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Troubled Young People After the Adventure Program: A Case Study

by Carolyn Hutton Durgin and Douglas McEwen

Structure is a critical component of a rehabilitation program for troubled young people. Case histories of those who have participated in wilderness adventure courses strongly suggest that without effective structure in the follow-up, the initial gains in positive behavior are short lived (Hutton, 1988). As Nold and Wilpers (1975) stated over fifteen years ago, adventure programs are only one part of the rehabilitation process.

Wilderness adventure programs for troubled young people, particularly those in the correctional system, became popular in the 1970's as correctional officials searched for alternative methods to increase the effectiveness of programming and to reduce the overcrowding in training schools (Kimball, 1980). "The unfamiliar, less secure environment of wilderness encourages developing new perspectives on old patterns and assumptions" (Kimball, 1980, p. 8). Despite the early enthusiasm, many correctional officials remained sceptical of adventure programs because of indications that positive effects lasted no longer than six months to a year (Kelly, 1974). While further studies have indicated some positive effects, such as improved attitudes (Gollins, 1980), a body of literature has not emerged that conclusively supports the long-term positive changes in behavior for troubled young people as a result of participating in adventure programs (Hutton, 1988).

Part of the responsibility for creating longer lasting changes in behavior lies in follow-up programs after the course. Peer pressure and stress in the home environment

make it difficult for these young people to maintain the positive behavior patterns learned on the course. Immediate follow-up support from community counselors would seem necessary to make the new behavior a part of a daily life style (Gollins, 1980).

Changes in self-image brought about during the Outward Bound course may be dramatic, yet it is unlikely that these changes will be lasting if there is no one to help the juvenile discuss, evaluate, and integrate his [her] learning into community life. By establishing follow-up programs that help the delinquent make the transition and sustain improved self-image, social workers can make significant contributions to the work with juvenile delinquents (Kaplan, 1979, pp. 45-46).

This article presents four case histories of what has happened to young people after their adventure courses. They raise important questions about the role of follow-up and the long term effectiveness of adventure programs that need to be addressed by the field.

Documenting Course and Follow-up Case Histories

The subsequent case histories were documented as part of the follow-up program associated with an adventure course for troubled young people offered through the Touch of Nature Environmental Center at Southern Illinois University. The thirty day course consisted of an initial immersion in individual and team initiative courses, backpacking, canoeing, rock climbing, rapelling, caving, orienteering, and basic camp craft. This was followed by a three-week expedition which included a solo experience. There were ten to fifteen young people in each group. Following the course, a Touch of Nature staff person went to the home community to meet with each

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young person, their family, and their counselors to review what was learned during the course. Each youth was then assigned an advocate who was a paraprofessional working for the Touch of Nature Center. This advocate would meet with the adolescent on a weekly basis and report on his or her progress towards achieving agreed upon goals. The advocates worked in conjunction with community social workers from youth serving agencies to reinforce the skills learned during the adventure course.



Photo courtesy of Colorado Outward Bound School

As a result of the advocacy program, a quantity of records were accumulated on the progress of each troubled young person after completing the adventure course. Three types of records were extremely important. First, there was the Wickman Andrews Behavior Intervention Scale (WABIS). The WABIS scale contains a rating of 40

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behaviors typically exhibited by delinquents which was filled out on a regular basis by the advocate. This rating helps characterize the young person in relation to their progress toward stated goals. The second source of information was the Youth Evaluation Statement (YES), written by the advocate after weekly meetings between the advocate and the young person. It evaluated the progress toward goals set in the areas of family, school,

work, peers, and counseling. The third source of information was a fact sheet completed by trip leaders at the end of the adventure course prior to the advocacy program. This listed a number of biographical details on the young person's community and family. The use of three data sources provided a means to cross-check information for consistency.

