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Feature

Bad Kids Inc.

What's to be done about out-of-control teenagers? The man who gave us Citi Habitats has a plan to turn a parental self-help group into a company as popular and profitable as Weight Watchers.

- By David Amsden
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According to the doctor, the symptoms are everywhere. The school shootings and the self-mutilation. The vulgar soaps in prime time. The designer drugs and the oral-sex orgies, which, the doctor is confident, are not a myth propagated to sell newsmagazines. "Twelve-year-old girls, in my office, I have them," he says. "They line up and give blow-job parties. No, it's for real. I did an MTV show about this."

Ron Zodkevitch, a 47-year-old psychiatrist from Forest Hills who some twenty years ago migrated to Beverly Hills, is making these pronouncements in his office on Wilshire Boulevard. Seated in the sort of high-backed leather chair that gives one the look of being on a throne, he props up his feet on a grand wooden desk. He is wearing cowboy boots. Beat-up, knocked-around black leather cowboy boots that let you know he is not your typical child psychiatrist. For this reason, he prefers being called "Dr. Zod," although the talent agents who are grooming him for his as-yet-unconfirmed appearances on *Oprah* have informed him that Dr. Zod sounds a bit too out-there, kooky in an unmarketable sort of way. And so Dr. Zod was recently rebranded as Dr. Ron, which everyone is hoping is a more authoritatively casual persona to introduce to America.

Dr. Ron is what you might call a psychological Renaissance man. His current professional duties can be described as follows: a therapist for the troubled children of entertainment executives; a paid confidant of pro athletes with confidence issues; a defender of insurance companies against workers'-comp hucksters; an associate clinical professor at UCLA; and a hand-holder to the diaspora of child actors who have grown up to be drug abusers, depressives, and serial divorcés. It is a living made in a shadow world of tormented egos and stunted maturity, though all of that, if Dr. Ron's plans come to pass, is about to change. A good deal of effort is currently being spent to turn Dr. Ron into the Dr. Spock of the teen pandemonium years.

"Oh, yes, it's going to be a big business," he says. "If you really think about it, there's nothing out there for parents of teens." With this in mind, the doctor has spent the past five years devising what he calls a "definitive program" for such parents, a Weight Watchers–style network of for-profit support groups that will preemptively coach parents to become "benevolent dictators." Dr. Ron believes that we live, to quote from his soon-to-be-published book, in a "threatening culture" in which teens are "set on destroying our happy homes." America's parents, in his view, have forgotten what it means to be parents, having had their authority neutered, too prone to treating their progeny as equals. His core conviction—and it's an increasingly popular outlook these days among those who think of parenting as an industry—is that the time has come for parents to take back the night from their children. And, while they're at it, the mornings and afternoons as well.

A philosophy is one thing, packaging it another. The notion that Dr. Ron could be commodified as the embodiment of a new discipline stems from a somewhat unlikely source: an entrepreneur named Igal Feibush, whose background is not in the self-help industry but in another equally lucrative and emotionally heated world—New York real estate. Feibush, an adrenalized and impeccably dressed 37-year-old who has had many commercial adventures (including, when he was a freshman in college, selling KILL GEORGE Yankees T-shirts after George Steinbrenner fired a string of managers), made his name as the founder of Citi Habitats, the Manhattan rental brokerage company that in 2003 did about $1 billion in business before being bought by the Corcoran Group. Feibush sold his stake back in 2000 and has been kicking around the fringes of the business world these past few years looking to enter "the next phase." Dr. Ron, in Feibush's mind, is the vehicle to take him there. "We're putting together what is destined to be one of the business success stories of our generation," says Feibush. "Troubled teens alone will make us several billion dollars."

The shrink and the shark. Neither of them, curiously, has any firsthand experience with raising teenagers. Zodkevitch, a lifetime bachelor, has no kids of his own. Feibush, recently divorced, is the father of a 4-year-old girl who has yet to show any signs of drug addiction or violent behavior. But this is beside the point. The market is the point. And what Feibush and Dr. Ron understand quite keenly is the fact that there is only one demographic more emotionally vulnerable and susceptible to outside influences than teenagers: their parents.

