



What It Takes to Pull Me Through

by [David L. Marcus](#)

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About What It Takes to Pull Me Through

A Pulitzer Prize–winning writer untangles the mysteries of the teenage mind as he witnesses troubled kids who are changed dramatically by fourteen grueling months at a renowned "therapeutic school."

Millions of parents struggle to grasp what goes on in their kids' heads, on their computers, and among their friends. As an education correspondent for *U.S. News & World Report*, David Marcus wrestled with similar questions while reporting on the maze of pressures American teenagers now face — a resurgent drug culture, proliferating temptations and threats on-line, skyrocketing suicide rates (three times higher than in the 1960s), and more.

To find answers, Marcus gained unfettered access to students, staff, and parents at the Academy of Swift River, a school known for combining intensive academics, wilderness survival, and group therapy to help teenagers in crisis regain emotional health. He focuses on four remarkable kids who run the demographic gamut: a Southern girl whose privileges cannot save her from sinking into drug abuse and unsafe sex; the self-destructive son of teachers grappling with his anger about being adopted; a black kid from a tough New York neighborhood who is silenced by consuming depression; and a once high-achieving Florida girl "broken" by the death of her mother.

While uncovering what drove these kids and their parents to Swift River, Marcus opens the black box of the teenage mind. As he reveals the intense, dramatic process that sets (most of) these kids right, he weaves a taut, absorbing tale and charts a path to hope that any kid, any parent, whether in crisis or not, can take.

About David L. Marcus

David Marcus is a contributing editor for *U.S. News & World Report*. He has also worked at the *Boston Globe*, *Miami Herald*, and *Dallas Morning News*, where he shared a Pulitzer Prize for a series of articles on violence against women around the world. He was a finalist for another Pulitzer and was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University.

Invite the author to speak at <http://www.davemarcus.com>

Questions for Discussion

1. The book claims that it is more difficult to be a teenager, and to be a parent, than it was a few decades ago. Why is this true? Or, if it is misleading, why?
2. About 80 percent of the kids at Swift River are on psychiatric medications. What broader trends in American society does this reflect? To what extent can this situation be attributed to the actions of the health industry?
3. Marcus has said that the much-touted "No Child Left Behind" law doesn't address the most pressing problems in education. What should genuine education reform look like?
4. Marcus says he moved to the suburbs for the quality of the schools but "became disenchanted with the quality of life." (See the Introduction and the "Memo to Parents.") Do you agree with his assessment of life in suburbia.
5. The four main students in the book come from very different social and economic backgrounds. What are some common factors that caused them all to end up in trouble?
6. The "back to basics" ethic is important at the beginning and the end of the Swift River program. Why is this so? What effect are present-day economic, cultural, and political forces having on adolescents?
7. Why does the program end with a month and a half in the rain forest of Costa Rica? Why not just send the kids to do community service in the town next to the campus?
8. What causes anorexia, bulimia, and other eating disorders? Why do more girls than boys have eating disorders?
9. Swift River hasn't done a study to follow up on its graduates. How would you conduct a study to evaluate the effectiveness of the program?
10. In your opinion, what are some of the "social and cultural toxins" threatening adolescents? Are they worse than they were a generation or two ago, or just different?
11. Parents usually realize that their children are in trouble when grades start falling. What other warning signs exist? How should parents distinguish between normal teenage angst and an actual crisis?

12. What are some ways our society can help adolescents positively connect with their communities?