Records were kept on hundreds of young people who participated in the adventure course and subsequent advocacy program. Unfortunately, most records were not filled out in a complete and orderly fashion. Of all the records accumulated, only four cases could be found with detailed unbroken reports for a period of six to eighteen months after the adventure course. What follows are these case histories. While one could argue that they are atypical of this population, we do not think so. Most of the other files examined showed troubled young people following similar patterns. Despite the limitations, we believe the case histories are based on the best records yet reported for a follow-up program for troubled young people.

Four Troubled Youth

Steve

Steve was a fifteen year old in the eighth grade, who lived with both parents, used marijuana and cocaine, but had no prior court record. From the reports it appeared that the father had a drinking problem and abused his wife. The mother loved Steve, but vented some of her frustration with the family situation on him. Both parents felt Steve had a poor attitude. Steve's father was concerned about his drug use and his mother agreed to family counseling. However, they were unable to consistently implement suggestions such as father-son talks, recognition of improvements, and required chores.

Steve appeared to change his attitude during the adventure course. He learned to trust the course leaders and spoke to them about his problems. However, he did not improve his communication skills or reduce his tendency to threaten others. The leaders felt he needed continued counseling support after the course.

Steve's progress was poor after the adventure course. He had a number of absences from school and continued to socialize with friends with known delinquent behaviors.

However, one month later, when one of his friends went to jail, he began to think about improving his behavior and selecting better friends. Several weeks later Steve was assaulted by his father. He left home at this time and continued to make new friends who were in constant trouble. His performance in school deteriorated so school officials and the advocate recommended he be sent to a children's home. Here his attitude and behavior improved, but after several months at the children's home, he stole a vehicle and was arrested by the police.

While the records indicate that Steve's undesirable behavior became more frequent soon after the wilderness course, it appears that much of this can be attributed to the poor family environment. Steve is quoted in one of the reports as saying he changed his attitude after the adventure course but the family did not. The family was a definite hindrance to Steve's progress. He did not respect his parents and felt his mother failed to prevent the father from disrupting the family. Steve tried to change his attitude because of experiences in the adventure course, but these feelings were overwhelmed by anger with the family, and sustained positive behavior never resulted.

Sandra

Sandra was seventeen and a half years old and had completed the tenth grade. Before taking the adventure course, she had no court record, but she did have difficulty with friendships, parents, foster parents, and school. She did not live with her natural parents who were divorced. Her mother abused over-the-counter and prescription drugs, was unemployed, and not very involved in the advocacy program. There were communication difficulties with her natural father.

During the adventure course it is reported that Sandra became more assured of herself, less afraid of trying, and more cooperative with others. Although Sandra was committed to the goals she established on the course, she was sometimes moody and rebelled with no warning. This could be due to the lack of continuity in her life and the fact that many of her foster home placements were unsuccessful.

After the adventure course, Sandra moved to a new foster home and began school. Three months later she attempted suicide after having an argument with her foster father. She was subsequently placed under psychiatric care for three weeks and then moved to a group home. Throughout the follow-up period she continued to have trouble forming friends.

There was no unusual turning point in Sandra's follow-up program. She continued to have communication problems with her father and felt rejected. This, combined with various disruptions in foster homes and unpredictable emotions contributed to her overall lack of ability to perform the new behavior learned on the course.

Tom

Tom was a fifteen year old who had completed the eighth grade. He had a history of chronic truancy, disruptive behavior in class, running away, and smoking marijuana. For a period he lived with his aunt and uncle in Florida but then he moved back with his father, stepmother, seventeen year old brother, and stepsister. The stepsister became a drug dealer, moved out, and Tom would join her for extended periods of time. The parents tried to help him by increasing family rules and talks, but these changes were short and inconsistent.