An ordinary night, 1987. Dr. Ron was sitting on the couch, absently flipping through channels when he stumbled across the made-for-TV movie that first showed him what was missing in the lives of American parents. "It's pretty cheesy, to be honest," Dr. Ron now admits, calling it one of those "disease of the week" numbers that seemed to be on all the time in Reagan's eighties, conspiring to scare the wits out of American families who were just bored and anxious enough to pay attention.

> The movie was called *Toughlove*, and it told the story of Jan and Rob Charters, two middle-class parents devastated by the behavior of their teenage son, Gary (played by Jason Patric in his first TV job). Gary is the embodiment of every parent's ultimate fear: a Suburban Everyteen who has morphed into a drug-using, crime-committing, school-skipping runaway. Distraught, the Charters look for answers in Toughlove, a parenting organization that advocates a vaguely militant approach to getting "out of control" teens back in line. The parents attend Toughlove meetings, listen to the stories of other Toughlove parents, absorb Toughlove wisdom. When Gary is arrested, the Charters refuse to bail him out. Nor do they answer his calls. Nor, when he knocks on the door, do they allow him back into the house. By the end of the film, Gary's girlfriend, whose mother is also a member of Toughlove, is dead of

an overdose, but Gary, fortunately, has seen the light. “I know I want to come back, and I know what the rules are,” he announces at the climax, which just so happens to occur on Christmas morning.

Toughlove, it turned out, was not the concoction of some neocon screenwriter. David and Phyllis York, two family therapists, founded the organization in 1979, after their daughter held up a cocaine dealer and they decided not to bail her out. In its heyday, the nonprofit had 1,500 support groups and a membership of some 40,000 flummoxed parents. The Yorks’ book, *Toughlove*, blurbed by Ann Landers, sold 1 million copies. And “tough love,” the term they coined and trademarked, became permanently lodged in the pop-cultural lexicon.

“I tend to be a little bit of a sponge,” Dr. Ron often says. “I like to learn. I think anyone can teach me something.” And so, his curiosity stoked by the TV movie, he decided to check out a Toughlove meeting. Inside a high-school gym, he found more than 200 Toughlove parents sharing stories and comparing strategies. Dr. Ron was impressed. He started sending patients to the meetings, “because they could get the kind of support I couldn’t give them once they stepped out the door.” In time, he grew close to the Yorks: “I fell in love with them—they became a second set of parents to me.” Eventually, he joined Toughlove’s board of directors and became one of its largest donors, giving tens of thousands of dollars to help the nonprofit stay afloat.

But Toughlove’s problems were not merely financial. The name, while catchy, was always controversial and became increasingly associated with teen boot camps, kicking children out of the house, even physically abusing them. The stigma came about, in large part, because the Yorks were never quite able to master the talk-show circuit. “Phil Donahue introduced us—before we came out—as people who believed in throwing kids out of the house!” recalls a still-frustrated Phyllis. “From then on, everyone started to mistake ‘tough’ for ‘rough.’ ” Furthermore, they didn’t have a publicist to explain that if you want credibility, it’s not wise to appear on *Geraldo*. And if for some reason you do end up on *Geraldo*, you want to make absolutely certain that you don’t end up siding, as the Yorks somehow did, with a mother who “set animal traps to catch her son” and another who “chained her daughter to the radiator.”

By 2001, Toughlove was foundering. Membership was declining, chapters folding. Most of the support groups still in session had devolved to Kaffeeklatsches consisting of three to five parents moaning unproductively in church basements. What Dr. Ron needed was an infusion of cash to get Toughlove off life support. A believer in family bonds, he called his father back in Queens for advice. His dad mentioned little Igal Feibush from Dix Hills, on Long Island, whom Dr. Ron used to babysit when they were both boys. Feibush, he learned, had grown up to make millions in real estate, owned an apartment on Central Park West, had his wedding covered by the *Times*, the works. Though the two hadn’t spoken in decades, Dr. Ron called him up immediately.

