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Wilderness Therapy

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Introduction

Since many of today's struggling teens are having difficulty progressing in the traditional therapeutic setting, it becomes essential to outline alternative therapy methods, which are often more effective in their unconventionality.

This paper will explore traditional therapy, why it often doesn't work, a child's fundamental irrational beliefs, non-traditional therapy methods, why non-traditional therapy works, the family's involvement in therapy, and wilderness therapy specific statistics.

If you have any further questions regarding the information here or BlueFire's Wilderness therapy program, please feel free to call 1-844-413-1999 and speak with someone directly.

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Traditional Therapy Method Limitations

Have you sent your child to traditional Therapy, only to find that it didn't improve his or her behavior? Or maybe seeing a therapist worked for a while, but then your child fell back into the same behavioral patterns. Traditional therapy for kids can be effective and helpful, but not all counseling is the same.

Stigma Associated with Therapy

Kids who are aware and fearful of the stigma associated with mental health problems and how their peers may perceive them sometimes choose not to accept help when offered. Self-esteem and social desirability often trump positive mental health for young people conflicted about their identity and self-worth, which often times is the underlying cause of the problematic behavior.

Why 45-minutes in a Therapist's Office May Not Work

Many kids do very well with counseling and therapy, but there are also a significant number of children and teens that don't. Traditional therapy is unsuccessful for many because 45 minutes in a therapist's office cannot wholly address a pathology both overwhelming and layered.

Why Therapy?

Many kids come into therapy with a lack of problem-solving and communication skills. These issues can manifest in myriad ways. Issues can range from grief or post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, a history of abuse or an accident, general school refusal or oppositional behavior in and/or outside the home and general discord with family members.

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Fundamental Irrational Beliefs and Behavior

When kids come into therapy, they haven't developed the skills that are appropriate. Their coping skills often become aggression, giving threats and engaging in power struggles with people to get their way. It's not just a matter of dealing with the issues at hand moving on and getting them back on track.

Seeing Beyond Themselves

For many kids, they have to learn how to be accountable and responsible for their actions and to understand that there are consequences associated with their actions not just for themselves but for how their actions effect those around them.



Not only are you dealing with your child's behavior, but you're also dealing with the core values and beliefs of how he or she sees the world and their place in it. They try to get their needs met, although they are momentarily doing this through negative behavior and negative coping skills.

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Where does Poor Behavior Come From? How Does It Continue?

If your child is acting out, he/she is getting “power” by using problematic behavior. He/she gets a sense of control. A closer examination shows that in most families, the acting-out kid has power. The child is spoken to differently, approached differently, and has different expectations outlined. In most families, the acting-out child has raised the family’s tolerance for deviant and aggressive behavior. The behavior ratchets up your tolerance, you’ learn to tolerate more and more, and you accept a broader and broader range of inappropriate actions and comments because you’re afraid of the acting out. In that sense, it gives your acting-out child power and control. And that, of course becomes part of the problem.

If your child is getting power and control by acting out, then he/she doesn’t need to learn how to get power and control by advocating their needs and having a collaborative process to create a reasonable healthy solution. Most of us get control of our lives by learning social skills: that means learning how to solve problems and learning to function and communicate appropriately in society.

Complex Needs Require A Non-traditional Approach

Sometimes a child’s needs are so complex that traditional therapy isn’t enough—so your child and the entire family need more of a foundation to launch forward and to have the skills necessary to navigate bumps in the road in a healthy and solution oriented way.

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No Progress with Traditional Therapy?

According to a recent study, wilderness therapy as an alternative therapeutic approach can be useful in helping individuals who do not respond to traditional treatment methods.

Primarily, Wilderness Therapy is designed to address emotional and behavioral problems. Due to the success of the nontraditional approach, wilderness therapy is becoming more popular, appealing to both parents and struggling children who are unable to make progress through traditional psychotherapy and other means of treatment.

Wilderness Therapy allows therapists to observe behaviors and reactions over the course of time and across variety of environments, providing insight into domains not explored in a traditional therapeutic environment.

