



White Paper  
**Boot Camp for Teens:  
Is There a More Effective Solution?**

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*In this white paper, we provide an overview of teenage boot camps, dispute their therapeutic effectiveness, and review a healthier, more effective alternative to serve teenagers and young adults. We focus on helping adolescents and young adults through a variety of challenges, including, but not limited to anger issues, anxiety, substance abuse, depression, divorce conflict, self esteem issues, risky/harmful sexual behaviors, school failure, and behavior issues.*

*This white paper is written for parents, teachers, school counselors, or anyone needing advice on where to turn to help a teen in crisis.*

## **Boot Camp for Teens: Is There a More Effective Solution?**

When a child is struggling, there is nothing a parent wouldn't do to help. When parents have exhausted all of their resources and don't know where to turn, some decide to turn to more extreme treatment methods, such as teen boot camps, to help their troubled teen.

Teen boot camp programs are designed to emulate the tactics used in military boot camps. The programs offer fast results for parents who have lost control of their troubled teens. While boot camps are effective at building strength and discipline, teen boot camps typically do not have a therapeutic model to address the underlying issues behind teen defiance and rebellion. This leaves many asking, "Why do parents send their troubled teens to a boot camp in the first place?"

In many cases, teens in crisis are sent to boot camps to remedy an undesirable behavior. Whether the behavior is substance abuse, anger, defying authority, academic underachievement, or breaking the rules, there is likely a deeper, underlying emotional issue that should be addressed.

1. What are Teen Boot Camps?
2. Why Aren't Boot Camps Effective in Helping Troubled Teens?
3. Signs a Troubled Teen Needs Treatment
4. Are There More Effective and Therapeutic Treatment Options Available?
5. What Makes Wilderness Therapy So Effective in Helping Troubled Teens?
6. What to Look for in an Effective Wilderness Therapy Program

## What Are Teen Boot Camps?

Sensationalized on the talk show circuit in the 1990's, teen boot camps are short-term, highly structured military-style rehabilitation programs. They are designed to use military training, authoritative teaching methods, rigorous exercises, and strict discipline to turn around defiant, angry, or even destructive teens. The hope is that the troubled teen will go back home with the attitude of a "good soldier."

Designed to teach troubled teens to respect authority and to learn to deal with their consequences, boot camps push teens to their physical extremes. Sometimes, however, they may push too far. While these programs may prove effective for teens who want to attend to become more disciplined, teen boot camps are not an effective therapeutic treatment program for teens who are truly struggling-- whatever their struggle may be.

## Why Aren't Boot Camps Effective in Helping Troubled Teens?

If a teen is truly in crisis, a boot camp program is not the most effective treatment program for him or her. Boot camps lack the sophisticated clinical model and individualized treatment plans that other, more therapeutically effective treatment programs have. The following are reasons boot camps are not effective in helping truly troubled teens.

### 1. Boot Camps for Teens Do Not Create Lasting Change

Since boot camps are not a sustainable model for troubled teens once they are back in the "real world," teen boot camps do not deliver lasting results. Additionally, teen boot camps stress following orders and do not foster a sense of autonomy, responsibility, or well-being in their participants. These are all vital aspects and the foundations behind achieving life-long change.

### 2. Boot Camps for Teens Do Not Involve the Family

Since teen boot camps do not involve the entire family in treatment, they do nothing to improve the family dynamic; improving the family dynamic is likely a large part of why teens are sent to boot camps in the first place. In addition to not addressing the family dynamic, sending a teen in crisis away may make him or her feel misunderstood or deserted in their time of need.

### 3. Boot Camps Do Not Teach Coping Strategies to Help Teens Through Struggles

Since boot camps use exercise, structure, strict schedules, and punishment to motivate teens, rather than encouraging them to work through their own struggles, teens leave boot camps without the proper coping mechanisms to help deal with their individual struggles in the "real world."

#### 4. Boot Camps are a "One-size-fits-all" Approach

While every teen in crisis has a different struggle, background, and story, boot camps have one method to treat each individual. In fact, Keith C. Russell, a leader in outdoor behavioral healthcare research, has noted that recent research shows that "boot camp approaches are not effective in treating adolescents with substance abuse disorders, and that practices used in boot camps can be considered cruel and unusual." (Russell 2001)

#### 5. Boot Camps for Teens Do Not Directly Address Troubled Teens' Real Issues

Teens who attend boot camps are often sent to remedy an undesirable behavior, such as substance abuse, anger, defying authority, academic underachievement, or breaking the rules; however, with these behaviors there is likely a deeper, underlying emotional issue that should be addressed.

A teen who is acting out and running away or experimenting with drugs and alcohol may be covering up a more serious undiagnosed mental illness, such as depression or anxiety. A teen who is performing poorly at school or skipping class may have an undiagnosed learning disorder or attention deficit. Boot camps do not address these potential underlying issues.