“Toughlove?” Feibush said over the phone when Dr. Ron asked if he’d ever heard of the organization. “Is that like some sort of boot camp?”

Parenting trends don’t make much sense. When you break them down, they have a lot in common with those in fashion and politics, coming in generational cycles that merge nostalgia for the past with

present-day insecurities. That Toughlove was so intrinsically linked with boot camps did not deter Feibush. He thought the cultural pendulum was beginning to swing back in Toughlove's retro-disciplinarian direction. He spots evidence of this simmering "movement" everywhere: on television shows like *Nanny 911* and *Supernanny* and *Brat Camp*, in newspaper articles about how "parent coaches" are a growing industry, in the rise of Dr. Phil as an anti-sentimental relationship guru, and even in the quiet boom and cultural acceptance of boot camps themselves. "Boot camps are now a multi-billion-dollar industry," Feibush says, admiringly. Such institutions, once fringe compounds populated by the Michael Skakels and *Sally Jessy* refugees of the world, had reemerged as a cheeky plot line on *Desperate Housewives*. The way Feibush saw it, the Toughlove worldview was being embraced by the mainstream, only no one knew that it was the Toughlove worldview.

The market, in short, was primed for a relaunched, revived, reinvigorated version of Toughlove. But Feibush's vision was not to build a better boot camp. Now more than ever, he needed to divorce the Toughlove philosophy from the boot-camp aesthetic—not because it was damaging, but because that niche was already being filled. What he would offer was an alternative to pulling kids out of their homes when they got into trouble. He would sell Toughlove as bringing no-nonsense parenting back *into* the home, with parents training themselves through a network of support groups. Furthermore, why wait for kids to get in trouble in the first place? This was the key to tapping the vein of parental anxiety. Feibush would shift the focus of the organization, ever so subtly, from troubled teens to troubled times. Toughlove would no longer be confined to the limited market of intervention; no, it would essentially create the "unquantifiably huge market" of crisis *prevention*.

Here is how the program is described on Toughlove's trial Website:

The wonderful thing about the *TOUGH*LOVE® Program is that it is not only for families with children who are seriously acting out with drugs, sex, self-injury, crime or running away. The *TOUGH*LOVE® Program should be used by all families. While children who talk back and refuse to clean up their rooms are some of the behaviors that are "typical" of developing teens and do not sound the alarms, they should not be ignored. The mouthing off of today and a parent's loss of authority can be the drug addiction of tomorrow. The time to educate yourself, gain support and take action is before reaching the height of crisis.

As for any lingering associations with boot camps and abuse, Feibush is confident that his media strategy will clear up any misconceptions. "You'll see," he says. "There will be that point where it turns the corner, goes over the mountain—where *this* is what Toughlove is. Matt Lauer, hypothetically speaking, is not going to introduce Dr. Zodkevitch and say, 'Well, this is Dr. Ron and he has this book and he's a triple-board-certified psychiatrist based in Beverly Hills.' Chances are, before the break, Matt Lauer is going to say, 'If any of you are parents of teenagers, then you probably need some tough love. And if you thought you knew what it was, stick around, because after the break, you'll really find out.' That's what's going to happen."

Before Feibush could launch his media offensive, though, he had to get control of the Toughlove name. The problem was winning over the Toughlove old guard, who saw in Feibush someone looking to exploit parental insecurities for a buck—a "used-car salesman type," as one put it. After months of back-

and-forth, the board rejected his plans for turning the organization into a for-profit venture, unaware that Feibush is someone who believes that "while you always try to attract bees with honey, there are some people you can't work with." He and Dr. Ron went directly to the Yorks and made their case for the corporatization and rebranding of Toughlove. Given that the Yorks were drifting into their seventies and couldn't afford to retire, the notion of making some money had understandable appeal. After a chatty dinner, Feibush and Dr. Ron won control of the Toughlove trademark. "They came to my house," says Phyllis, "and Dr. Zod introduced Igal as the man who would create an empire."