Get to the bottom of things, instead of band-aiding the issue

Wilderness therapy removes:

- Technology
- Distractions
- Poor Peer Groups
- Thread of Bad Habits

Wilderness therapy teaches and allows students to:

- Identify and adapt unhealthy behaviors
- Be self-sufficient
- Learn positive social skills
- Thrive on a team

Fundamental irrational beliefs are often overcome in wilderness therapy. Wilderness therapy cannot erase the bumps in the road, but it can help struggling teens navigate in a healthy, solution oriented way.

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Where are beliefs challenged?

- On a multi-day adventure trek
- Through journaling
- Via tiered communication process with parents
- In learning new skills
- Detachment from triggers, habits
- Introduction to positive peer groups
- Technology removal
- Parental Involvement



If your child is in counseling, the therapist should not be the only one involved who has the training to help your child heal. As a parent, you need to have training and support available to you to learn how to present a consistent structure for your child. In other words, you need to know the things the therapist knows about how to manage your child's behavior and how to teach him to appropriately and positively address problems.

Sometimes a child's needs are so huge that traditional therapy isn't enough—so your child needs more of a foundation to create lasting change over time.

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Family Involvement As Necessity

Since these problem behaviors occur in the home and/or in the classroom, the only thing that's effective is to empower parents and children with the knowledge and skills necessary to address this kind of behavior before it escalates to a level of unmanageability. Simply put, the Family needs to retrain themselves and teach the child the problem-solving skills and communication tools they need.

Wilderness Therapy Not Only Empowers Teens, But Parents

One of the most effective aspects of Wilderness Therapy is to empower parents with the tools they need to not only manage their child's behavior, but also to challenge it in a way so that the "bumps in the road" can be used as a teaching moment for the whole family. This way, parents can be more effective in teaching their child to learn how to solve problems differently in the future.



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Communication Between Parents and Teens

A careful tiered communications policy allows parents, teens and siblings to repair the family dynamic

1. One way communication such as letters, videos and emails allow family members time to gather thoughts, replacing emotional reactions with reasoned reactions.
2. Shared phone calls and teleconferences allow parents and teens to reconnect and reform the bond and trust that may have been lacking.

With the tiered communication process, parents can see a child's growth and maturity process. Teens feel confident in their transformed level of independence and personal skills.

What does family learn in just a few months?

- Improved communication skills
- Team work
- Empathy
- Self-awareness
- Understanding
- Family service

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Wilderness Therapy Works

The efficacy of traditional psychological interventions for children has long been debated among mental health professionals; however, only recently has this issue received national attention, with the U.S. Public Health Service (2000) emphasizing the critical need for early intervention, evidence based and family focused treatment tailored to children's maturational (age appropriate) needs. Adventure therapy is a developmentally responsive intervention being used increasingly by therapists.

An analysis of 93 controlled outcome studies (published 1953-2000) was conducted to assess the overall efficacy of adventure and play based therapy to determine factors that might impact overall effectiveness. The overall difference in treatment effect for adventure based therapeutic interventions was significant (.80 standard deviations). Further analysis revealed that greatest effects were achieved through humanistic treatments that also incorporate parents in the treatment. Adventure based therapy appeared equally effective across age, gender, and presenting issue. (American Psychological Association, 2012)



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Conclusion

Wilderness therapy reaches teenagers with a non-traditional technique and with oftentimes non-traditional effectiveness. By teaching children and teenagers to be self-reliant, they learn the value of personal responsibility in a more powerful, complete way than can be achieved in a conventional therapeutic setting. Wilderness therapy is not a cure all, but it teaches kids the tools they need to tackle life's problems.

BlueFire Wilderness Therapy

BlueFire Wilderness therapy is for teens ages 13-17 struggling with emotional, social and behavioral challenges. We lead a comprehensive adventure experience that transforms teens and helps the whole family.

Learn More

If you would like to learn more about our Southern Idaho-based wilderness therapy program, please call 1-844-413-1999 to speak to someone directly.