real help is needed?

Most experts agree the "St Kilda schoolgirl" needs professional help. Even so, getting there is not easy if she does not co-operate.

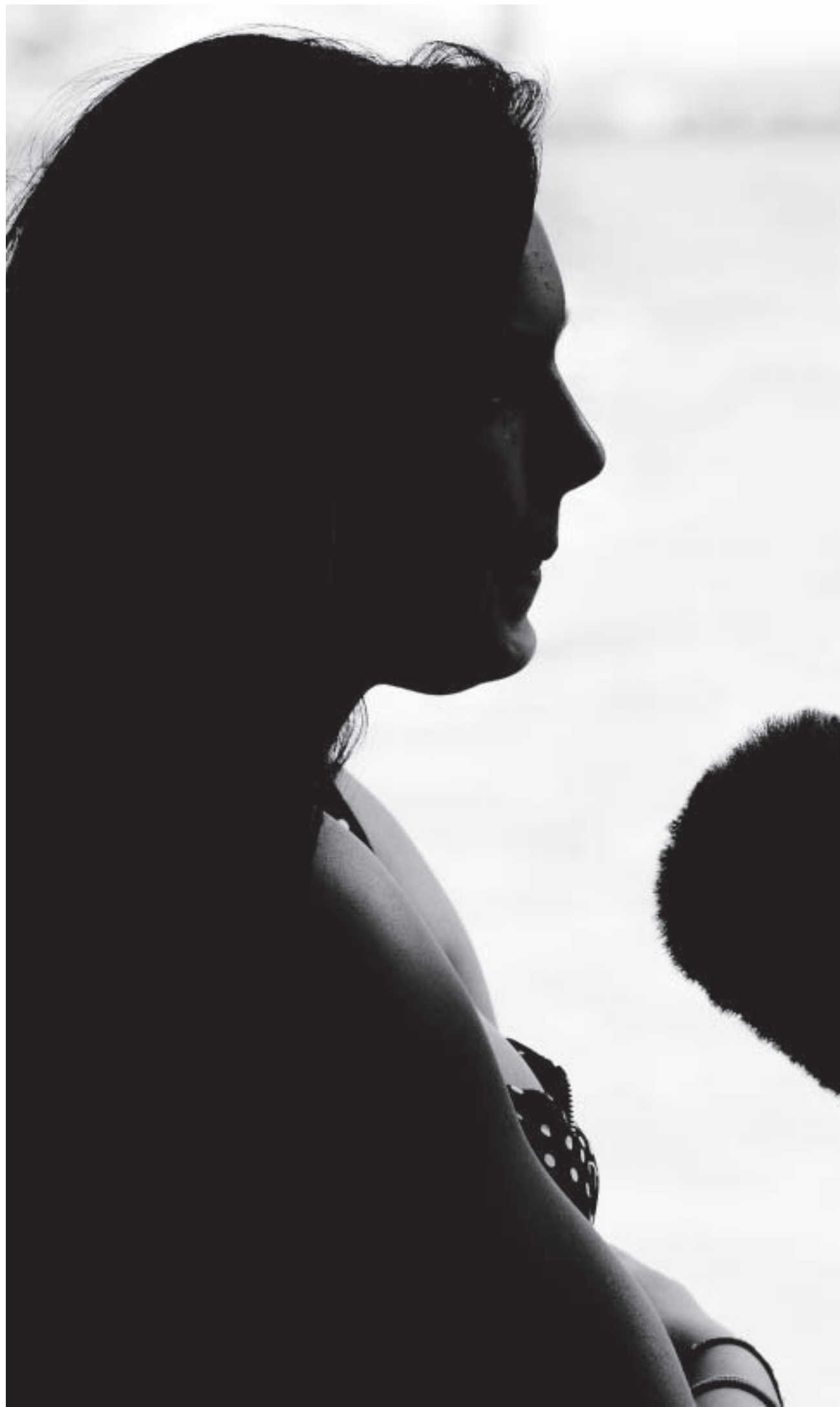
So far, the girl has remained defiant, telling the media she knows what she is doing and that apart from lying about taking some player photos she has no regrets.