### Signs a Troubled Teen Needs Treatment

Teenage years can be rough for parents and teens alike. Often times, it can seem like teens are on an emotional roller coaster, as this is a dynamic time in one's life. It is perfectly normal for teens to display typical teen behavior, such as mood swings, an increased peer influence, and a changing appearance; however, there are some red flags that parents should keep an eye out for.

While teens are likely to turn to their friends rather than their parents for advice on making choices, a sudden change in their entire peer group could be a red flag, especially if the new found friends are having a negative influence. In addition, teenagers may want to express their newfound individuality by dyeing their hair or trying a new style of clothing; however, an extreme change in appearance, such as an extreme weight loss or gain could signify a bigger problem. Here are some other red flag signs to look for in a troubled teen:

- Secretive behavior, deception, or lying
- Unexpected/unexplainable decreased or failing academic performance
- Spending too much time sleeping
- Significant changes in appetite or eating patterns (skipping meals, avoiding food)
- Excessive Isolation
- Regularly missing curfew

- Stealing
- Skipping school
- Body image issues
- Promiscuity
- Significant disregard for personal hygiene
- Withdrawal from favorite sports or activities
- Excessive outbursts
- Self mutilation (cutting) or mentioning hurting him or herself
- Extreme defiance
- Bullying others
- Experimenting with alcohol and drugs
- Loss of self esteem/extreme self loathing

If a teen is displaying some of these red flag signs, it may be time to think about an appropriate treatment program, as these could be signs of a mental illness, destructive behavior, substance abuse problem, or eating disorder. While some parents may be tempted by the quick turnaround that many teen boot camps offer, these serious issues should be addressed more therapeutically.

## Are There More Effective and Therapeutic Treatment Options?

If your son or daughter is truly struggling with a mental illness, substance abuse, emotional, cognitive, or developmental issues, a teen boot camp may not be the most ideal or effective treatment option for him or her.

There are more effective and therapeutic treatment options out there for teenagers who need personalized care to work through their issues. Depending on the type and severity of issue(s) your son or daughter is facing, there are many therapeutic options available.

If your teen's issues are severe enough that you are considering placing him or her in a teen boot camp, you should know that there are many types of therapeutic residential treatment programs available. Therapeutic residential treatment programs have proven effective at getting to the root of the issues that teens face.

### What is Wilderness Therapy?

One of these treatment options is a wilderness therapy program. The popularity of wilderness therapy programs has increased over the past few decades. The increase in wilderness therapy's popularity is due to its ability to aid individuals in overcoming emotional, behavioral, and cognitive issues.

A large part of the effectiveness of wilderness therapy programs is due to the individualized, therapeutic methods of helping each teen work through his or her own personal issues. In fact, “the design and theoretical basis of a wilderness therapy program should be therapeutically based, with assumptions made clear and concise in order to better determine target outcomes and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention” (Bandoroff & Scherer, 1994)

## What Makes Wilderness Therapy so Effective in Helping Troubled Teens?

There are several attributes of wilderness therapy that make this type of treatment especially effective in addressing the underlying issues troubled teens face while creating lasting change.

### Using the Wilderness and Unfamiliar Environments to Create a Unique Experience

One aspect that makes wilderness therapy an extremely effective method of treatment is the use of the wilderness and adventure activities to challenge teens. Living in the wilderness is such a novel, unfamiliar environment and experience for many teenagers, allowing them to leave the pressure and stress of their everyday lives behind them. Research has shown that simply being exposed to the wilderness has positive effects on individuals’:

- self-discipline
- executive functioning
- attentional functioning
- ADHD symptoms
- problem solving
- critical thinking

### Giving Teens an Opportunity to Form New Bonds and Relationships

Wilderness therapy offers teens the opportunity to form both peer bonds with other teens and mentor/mentee relationships with wilderness therapy staff. Since wilderness therapy takes place in a group setting, each troubled teen has the opportunity to bond with other teens who are going through similar struggles and facing the same obstacles through wilderness therapy. The group setting allows group development processes to facilitate learning.

In addition to the close bonds formed with other teens participating in therapy, wilderness therapy provides troubled teens the opportunity to form meaningful relationships with positive role models in the form of wilderness therapy guides and counselors.

### **Allowing Teens to Experience Natural Consequences**

Another aspect about Wilderness Therapy that makes treatment so effective is exposing teens to natural and logical imposed consequences. Recognizing and experiencing the natural consequences and logical imposed consequences have a great impact on developing intrinsic motivation. Teens must understand how the consequence relates to their actions for this to develop. An effective wilderness therapy program should help students understand the connection between their choices and consequences; cause and effect.

As such, it is vital for wilderness therapy programs to utilize natural and logical consequences. These facilitate intrinsic change and greater insight for self governance. Programs should allow, as long as it is not a safety risk, the natural consequences of a student's choice to occur.

A natural consequence is a direct result of a choice, without any imposed consequence. For example, if a student chooses to not build a shelter when the staff tell them it is going to rain, the consequence is they and their belongings get wet.

