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Extreme Pursuit

Winning the Race for the Heart of Your Son

JOHN E. DAVIS, M.A.



NAV PRESS®

BRINGING TRUTH TO LIFE

Sample from *Extreme Pursuit* / ISBN 1600061001

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For my Dad

I love you

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Foreword

I am a licensed professional counselor. I counsel adolescents (mostly girls) and their families. I have even written a few parenting books for mothers and their teenage daughters. I am always looking for resources to support my work in this area.

Years ago a pastor told me about John Davis. He said, “If you ever need to make a referral to a counselor for an adolescent boy, I recommend John.” I started referring inquiring parents (mostly moms) to John. And then something remarkable happened. I started hearing back from these same moms. They said things like:

“Thank you for sending us to John. He saved my son’s life!”

“Thank you for telling us about John. He’s changing our entire family.”

“Thank you for knowing about John. He is just what we needed.”

I make a lot of referrals, but I seldom get follow-up phone calls like this, so I decided I needed to meet this man. I invited him for coffee at Starbucks. John showed up carrying his Nalgene water bottle (he didn’t drink coffee, which worried

me a little, because Starbucks is important to me!). He exuded health and passion. I knew that I was meeting a rare man. He told me about his adolescence, a story of excellence in athletics and loneliness in relationships. He disclosed his mistakes in looking for connection in all the wrong places. He talked about the million little pieces of brokenness in him that led him to some extreme places. And then he told me of his passion for helping boys who are lost in a culture that sucks them into dark and dangerous places and whose parents don't know how to find and help them. I was hooked. I knew that John would be my "referral" for as long as he practiced.

What I didn't know was that two years later my own family would fall apart. A messy, unthinkable divorce. And I had a fourteen-year-old son who was quickly becoming one of the lost boys John had talked about. My son had low self-esteem, an absentee dad, and a mom who didn't know what a teenage boy needed. You can guess who I called: John Davis.

When we met again I told him my story—of my own failures, my ex-husband's failures, and my son's struggles with self-esteem, depression, and experimentation with drugs. (Who would blame him for wanting something to make him feel better in the midst of the mess his parents had created?) I was nervous. I knew that I, the counselor, writer, "expert on adolescents," had made a big mess of things.

After I'd told John my story, I showed him my son's eighth-grade picture. John didn't lecture or advise. He cried. He looked at the picture of my son—an awkward, confused, lonely boy—and he cried for him. *I need you to get this.* This big, athletic, handsome, competent man wept for my lost boy!

And then John said, “Sharon, I don’t know exactly how to help your son. But I *can* help him. And you are not alone. Let me take it from here.”

Single mom (or mom in a marriage feeling like a single mom), you “get” how these were words of life to me. John gave me an extravagant gift for which I owe a debt of gratitude I can never repay. If you are a single mom or a mom doing most of the parenting on your own, this book is for you! You might read about some mistakes you’ve made. We moms don’t know how to relate perfectly to our sons. They are “other.” John can give you powerful tools as well as encourage you to invite your son’s dad to participate more fully in his life.

During our counseling with John, he said to my son and me that the whole point of the counseling was to transfer what John offered to my son to the healing of his relationship with his dad. I hated that because I was early in the process of forgiving his father. My son hated it because he didn’t want his dad at that time. But John was right. My son and his father have forged a healthy relationship that is guiding my now-eighteen-year-old son to being a man—something a boy can learn *only* from his father.

And so, dads, this book is for you! You may feel guilty for your choices or inadequate to guide your son or emasculated by your wife’s criticisms of you, but *you* are what your son needs to be the man he was created to be. I know of no one better than John to help you with that. He passionately wants to give you tools to help your son. He can do it if you will acknowledge that you can’t do it without help.