Melbourne psychologists are loath to diagnose her publicly but say she is clearly troubled and her case highlights a number of issues faced by many teens and their parents.

The seeds for trouble can be sown in childhood if parents don't help children to develop a good values system and resilience, or the child feels they have been abandoned at some point.

In other cases, a child will develop a mental illness or exhibit symptoms of a personality disorder, regardless of circumstances or parenting style.

Family psychologist and *Tricky Kids* (Finch) author Andrew Fuller says society's obsession with celebrity and the failure of many adults to behave



sensibly are not helping. Mr Fuller says teenagers are finding their place in the world and need the guidance of responsible, charismatic adults.

However, almost half of all parents have had their own attachment and insecurity issues.

Mr Fuller says cases like

the St Kilda teen, which involves celebrities and adults who should know better, are a "wake-up call" for them as well as young people.

"We need to put celebrity back into its box," Mr Fuller says. "We sometimes see celebrities as having glossier, happier and more

fulfilling lives than everybody else and that can sometimes be a big danger. They're just human beings like you and me."

With so much that can go wrong, it is little wonder many families struggle during the teen years.

Adolescent psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg says

parents need to act if disruptive behaviour is continual and damaging to them and their family.

For example, one girl who loved horses and saw them every weekend suddenly stopped going. The doctor said she turned out to be suffering from depression.

"What we're looking for is

PREPARING CHILDREN FOR ADOLESCENCE

As pre-schoolers:

- Instil your values and encourage good self-esteem.
- Provide structure from a young age. Start rituals such as a special day together.
- Ensure they have a charismatic adult in their life who loves and listens to them.

In primary school:

- Have consistent rules and reward good choices.
- Model an optimistic outlook and positive body image.
- Teach children to manage their anger and empathise with others.
- Limit technology in bedrooms.
- Encourage sport and other activities, which encourage healthy habits.

At high school:

- Keep communication open.
- Encourage them to think for themselves and not follow the pack.
- Discourage social networking if not mature enough.
- Keep computers in a communal location and monitor online activity.
- Make them take responsibility by helping to pay for their technology.
- Talk to the parents of your child's friends.
- Tell your child you will love and be there for them no matter what.

Early warning signs:

- Sudden change in personality, eg from social to anti-social.
- Withdrawal from established activities and friendships.
- Rule-breaking behaviours such as truancy, not keeping time agreements, stealing, lying.
- Sleep disturbances.
- Sudden and constant irritability, which can indicate depression.

Seeking help:

- Tell them that the family has a problem; not just them.
- Explain that help is needed by getting all family members to outline the impact of their behaviour.
- Avoid diagnosis by internet, which can confuse.
- Seek counselling with a respected adolescent expert, possibly together.
- Your GP may be a good starting point and can refer you to a specialist.
- Consider self-help groups such as AA or Narcotics Anonymous (NA).

a departure and quite a significant departure in their normal behaviour," Dr Carr-Gregg says.

Convincing a teenager to get out of bed is hard enough. So how do you get them to counselling?

Dr Carr-Gregg's book, *When to Really Worry; Mental health problems in*

PARENT MINEFIELD

Troubled: The 'St Kilda schoolgirl' (far left) talks to the media about her alleged relationship with Ricky Nixon.

teenagers and what to do about them (Penguin), helps parents tell the difference between normal rebellion and dangerous behaviour.

If serious problems emerge, Dr Carr-Gregg says it is essential to find a reputable health professional specialising in adolescents, or the child may simply scoff at them.

He says that in many cases, the worst can be prevented if parents get to know and take an interest in their children from birth, encouraging them to play sport and pursue interests such as music.

Optimistic role modelling — how many parents tell their kids not to drink or smoke then do it themselves? — and listening and helping children deal with adversity are also important.

High school teacher, mother-of-two and Teen Talk book series author Sharon Witt says modelling good, positive behaviour is vital for children and teens.

Ms Witt, now writing a book for the parents of teens, says parents must help develop children's self-esteem and ability to resist peer and media pressure from a young age.

"We can model what it looks like to be a positive woman," she says. "And staying connected to your daughter is a big thing."

