

WILDERNESS THERAPY

Help for Families with At-Risk Youth



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This white paper will address factors that contribute to a youth being at-risk, common behaviors of at-risk youth, and the warning signs that your teen needs professional help. We will then take a look at how wilderness therapy addresses various problems at-risk youth face and how wilderness therapy can also help their families.

This white paper is written for at-risk youth, their parents or caregivers, counselors, and anyone seeking help for their youth exhibiting negative behaviors that will affect their long-term path to a successful adult life.

Wilderness Therapy: Help for Families with At-Risk Youth

It can be challenging for parents who have an at-risk youth in their home. There can be increased conflict, an interruption in family routine and harmony, and a constant feeling of ‘walking on eggshells’ to avoid sparking an argument, power struggles, rage or aggression from their struggling teen.

Living in such an environment is not sustainable nor is it healthy for anyone involved and must be addressed. With proper interventions and treatment, there is hope that your home can once again become a happy place filled with trust and healthy relationships. Credible treatment options, such as wilderness therapy, incorporates several methods to help your at-risk youth strengthen their self-efficacy and understanding of themselves, which translates positively into their home life and also to your peace of mind.

- What Is an At-Risk Youth?
- Factors Contributing to a Youth At-Risk
- Common Behaviors of an At-Risk Youth
- 20 Signs Your At-Risk Youth Needs Help
- How Wilderness Therapy Can Help At-Risk youth
- How Wilderness Therapy Can Help Your Family

What is an At-Risk Youth?

At-risk youth are adolescents who are less likely to transition successfully into adulthood and achieve economic self-sufficiency. Experts say that youth today face more serious challenges than ever before, with school violence, deterioration of structure in families, gangs, substance abuse, electronic addiction, and media images barraging the youth today. Teens who have trouble coping with these stressors and instead turn to destructive or unhealthy behaviors such as substance abuse, addiction, self-harm, and violence, are often considered to be at-risk. The result of these behaviors can be detrimental to their future course and lifelong goals.

Factors Contributing to a Youth At-Risk

An at-risk youth can also be defined as “at-risk” because of a personal habit or syndrome, their family situation, or their community setting. While a teen may be considered to be “at-risk” for a variety of reasons, the results can be similar---negative life outcomes such as school failure, violence, promiscuity, or poor conflict resolution skills, all of which a youth and parent hope to avoid, as these life outcomes can take a long time to repair. Examining the contributing factor to a youth being at risk can help to determine the best course of treatment and how best to take preventative measures against further damage in the youth’s life.

Personal Factors Contributing to a Youth At-Risk

Individual diagnoses can contribute to a youth being at-risk. A teen diagnosed with depression may be more at risk for suicidal thoughts or suicide itself, while a teen diagnosed with a personality or mood disorder may be more at risk and prone to violence or aggressive behavior. Individual syndromes or habits, like alcoholism or substance abuse, can also play a role in a teen being at-risk, even if their environment or family do not appear to be typical settings for at-risk teens. A recent trauma a youth may have experienced, such as a death of a loved one or a severe upset of their typical life, may also be a contributing factor.

Family Risk Factors Contributing to a Youth At-Risk

Teens can also be at-risk because of family risk factors, such as, single parenthood, their parents having low-education levels themselves, or the parents regularly undermining the youth’s development. The level of risk in

the family can be measured by those factors along with welfare dependence, family dysfunction, and parental substance abuse.

Community Risk Factors Contributing to a Youth At-Risk

Teens can be at-risk on a community level because of a low-income neighborhood with a high crime rate, toxins in the environment, low language proficiency, or perhaps a low graduation rate at their school. Youth at-risk is becoming an increasing problem in the United States due to an increase in poverty. In 2008 14 to 18 million children lived in poverty, an increase from the 2000 statistic of children living in poverty. Experts predict that number will continue to increase 20 percent.

Common Behaviors of At-Risk Youth

Every at-risk youth is different in the cause for their behavior, but there are some flagged behaviors that programs and schools use as indicators. Frequent absences from school leading to suspension or expulsion, teen pregnancy, and drug use are some examples of obvious indicators, but other common behaviors are not as easy to identify and yet are just as prevalent and useful as a sign your youth needs help. Poor reading skills, history of abuse or trauma, and behavioral aggression are some examples. Other common behaviors for at-risk youth can differ by gender.