The launch of the revamped Toughlove is slated for the end of February. That's when McGraw-Hill publishes Dr. Ron's book, *The Toughlove Prescription: How to Create and Enforce Boundaries for Your Teen.* ("Are we going to sell as many books as *The South Beach Diet?"* asks Feibush with rhetorical bluster. "I don't doubt that we will come close to, or surpass, their book sales.") The book is designed to do two things: (a) get Dr. Ron on television and (b) draw parents into the meetings, which are mentioned as the "revolutionary concept" of the program. The meetings in turn will evolve into a self-perpetuating network of the sort of support groups that consoled the fictional Charters family, with Dr. Ron serving as the omniscient paterfamilias presiding over what he calls the "Toughlove extended family." "Anyone can read a book," explains the doctor. "But actually following through requires the kind of support you get in a group."

What Toughlove seeks to eliminate is, to use the group's vocabulary, the parental tendency to "rescue" their children. Instead, parents should force their kids to "face the consequences" of their actions. This is what Toughlove has always been about; but rather than dealing only with issues like overdoses and arrests and suicides, the new meetings might devote time to such weighty topics as messy rooms (the Toughlove prescription: See how the little rascal likes living in a pigsty) and raging hormones. (Dr. Ron suggests saying, "You are not allowed to have sex. As I explained to you, there are risks and consequences with sexual activity. I will not help you out of the consequences of your actions.")

The point is not the wisdom or originality of these parenting ideas, it's the network—the communal experience, the nebulous currency of "support."

"Misery loves company" is how Feibush describes the appeal. "But not in a bad way, you know?"

The meetings, of course, are also the "revolutionary concept" of Toughlove as a business proposition. Parents will first pay a $99.99 annual membership fee—which also gives them access to Toughlove's Website. ("iVillage meets WebMD," promises Feibush, with chat rooms, 24/7 virtual support groups, and a rotating series of "expert" columnists.) Then there are the fees for the weekly meetings themselves. And, of course, at those meetings there will be a variety of products to purchase, from audiotapes to workbooks to drug-testing kits. The total cost per family is not high—just a few hundred dollars a year, far more reasonable than weekly therapy sessions or boot-camp tuition. Like Citi Habitats, which aimed to corner the market on middle-class apartment hunters, Toughlove's success will rely on getting a lot of people to spend a little.

Come March, a pilot program introducing Toughlove to parents will be tested in the Broward County, Florida, school districts, a cross-pollination that Feibush hopes to mimic across the nation—using public schools, in effect, to feed the company with concerned parents. Ideally, those who give the program a shot will stay with it for years, climbing the "ladder of change," an ascent that begins with "accepting denial" and ends with "interdependence" on the group, which has become a "second family" and which members now have a responsibility to "help support." According to Toughlove's business plan, which Feibush calls his "executive dashboard," the company is hoping to gross about $235 million annually

within the next three years. It might sound like an overly ambitious sum for a start-up, and yet to meet these goals Feibush needs a following of just 250,000 dedicated members—those willing to spend between $300 and $1,000 a year—a mere 1 percent of the population of parents of teens. And that is only the beginning. Once the Toughlove brand is reestablished, Feibush hopes to franchise it: Toughlove for Tots, Toughlove for Relationships, Toughlove for Business, Toughlove for anyone who likes the expression "tough love."

"Our business model is Weight Watchers," says Feibush. "There's a Weight Watchers in every community, right? It's a $5.5 billion company. What they sell is education and support. It's one of the biggest secrets on Wall Street. We are going to be the Weight Watchers of parenting."

The Weight Watchers of parenting is being launched into the world at a peculiar time: Kids, by all accounts, are behaving better than they have in years. According to the Centers for Disease Control, drug and alcohol use among teens has been consistently declining over the past five years. And sex? Abortion rates are down, use of contraceptives up, leaving oral sex the only ground in which those with alarmist leanings can get any traction. It's an inverse relationship: Parents perceive an increase in destructive behavior even as such behavior is in decline. "There's a sense," says Dr. Richard Gallagher, a psychologist at New York University who specializes in parenting, "that adolescents are involved in more sexual activity and more drug use than they actually are."