My son’s time in therapy with John was short-lived, due to circumstances beyond our control. In our final session, once

again John said very little. He wept. He cried in front of my son because of his sorrow that they would no longer be seeing each other every week. Months later on occasions of failure and success, my son would ask me, “Can I call John and tell him about this?” John is tough—a little. But he is mostly tender—full of fierce compassion for his adolescent clients. And they love him because he loves them. And that really is the key.

John can teach you to be tough. That might hurt at times because facing our failures or oversights is humbling. But John can also teach you to be tender. I’ve seen him cry much more than “kick butt.” Moms and dads, he’ll teach you to be tough and tender in the midst of pain, disgust, confusion, fear, and agony. And then you’ll be what your teenage boy needs—a rare parent for a boy who is no ordinary boy.

John Davis is a strong man who climbs mountains; confronts abusive parents; counsels teenagers who hide guns, sell drugs, or get hooked by pornography. He’s a man who heads straight into all that most of us want to look away from. So if your son is three and just starting to talk a blue streak, read this book. If your son is thirteen and wanting a tattoo, read this book. If your son is seventeen and using drugs, read this book. If your son is twenty-three and living in a dark hole away from you and God, read this book. It’s never too late to begin an extreme pursuit for the heart of your son.

Thank you, John, for weeping for my son and me. You are a tender warrior. We parents have a lot to learn from you.

Sharon A. Hersh, M.A.
Lone Tree, Colorado

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The Chase Is On

In December 2001 I took a group of guys on a mountaineering expedition to Longs Peak—a 14,259-foot mountain near Estes Park, Colorado. We spent a day mountaineering, which included ice climbing, building a snow igloo, and working together as a team on a safety rope. That night, however, we experienced an unexpected wicked prewinter storm accompanied by extreme winds and below-zero temperatures. We had all the appropriate gear and were *generally* prepared—except for the *extreme* change in weather. That night the temperature was minus twenty degrees.

The following morning the gas tanks for our cooking stoves were frozen, so we couldn't boil snow for water and couldn't cook breakfast. Everyone ate trail mix while we shivered in the poststorm cold. I went out to warm up the tanks in the sun and take photos of our snow igloos. While taking pictures, I noticed another dramatic change in the climate. Clouds poured off the diamond face of the mountain, cascading and rolling over the peaks and into our campsite. I yelled at everyone to get ready

for another storm! Within three minutes winds hit in excess of eighty miles per hour and tore through our gear, throwing it in every direction for more than eight hundred feet. I could barely stay standing.

After the storm had blown through, about three hours later, we gathered and packed our gear and climbed down. Our tents were torn, and the risk in staying was too great, as I noticed yet another front that would no doubt bring with it more treacherous wind and snow. We didn't make the summit, but everyone was alive.

How many parents feel like a storm is coming? Some do. Maybe that's why you picked up this book. You sense that things are off; the barometer that you use to read your son is telling you that something is coming over the horizon, maybe before you're ready. Many parents don't anticipate a storm because their kid seems "well-enough behaved"—for a teenager, anyway. He's keeping up in school, playing sports, even going to church youth group. They don't know a storm is already brewing behind the diamond-like facade. Their son may be experimenting with drugs, abusing alcohol, or having sex—all while the climate seems pretty balmy.

Caught Unawares

At sixteen Garrett was creative, bright, and popular with his peers. He maintained a 3.75 grade point average and held down a regular job. The first sign that things might not be as they appeared was Garrett's first misdemeanor: possession of

marijuana. His second encounter with the law came because he liked to go joyriding around his neighborhood in his truck. One evening he ran over three trees, valued at more than \$1,800, which he paid to have replaced. His third cry for attention came when he got arrested for driving under the influence, blowing a .245, which is about four times the legal limit. This time he drove into a burning campfire. His fourth collision with the law was a misdemeanor—a minor-in-possession-of-alcohol ticket, considered by many teenagers as a badge of honor. His fifth scream for attention came when he was flagged over by police officers. Knowing that he was driving without a license, Garrett tried to flee the police. His sixth attempt to get someone to notice what was going on inside him came when he drove intoxicated to his scheduled probation appointment.