Common Behaviors of At-Risk Teens (Males):

- Violent or aggressive behavior
- Use of drugs
- Substance abuse

Common Behaviors of At-Risk Teens (Females):

- Feeling sad or helpless
- Suicide-related behaviors
- Eating Disorders

20 Signs Your At Risk Youth Needs Help

It can be hard for parents to know when it is time to seek professional help for your at-risk teen. Programs vary in their measurement of what exactly an at-risk youth is, but if your teen exhibits more than 4 of the following, they could be at risk for some of the outcomes previously discussed that are detrimental to their long-term success and health.

1. School suspension, expulsion, truancy or drop in grades
2. Youth being verbally abusive to those around him or her
3. A struggle with basic rules and expectations in the family
4. Difficulty motivating the youth to do household chores and homework
5. Problems with the law
6. Contemplating dropping out of high school
7. Parent is 'walking on eggshells' when speaking with the youth to avoid conflict
8. Bad peer group association
9. Evidence of suicidal thoughts or behaviors
10. Loss of interest in former hobbies, activities, or friendships
11. Depression or withdrawal from others
12. Sexual promiscuity
13. Violent behavior
14. Change in personal hygiene or appearance
15. Manipulative or deceitful behavior
16. Stealing from family or others
17. Lying regarding their whereabouts or activities
18. Lack of motivation
19. Poor self-esteem
20. Drug or alcohol experimentation

How Wilderness Therapy Can Help At-Risk Youth

Wilderness therapy, more so than other programs, addresses the various issues youth have that put them in the at-risk category and the behaviors that can prevent them from success. Wilderness adventure therapy can increase self-efficacy, self-esteem, problem solving and decrease depression and conduct disordered behaviors among other issues at-risk youth may have.

Wilderness Therapy Promotes Self-Efficacy in At-Risk Youth

A credible wilderness therapy program incorporates adventure activities and therapy in a wilderness setting in effort to increase the youth's self-efficacy and thus, improve the teen's behavior. Research has shown that changing beliefs and efficacy perception is necessary for changing behavior on a long-term basis, and is more successful than just focusing on changing the behaviors themselves. Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura, is "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute a course of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). High self-efficacy can contribute to positive perception of one's actions and a motivation to persist through adversity, which could be a very positive thing to a youth who is at-risk and attempting to face negative conditions around him or her, such as bullying or drug use in their school. Changing efficacy perceptions is more effective than just focusing on changing negative behaviors. Personal efficacy is derived from past performance, perceptions of one's own ability or others with similar abilities, verbal feedback, and the person's physical or affective state while performing the task. Wilderness therapy incorporates these four factors that build personal efficacy and thus works to remove negative behaviors.

Wilderness Therapy Builds Confidence in At-Risk Youth

Additionally, adventure activities in a credible wilderness adventure therapy program addresses the past performance factor. When an at-risk youth sees they can overcome obstacles and activities that seem difficult at the start, such as rock-climbing, hiking, or backpacking, they have more experiences added to their arsenal of past performance that they can reflect and turn to when facing an obstacle in real life. Surmounting a physical boundary, or literal wall, like in rock-climbing, can increase the youth's self-esteem and teach them "I can do hard things!"

In learning that they can surmount difficult odds, their perceptions of their own abilities is improved. They can take pride in who they are and what they can accomplish. While engaging in these various physical activities, the trained staff give them positive verbal encouragement and feedback which also helps to increase their personal efficacy. Processing and debriefing are often used to help youth internalize the experiences they

are having and relate them to their own therapeutic goals through a discussion led by program facilitators. A credible wilderness adventure therapy program that incorporate adventure activities like hiking, rock climbing, mountain biking, skiing, backpacking, and canyoneering is a “dynamic way to break through boundaries’ (<https://aspiroadventure.com/>) that youth may have set for themselves, or had set for them by factors they cannot control.

Wilderness Therapy Provides a Novel and Therapeutic Environment for At-Risk Youth

A credible wilderness therapy program will provide these opportunities and treatment in an environment that is away from the distractions and complications of typical adolescent and young adult life and is an ideal place to realize one’s true potential. A credible wilderness therapy program incorporates the healing effect of the outdoors as a way to provide a form of therapy to at-risk teens.