At times, logical consequences may be necessary to impose, if it makes sense for the offense. For example, a group's members are dawdling when it is time to pack up camp in the morning, causing them to get out of camp late; a logical consequence is the group wakes up earlier to allow for the group to get out of camp by the set time.

### **Offering Adventure Activities to Challenge Teens**

Some wilderness therapy programs offer an added component of adventure activities to their therapeutic offerings. By participating in adventure activities, such as rock climbing, rafting, or mountain biking, teenagers in wilderness therapy programs can see that they have the ability to adapt and thrive while overcoming new challenges. This fosters a strong form of self confidence in teenagers.

By focusing on adventures and emphasizing skill building, wilderness therapy programs which offer the added component of adventure help to develop personal strengths and promote self-efficacy within each teen. Building on each individual's strengths, rather than simply treating symptoms, promotes long-term success for each teen in crisis.

The added component of adventure and the variety of appealing activities in wilderness adventure therapy also leads to an increased buy-in to therapy from teens who may be unreceptive to or apathetic about more traditional, talk therapy methods.

## What to Look for in a Reputable Wilderness Therapy Program

While there are a plethora of “wilderness experience programs” and wilderness camps out there, there are characteristics that make a wilderness therapy program a truly therapeutic experience. There are several characteristics and processes that a credible wilderness therapy program should implement to ensure that they are following best practices within the industry.

### ✓ 1. Licensure/Accreditations

A reputable wilderness therapy program should obtain state licensure. In addition, to implement and maintain clinical best practices, and to maintain the integrity of the wilderness lands they use, reputable organizations partner with applicable regulatory and accrediting organizations.

If the organization offers academic credits to their participants, the wilderness therapy program should be accredited by an academic organization to ensure that the credits are transferable.

### ✓ 2. Medical Care

A credible wilderness therapy program conducts a medical examination upon admission, and routine medical check-ups to monitor participants’ well-being.

### ✓ 3. Formal Evaluation

A credible wilderness therapy program should evaluate their clients upon admission; routine formal evaluations of the effectiveness of the treatment path should also be conducted periodically to ensure that the treatment is effective.

### ✓ 4. Adequate, Expert Supervision

The wilderness therapy field guides should operate under the supervision of a licensed mental health practitioner or clinical social worker. In addition, wilderness therapy program participants should have individual or group therapy sessions with a licensed therapist.

### ✓ 5. Family Involvement

A reputable wilderness therapy program involves the family in the healing process since families are vital to the process of change that takes place. With both student and parents on the same path, the entire family begins to heal. The wilderness therapy program should work with the family to help them understand each participant’s issues, goals, and treatment path.



- ✓ **6. Specialized Training**  
All wilderness therapy field guides should be trained and certified in CPR, first aid, and first responder certification. In addition, therapists should be trained in their area of expertise or specialty (i.e. substance abuse treatment, depression and anxiety treatment, family therapy etc.)
- ✓ **7. Individualized Treatment Plans**  
At a reputable wilderness therapy program, all clients should receive an individualized treatment plan based on their personal needs, goals, and issues. The individualized plans should be carefully monitored by licensed therapeutic staff members.
- ✓ **8. After Care and Transitional Support**  
Progress doesn't stop the day a client leaves treatment. As such, therapeutic staff members should ensure that the teen has a smooth transition back into the "real world." In addition, the family and the client should receive adequate aftercare services to ensure that the progress made during treatment is a lasting change.
- ✓ **9. Clinical Model**  
While every teen should receive an individualized treatment plan, a reputable wilderness therapy program should have a clearly defined clinical model that is based on mental health field best practices.

## Conclusion

Helping your son or daughter transition into a successful, happy, well-balanced adult means being there for him or her during the difficult teenaged years. While it may be tempting to send your troubled teen to a teen boot camp as a quick-fix remedy for their undesirable behavior, it is vital to think about what is in the best interest of your son or daughter.

Keep in mind that the undesirable behavior your teen is displaying may be just a symptom of a more serious issue that needs to be addressed therapeutically. In order to promote a life-long change in your teen, it is important to select a treatment program that is reputable, credible, and effective in addressing your teen's individual issues.

## Resources

*The Attributes of Effective Field Staff in Wilderness Programs: Changing Youths' Perspectives of Being "Cool"* (Taniguchi, Widmer, Duerden, and Draper 2009).

*What is wilderness Therapy?* (Keith C. Russell 2001)

*Advocating the End of Juvenile Boot Camps: Why Military Model Does Not Belong in the Juvenile Justice System* (Jaime E. Muscar 2008)

*Wilderness family therapy: An innovative treatment approach for problem youth* (Bandoroff and Scherer 1994)

## Additional Resources

For additional resources on helping your child, please visit our website's resource section:  
<http://aspiroadventure.com/parent-resources/suggested-reading/>



*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.*

## **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.