Above all, Witt says our children should know that, even if their parents don't like their behaviour, they will love them unconditionally.

This won't stop you punishing them but they need to be reassured that their parents would never abandon them.

"You don't like their behaviour but you still love the child," she says.

The St Kilda girl appears to revel in being estranged from her parents, almost as if it gives her permission to do as she pleases. Sadly, that has led to even more trouble, this time with Nixon.

Family psychologist Dr Janet Hall says if it was her daughter she would stay in regular touch, offering emotional support and counselling.

She insists good parents can have a child who goes off the rails, so we should not be quick to judge.

"Be kind and have compassion," she says. "She needs guidance. It might be a personality clash or mental disorder such as borderline personality disorder or antisocial disorder."

"If the parents have modelled antisocial behaviour, however, they can be to blame: for example, heavy drinking, law violations."

Deakin University psychologist Dr Helen



Communicating well: Hannah Abbott. Picture: ANDREW HENSHAW

Respect is key for Hannah and her sisters

GOOD communication, respect and sport have played a big part in Hannah Abbott making it through her teen years so far unscathed.

The 17-year-old is in Year 12 and hopes to study fashion design and fashion journalism.

Her mother, Felicity Savage, says Hannah, the eldest of four girls, has caused few problems.

Ms Savage says 5am starts for rowing and cross-country kept her daughter busy and instilled a sense of teamwork and responsibility. Community work

such as volunteering with the Red Shield Appeal also helped.

"To be very honest, we have had very few teenage tantrums with Hannah," she says.

"During her early teens she was very involved with rowing, netball and cross-country.

"I feel any team sport instils a great sense of camaraderie, commitment and responsibility."

Her parents are separated, but both have always encouraged Hannah, from a young age, to be respectful of her family, her body,

her friends and her belongings. Ms Savage also taught her to always listen, to be guided by her morals and values, and that rudeness and nastiness would never be tolerated.

Boundaries, and encouraging contact with extended family, have also been important.

Hannah is grateful that, unlike in families that lack open communication, she can now tell her parents anything and that she and her mother trust each other.

She also has supportive friends.

"Surround yourself with people with the same values," she says.

"But at the same time, you've got to challenge yourself."

Ms Savage says young children should be taught about good communication and about making choices and that consequences follow bad choices.

"Both parents have always made sure that we will be there for (the children) in terms of emotional support, no matter what the circumstances," Ms Savage says.

McGrath agrees that some teenagers exhibiting extreme behaviour have personality disorders or mental illness.

Borderline personality disorder, for example, sees them swing wildly from periods of extreme satisfaction to rage and revenge seeking.

Such extreme behaviour can be genetic and may or may not be triggered by external factors. To complicate things, many people have more than one condition.

Dr McGrath says some troubled teens feel they were abandoned as a child, even if this wasn't the case. Those with borderline

personality disorder are often overly dramatic and things can worsen with puberty.

"Often, the dramatics are turned on in public," Dr McGrath says.

She stresses setting the groundwork to give children the best chance of coping and early intervention if things go wrong.

That means teaching young children to manage their emotions and feelings, helping to build resilience skills and encouraging self-respect.

"That message needs to be given from the earliest of years," she says. "(And) that self-respect involves

understanding that you could be chewed up and spat out."

Adolescence has always been a nightmare for parents but, as the St Kilda schoolgirl scandal shows, new technology offers many more ways for young people to mess up.

Twenty years ago they'd fight, get drunk, take drugs and sleep with the wrong people.

Today, they can make sex tapes, download rude photos, text inappropriate images and bully each other online for the whole world to see — forever.

Parents can help minimise such dramas by limiting computers and

gaming in bedrooms and monitoring online activities.

Dr Carr-Gregg adds that families should have computers in a public place and develop an online contract with their children.

"There's no point banning it," he says. At the end of the day, almost all teens will test boundaries and cause headaches. The best parents can do is minimise the fallout and lay the foundations for them to come through it as decent human beings.

NET LINKS: drjanethall.com.au; andrewfuller.com.au; michaelcarr-gregg.com.au; teentalkbooks.com

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