After being charged with battery, the court forced him to enroll in the adventure course as an alternative to jail. Thus Tom entered the course with a negative attitude

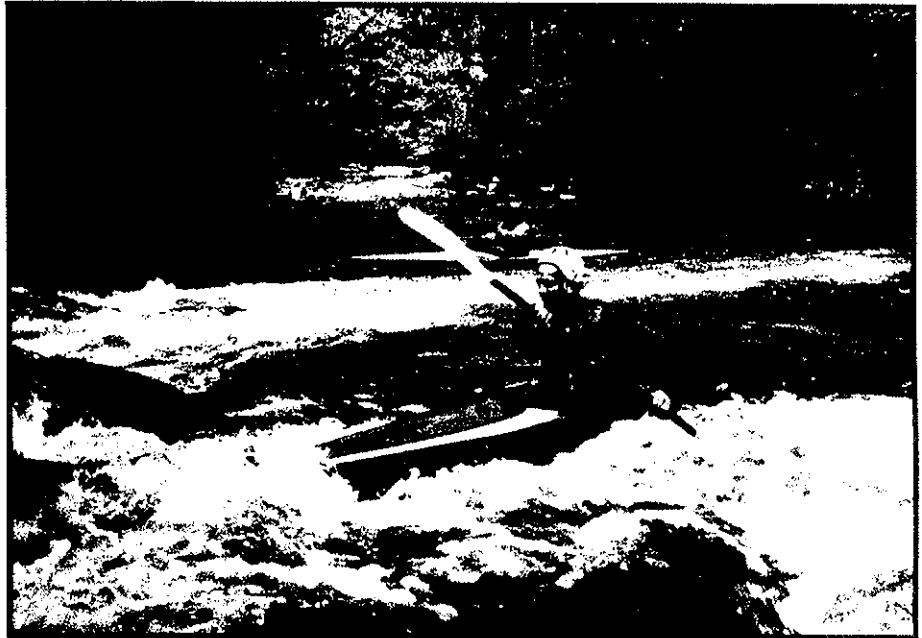


Photo courtesy of Colorado Outward Bound School

and felt he had no real problems that needed changing. Throughout the course he exhibited very negative behavior that included running away, fighting, not doing his duties, sniffing white gas, and throwing his pack over a cliff. Ultimately he decided to improve his behavior and complete the course. His instructors felt that Tom had gained some feeling of accomplishment and a new attitude toward home and school. However, they felt he needed constant counselling to complete goals and make appropriate decisions.

After the course, Tom's goals were to attend school,

stop fighting, meet weekly with his advocate, and live with his parents. For the first month Tom appeared to make great progress. He and his father gained each other's trust. Tom no longer associated with detrimental friends except for his girlfriend. However, at the end of the first month he was accused of exposing himself. By the end of the ninth month after the adventure course, Tom had left home and was staying with a transient. Tom knew he was in error but would not return home to the strict

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discipline of his parents. He felt they didn't provide a sincere family environment; spending too much time at bars and not trying to communicate with him.

After Tom ran away from home and refused to attend school, the court initiated a new advocacy program. However, he refused to cooperate, missed appointments, walked out of meetings, refused counseling, refused offers for jobs, and continued to associate with very undesirable young people. Much of his behavior at this time could probably be attributed to the use of drugs supplied by his stepsister. Finally, the second advocacy program was terminated and the agency recommended a residential drug treatment program to help Tom overcome his dependency on drugs and work through his many emotional problems.

In summary, Tom had a long history of multiple behavior problems. While the adventure course temporarily improved his attitude and actions, his undesirable family environment and his stepsister's drug culture made it too easy for Tom to regress. He saw no real need to change, and despite constant counseling support, he sunk into a drug culture. The final report described Tom's attitude as "I do not care."

Greg

Greg was a fourteen year old seventh grader living as the only child with his parents in a well maintained, clean home. The family was poor, both the mother and father worked at minimum wage. However, Greg received an extraordinary part of the family resources. Greg was physically strong and intimidating. He liked sports, but did not accept discipline, fought with his father, had

no respect for others, had a severe language abuse problem, skipped school while his mother was at work, and was hyperactive. He had a long history of social problems.