So if it's not objective reality, parents' willingness to believe in what Dr. Ron calls "today's threatening culture" must be driven by something else. Sociologist Elliott Currie, author of *The Road to Whatever: Middle-Class Culture and the Crisis of Adolescence*, which documents the rise of a "neo-Darwinian" approach to raising kids, says it's all about status panic. "Especially in certain more middle- and upper-middle-class sectors, it's become very important for a kid to be close to perfect," he says. "We want trophy kids the way we used to want trophy wives and trophy cars. So if anything goes wrong, it sets off this panic, and we see a hypervigilance about deviance." With parents afraid that any infraction is a harbinger of worse problems to come, he says, "shooting up heroin and talking back to Grandpa become collapsed into one thing." And, Currie points out, establishing this mind-set as the norm is in the economic interest of those whose businesses thrive on the idea of teens being out of control.

True to form, Dr. Ron and Feibush contend that the brightening statistical picture of kids' behavior shouldn't offer much reassurance to parents. "Eighth-graders are still getting high," says Dr. Ron. "Thank God it has gone down, but if it's your kid it doesn't matter if it's 20 percent—it's 100 percent in your family." And if it's not your family today, the theory goes, it likely will be tomorrow. This, really, is what it comes down to: More than education, more than support, more than behavioral issues, Toughlove traffics in anxiety. It's the classic formula of self-help: fear and loathing beautifully packaged, reasonably priced. Look at Weight Watchers. The program thrives not simply because it has helped fat people become thin, but because we all feel fat no matter how thin we are.

Self-help, however, is not all smoke and mirrors. Meeting in small groups, creating a community, having someone to call in the middle of the night—these can be a safety net for anxious parents, whether or not their kids are in real trouble. The appeal of the original Toughlove concept is as much about the process as its end result. Parenting advice, after all, tends to boil down to common sense. The question for the new Toughlove is whether money can be made off it.

At this point, Toughlove is a kitchen-table crusade, and Feibush has been supporting it substantially out of his own pocket. He has invested, he says, "hundreds of thousands of dollars, probably close to half a million." Today he spends a lot of time in New York, pitching the company, looking to raise between $3 million and $4 million of initial capital for the launch—hiring a staff, producing the video and

audiotapes, making the infomercials to sell those tapes, finding a publicist to make sure the bookers at the *Today* show extend an invitation to Dr. Ron. “People are floored by the type of project that we’re doing and by the type of returns they can get,” Feibush says, adding that he’s been in talks with many well-known banks, Bear Stearns among them.

But with the March rollout only two months away, Feibush is far short of meeting his goals. One venture capitalist who passed on the opportunity to invest did so, he says, because he wasn’t convinced Toughlove could generate the same sort of revenues as Weight Watchers. “Weight Watchers, I’d bet, makes most of its money selling food,” he says. “I just don’t see Toughlove having those kind of consumables. Maybe a best-selling book, but that’s it.” For this financier, the whole Weight Watchers model was a bit dubious: “For one, Weight Watchers has never been controversial, so there wasn’t that risk. Plus I think Weight Watchers is something like 40 years old. It built over time. Igal is trying to do the same thing in only a couple of years.”

Feibush tries to deflect investor skepticism about Toughlove by reminding them that it is “a time-tested program that works and has already saved millions of lives.” He will point out that one of the elements that makes Toughlove such an airtight plan is that it already has a built-in network of support groups. Indeed, these are claims that one can imagine having a certain sound-bite appeal, though the truth is more complicated. Toughlove has never formally kept track of families in the program, and all success stories are anecdotal. As for the groups, ever since Feibush took over the organization, many of the diehards dropped out. The dejected board members immediately launched their own nonprofit called Standup Parenting, recruiting former Toughlove parents to join until Feibush and Toughlove took them to court. Other splinter groups have also formed.

Feibush dismisses these potential competitors. “They don’t have the resources. We have a brand name. We have an authority in Dr. Zodkevitch. Now we’re able to expand. You’re going to remember Toughlove from a pure marketing standpoint.”

A long, pensive pause.

“Do you buy what I’m saying? Do you concur?”

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