You might be thinking—where were his parents? Were they even in the same country? Well, you would have wanted to ask my parents the same thing if you had known me twenty-five years ago. I was attending high school, although I participated as minimally as I could. I was involved in sports and extra-curricular activities, and I had a few close friends. My parents asked me the questions that parents should be asking. Despite my parents' and siblings' efforts to relate to me, however, I was an angry kid. I was sensitive to criticism and defensive about personal growth and change. I made a lot of bad choices as a result of feeling emotionally disconnected, and I couldn't understand (any more than my parents could) why I resisted what I most craved—connection with others.

Garrett told me once, “My dad was so disappointed in me. He never really yelled, though, except when I showed up at the

house drunk. Normally, he would put his hand on his forehead and shake his head and say, ‘When are you going to learn?’

“I kept on making dumb choices based on the fact that I really wanted to fit in. It was huge for me to see my dad devastated. But after I’d have a month of good behavior, I’d forget about his disappointing looks. I always got way ahead of myself, feeling that nothing would get in the way of my success.”

After working together for six months, Garrett and I were able to determine that he was operating on a six-week cycle emotionally. His acting out was tied directly to his emotions. Garrett would have three to four weeks of success and be feeling really great about himself, and then a buildup of emotions that he wasn’t working through would trip him into a downward spiral. This really hit him hard. Garrett was sensitive and had a sweet disposition, but this internal struggle was tearing him apart from the inside out, and his choices reflected that. Many times in our sessions Garrett would express tremendous frustration and self-contempt. We spent hours talking about every behavior he had ever tried in order to help turn himself around and be the best young man he could be, but it took us about a year of individual and family counseling to find the keys to this boy’s heart.

Extreme Times Call for Extreme Measures

These are extreme days. The media and electronic technologies have accelerated and amplified *everything*. Things happen earlier,

faster, and with more intensity than ever before. Adolescence is no exception. This stage of human development has always been unmatched by any other in terms of its rapid physical changes, roller-coaster emotions, and relational turmoil. It is crucial that we match these extreme days with an extreme pursuit of our sons.

Today's boys are engaging in higher levels of extreme behavior than ever before. Boys as young as nine are immersed in pornography and substance abuse. Even boys who are not engaged in extreme behaviors are influenced by peers and media that suggest that these behaviors define masculinity. The behaviors of teenage boys reveal an internal wiring that drives them to be extraordinary, to build something great, to create an impact on their world—rather than to be average, left alone, unchallenged, and uninspired.

At a time when boys need strong, appropriate modeling, many parents are disconnected from their sons because of the demands of their own lives and their perceived inability to make a difference in their son's world. One of my friends told me that when she saw her sons' school's number on their caller ID, she wouldn't answer. We're all tempted to put our heads in the sand or look the other way and hope it's not *our* son who will get into trouble. But it's not worth the risk because the risks out there are huge. Disengaged parents usually find out much too late that they should have been doing more, and in many cases, what they were doing should have been done differently. The world can be a dark and dangerous place for a boy.

Over the past decade I've counseled more than a thousand boys and young men. They fit what may be a surprising profile to many, in that they are bright and have sensitive hearts. Almost

without exception, however, *they are emotionally disconnected*. Their souls are adrift, with no anchor for stability or harbor for protection, and the world eats them up. In many cases, by the time a parent is alert to the danger, a tremendous amount of damage has already been done. That's usually when I get the call—an anxious, frustrated parent is seeing their son being devoured and they don't know how to stop it.

As a teen your son is desperately searching for his own identity as he interacts with the world. Teens seek *experiences* and will gravitate to people who fit into that experiential mindset, a mindset that asks, "How do I really connect with the world?" They look for answers in girls, sports, parties, academics, or withdrawal into a private world of their own music, video games, and computer interactions. A son in this phase is likely to abandon anything that can't help him answer the question, "How do I really connect?" In short, teen boys are desperately trying to find themselves *and* remain connected to someone. Often boys will give up things that are important (values, hobbies, interests, beliefs) in an effort to connect somewhere.