While research shows that simply spending time outside can improve both physical and mental health, wilderness adventure therapy is not simply just playing outdoors, nor is it a ‘boot camp’--but rather there is therapy involved from professionals who can assess the at-risk youth’s varying needs and assist in their care. Many programs isolate one problem of at-risk youth, such as reducing school failure, but in isolating one at-risk factor they often ignore or do not cater to the other at-risk problems the youth experiences, such as substance abuse. In the real world these problems co-exist and contribute to one another, so a program is needed that touches on all of these risk factors together. A credible wilderness therapy program will use a variety of methods to overcome these risk factors together. Aspiro, for example, uses a research-based and results-driven model, with individual and group therapy, assessment and treatment plans, meaningful relationships with the field staff and therapists, integrated adventure therapy, and transitional support and long-term recommendations to assist in the at-risk youth’s long-term success.

How Wilderness Adventure Therapy Can Help Your Family Emerge Better Than Before

Wilderness therapy can help not only the youth at-risk, but also their families. Research shows that parent-adolescent conflict has a correlation with some at-risk behaviors. Therefore, the relationship of the parent and youth is an important factor in preventing at-risk behaviors and then sustaining healthy patterns once achieved.

Wilderness Therapy: Healthier Individuals, Healthier Families

As a way to achieve healthier patterns within the home, wilderness therapy first works with the teen individually to help him or her overcome negative behaviors. Once the individual is in a healthier place, it is common for the relationship with parents to improve and their values to become more aligned. Once there is less conflict within a parent-child relationship, the child or teen is more likely to support the values to maintain a good relationship with their parent. The same can be true in the negative sense. When the parent-youth relationship deteriorates, at-risk behaviors can often follow.

Again, this circular pattern of behavior can be improved when your son or daughter returns from a credible wilderness adventure therapy program. A recent study found that youth returned from wilderness therapy programs with significant improvements in mood and behavior, and that those improvements continued even at home. The once struggling teen will hold a positive perception and confidence in his or her abilities and will in turn, display good behaviors and an improved relationship with the parent. This often equates to less arguments and more communication, in addition to improving other facets of family life that can make all the difference.

Wilderness Therapy Addresses Family Concerns and Dynamics

Some wilderness therapy programs are unique in that they incorporate families into the treatment of the youth, instead of treating the youth and then returning them home with not enough preparation, where they may regress into old behaviors. Educating the parents and other family members of their own impact on the family dynamic can set the youth up to better succeed once they return home from treatment. Programs like Aspiro offer parent and multi-day family workshops, in which the family can come when the youth has been in the program for a couple weeks so that they can see the progress the youth has already made, and then find how to better succeed in their relationships and as individuals. “Parent participation is fundamental as our clinical team addresses family concerns and family dynamics in our wilderness therapy programs” (<https://aspiroadventure.com/parent-resources/parent-seminars/>). The parent and youth can each be “heard.” The parent workshop includes a course of how to lessen collision between the parent and child, which can mean more harmony in the home and more peace of mind for the parent and teen as they attempt to right their course to a better future. Each family member will learn how their behavior affects the family dynamic, which provides a more effective treatment instead of isolating one member (the youth) and then returning them to the same dynamic and situation that had problems before.

Conclusion

A teen can be at-risk for a variety of reasons. However, regardless of the cause or individual circumstance, it is always extremely heartbreaking and difficult for parents to have an at-risk teen in their family. As a result, many parents feel overwhelmed about how they can best help their teen. However, the road to recovery for your loved one begins with simply identifying your 'at-risk' teen and then seeking the help they need.

A credible wilderness therapy can provide you with peace of mind knowing your teen will be on a better path to health and long-term success. A credible wilderness adventure therapy program will achieve health for your son or daughter through increasing your youth's self-efficacy, confidence, and can help him or her overcome the negative aspects of their life that have dragged them down.

With proper support and care, your teen-- and your family-- can emerge happier and healthier than ever before.

This white paper was sponsored by Aspiro Adventure, the pioneer of Wilderness Adventure Therapy. Aspiro Adventure offers safe, effective, and clinically-sophisticated treatment options for adolescents and young adults.

Resources

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About Aspiro Adventure

Aspiro Adventure's Wilderness Adventure Therapy program was uniquely crafted to assist students and their families in creating lasting, life-long emotional changes through compassionate, intentional, research backed, and safe outdoor adventure therapy programs. The professionals at Aspiro Adventure understand individuals don't come with instructions, and every student is unique, capable, and amazing in their own right.

Aspiro Adventure focuses on helping adolescents, young adults, and their families through difficulties that occur when various behavioral, cognitive, or developmental issues are present. Research shows that engaging individuals on a personal level with strategic and intentional activities will aid in developing the tools and skills necessary to engage life in a healthy and positive way.



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