His parents eventually agreed to family counseling and Greg entered an advocacy program one year before he was referred to the adventure course. During that year he lived with his parents the first four months. However, after a violent fight with his father, he was placed in a group home where his behavior and attitude improved. Unfortunately, after his return from the group home to his parent's custody, his behavior regressed. Greg, who had been sexually abused by a neighbor, was suspected of being promiscuous with other boys.

Greg participated in a thirty day adventure course. Due to the fact that he was slow, clumsy, and inattentive, he became the group's scapegoat. He also lacked self-confidence and ran away several times. However, by the end of the course he began to assert himself to a greater degree and became less of a scapegoat. The instructors felt he needed much structure to help confront his problems.

After the course, Greg's goals were to attend school daily, follow his parents' rules, concentrate on his homework, and cooperate with his teachers. Greg's commitment to his goals was weak. He had no self-discipline and no respect for his parents. The parents were unable to consistently practice what they learned in family counseling. In the first month after the adventure course, Greg was placed in a special program for behavior problems at a hospital. By the second month Greg's parents could not control his behavior.

His behavior deteriorated in the months following the wilderness course. This was attributed to his being in the custody of his parents. They demanded strict discipline but made inconsistent demands, lacked patience, and refused to believe their actions contributed in any way to his overall behavior.

Despite the constant counseling support and the attempts of his parents, Greg was ultimately expelled from school because of truancy and abusive behavior. He also left the advocacy program. It is assumed that he eventually left home and his fate is unknown.

Conclusions

It is apparent from these case histories that an adventure course is only a small part of a troubled young person's life and that these outdoor experiences, by themselves, had limited impact upon changing their behavior. The records of other cases reviewed, while not as complete as the four presented, produced similar conclusions. Troubled young people may leave an adventure course with positive behaviors and good intentions to achieve desirable goals, but these changes, no matter how small, are soon lost in the struggle against poor family interactions and negative community envi-

ronments. The advocacy follow-up program, its counselors, and the youth agencies, simply could not provide the intensive services each young person required. Tragically, Steve, Sandra, Tom, and Greg were unable to sustain a positive behavior pattern in the face of an essentially unchanged home environment and negative peer pressure.

These case studies raise some fundamental questions about the value of adventure programs for troubled young people. It could be argued that it is unethical and inappropriate for any organization to run an adventure program for troubled young people without a very strong community follow-up involving significant others. Clearly support from family and peers is a key to sustaining positive changes initiated during the adventure course.

In the face of tremendous obstacles within the young person's home environment, what steps can be taken to improve the effectiveness of an adventure course and follow-up program? While there is a lack of empirical or narrative research to support any strong statements, the authors do wish to offer some suggestions.

First, more care needs to be taken in selecting young people who have the highest prospects for success in adventure courses. One important factor is age. Younger candidates, ten to thirteen year olds, are probably more able to change than seventeen year olds with criminal records and well established behavioral patterns. Improved pre-tests of the young people would also be helpful in identifying those most likely to succeed.

Second, longer adventure courses might help more firmly establish desirable behavioral changes. Reports reviewed in this study suggest many troubled young people are just beginning to make positive changes when the course terminates. Perhaps more time could be spent at base camp after the field trip to reinforce positive changes.

Third, it is absolutely essential that every adventure course for troubled young people be integrated with a follow-up support program. The advocacy program reported in these case studies is one example and even then success was often not possible. Follow-up programs need to be strengthened. If the young person's home environ-

ment is extremely negative, perhaps direct placement into a sheltered home for an extended period would help establish positive behavioral patterns and foster some maturity before re-entry. Another possibility is to have short, weekend, follow-up adventure courses to re-establish and/or reinforce positive behavior. These mini-courses could also include family and/or friends to help involve all the young person's significant others in the follow-up.

From beginning to end, each part of the rehabilitation process is essential if lasting changes are to be made in a young person's behavior. Adventure courses can be an important part of that process. However, much more is needed. The trail to success is long and arduous. It appears we are just beginning to understand how long and difficult following that trail might be.

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