Boys who are in trouble are emotionally disconnected in some important ways from the people most essential to helping them find their identity. They are on the run, looking for something or someone to give them direction as well as relationship that meets the deepest needs of their heart. I understand it's hard to stay connected to a sullen, angry, awkward—sometimes even scary—adolescent boy. Many parents of teenage sons are desperately seeking skills and a strategy. If that sounds like you, be encouraged. I'll help you find both. For example, do you know why "shoulder-to-shoulder" communication is

better than “face-to-face” with a teenage boy? Do you know the things that repel your son rather than draw him to you? The answers to those questions and many more are in the chapters ahead. You *can* learn to effectively communicate and connect with your son in this volatile phase of his life. I’ll give you principles and practical ideas that will empower you to both “get it” and “do it.”

I find that dads, especially, need tools. I will give you new tools and I’ll coach you in more effectively using the tools you already have. Of the 133 sons I have on my client list right now, only five of their dads are actively engaged with their sons. Usually I get calls from moms looking for solutions, desperate for help. Being a dad is a responsibility, but it’s also an opportunity—a chance to be a part of something huge, something that’s going to outlast anything else you do. You have an opportunity to get a front-row seat and watch a boy being transformed into a man. You have the chance to rise to the occasion and face one of the most daunting challenges on the planet because you have a son and you’re his dad. When you engage in pursuing relationship with him and begin to see even the *slightest* bit of progress, you’ll know you’ve had the privilege to be a part of something more important than anything else you’ve ever done or ever will do.

Mom, I suspect you’re tired of lugging the toolbox around. You’ve tried using the tools and feel like they’re not working. That could be because they’re not the tools you’re supposed to be using. I’m going to give you permission to hand the toolbox over to your son’s father. If you’re in this parenting thing alone, I’ll coach you as to which tools to use and how to use them

effectively in a boy's life. You *can* parent your son with skill and grace.

A Race You Need to Win

I suspect that whether you're a mom or a dad, you picked up this book because something inside you is leading you toward a more strategic, empowered pursuit of relationship with your son. Something has motivated you to make it a priority at this time. Do you know what it is? What's the dream? What's the crisis? What's the need you are feeling deep down inside? In my experience you're probably in one of the following situations.

YOUR SON HAS “DISAPPEARED.” You thought you knew who he was. You thought you knew where he was, and you may have even thought you knew where he was going. But something changed. He is *physically* present in your home (to the extent that he empties out the refrigerator every night), but it's like a fog has descended and *you've lost contact*.

YOU ARE IN CRISIS. Things have started to unravel and are headed in the wrong direction. Rules are being broken. Conversations are overrun by anger and harsh words. Perhaps you found pornography on the computer or marijuana in his sock drawer. The police or the principal has called. He's breaking stuff and hitting people. You suspect he's sleeping with his girlfriend. Life is coming apart at the seams and *you don't know what to do*.

SEASONS ARE CHANGING. Time moves very quickly, and you might be watching the years slip away — watching your son

slip away—through the one-way doors of time that can never be reentered. There is a desire deep inside of you—one that is often drowned out in the noise and demands of daily details; but deep in your soul *you want to connect with him before it's too late*—and you see that opportunity passing by with each passing day.

Wherever you find yourself, you've made a decision to *do* something to capture the heart of your son. You're in hot pursuit—or you want to be, but how do you know which direction to run? Certain strategies work, others don't. When we are just hanging on for dear life, winging it as best we can, we miss strategic opportunities to go after our sons with passionate pursuit and tactical maneuvers that really work.

The chase is on and it's a chase like no other. It's a pursuit of something vitally important to you, to your family, and to our world. In many ways the chase is also a race. A race against time. A race against evil. It is a race you *need* to win, for it is *a race for the heart of a son*, your son, no matter where he is and no matter where he is headed.

The pursuit of your son is one of incalculable significance, but it is a daunting and difficult one. If you're feeling beat up and scared, you may be reluctant to pick up the chase. If you're feeling rejected and hurt, you may not want to open yourself up to more pain. If you're feeling angry and resentful, you may be ready to flush everything and abandon the race all together. But you will feel better as you do something new that begins to make a difference. If you take up the chase in the ways I'm going to suggest in the pages ahead, it will mean great reward for you and your son, even though it might look totally different

for your family than you anticipated or hoped for. If you pursue your son's heart, there will be moments when you will capture it and connect with it in ways you never dreamed possible. And that's about as amazing as it gets.

Whether it's for the thousandth time or for the first time, now is the time to begin an extreme pursuit for the heart of your son, a pursuit that is equal to the extreme world that will try to take him captive. Time is slipping away. You can waste it or you can give it another shot and make it count for something important, like your son's heart. Your own heart is telling you that it's time to take action, step up, do something, right now, with the hope that it will make a difference for your son, your family, and our world. My promise to you is to give you specific, concrete ideas. I'm asking you to try it, or try it again. Risk again. Be willing to be hurt again, because pursuing your son's heart is worth getting hurt, looking like a fool, and stumbling through changes that may feel awkward or questionable at first.

As you begin your pursuit, you will naturally want to see results. But I urge you to stay focused on the chase because it's all about the process. You might be very disappointed—maybe even devastated—over how things are turning out with your son. You might be dealing with regret, longing to rewrite the past or do it over again. You might be wondering how to make the very best of the days ahead. It's easy to get fixated on changing your circumstances or correcting a problem, but to win this race you must focus on the *relationship*, on capturing the *heart* of your son. What lies ahead is a journey, not a destination, and the ride could very well be a wild one. There will be encouragement and light, but the road will undoubtedly have dips and

ruts. The valleys into which you descend may be dark—*really* dark. Great hope exists, but in the shadows enemies lurk, and any one of them may trip you up, or cause your son to fall after he’s stood tall for some time. If you focus on the results, it’s going to be a roller coaster. If you focus on the process, you will be amazed at the view, and the journey will blow you away.

In a therapy session with Garrett two years into the process, we were discussing what his choices had “cost” him along the way. A week later he brought in a T-shirt he’d created to wear to his homecoming football game. On the front of the shirt in huge bold print was “.245.” At the bottom of the shirt in smaller print it said “GPA? No, DUI!” On the back of the shirt he listed the following costs, hoping to encourage sobriety among his classmates.

Court Costs:	\$500
Ankle Monitor:	\$1,200
Community Service:	\$600
Therapy:	\$9,200
Breathalyzers:	\$400
Urine Testing:	\$1,400
Probation:	\$1,000
Replacing Trees:	\$1,800
Loss of Vehicle:	\$7,500
Total cost:	\$23,600
Lessons learned:	Priceless!

You have a lot invested in your son too. Time, money, and emotion to name a few. Add to that the skills you will learn in the pages ahead and the commitment you bring to the table, and it will all add up to a process that is priceless.

Steady yourself and take a deep breath, because the pursuit of your son's heart is a journey of heroic proportions. I applaud you for your courage and determination—no matter how often they may falter. I will give you every resource I know to win the race. *The chase is on.*

GO FOR IT!

ON YOUR MARKS!

Take fifteen minutes and write out the top five ways in which you would like to connect better with your son. Keep your list free from things you want your son to do. Focus on what you can do to improve or create the relationship.

GET SET!

Draw up a list of what you think you may have to do to make this happen. Spend some time looking at your own issues and reflecting on how your son's responses have kept you out of his world.

GO!

You hold the key to open the door of communication and connection with your son. If you are not sure where to start, leave a blank to be filled in later, but be sure to come back and make note of specific things you can do as you learn new skills. Use the following chapters to construct a plan for winning the race for your son's heart.