

## WHY WILDERNESS?

Some of the adolescents we work with may be experiencing one or more of the following problems:

- Out of control behavior
- Low self-esteem
- Rebellion against parental or school authority
- Strong desire to live outside family values
- Abuse history
- Lack of motivation
- Anger due to adoption/rejection
- ADD/HD
- Runaway pattern
- Frustration with family
- Experimentation with drugs/alcohol
- Expulsion or suspension
- Manipulating behavior

America discovered the therapeutic wilderness experience in a massive way in the 1970s. Experts found that the out-of-doors was beneficial for working with young people exhibiting emotiondriven behavior problems. How is it that children who are unable to learn the values of responsibility, honesty and trust at home or school can acquire this awareness by leaving civilization behind for a while?

Part of the reason was well-expressed by the 19th century American lawyer and orator Robert Ingersoll: "In nature there are neither rewards nor punishments -- there are consequences."

The majority of children enrolled in wilderness programs have been unable to find relief and success at home through traditional therapies or counseling. Wilderness programs work to interrupt this unsuccessful pattern by empowering students through a challenging, structured emotional and physical growth curriculum in which each child can seek out and discover the tools he or she needs to move forward toward adulthood.

Our society is based on a multi-layered system of incentives and deterrants. This works reasonably well with children who have the self-confidence to foresee consequences and to understand the chal-

lenge and desirability of taking on age-appropriate responsibilities. But, to the problem child who has a low self-image and finds it difficult to trust anyone, these rewards and punishments often are seen as arbitrary decisions by authority figures. Many of these children see manipulation of others as the best way to get rewards, and a consider a negative outcome as something to try to key component of every reputable wilderness program, and parental involvement is a powerful reinforcing tool to ensure that each child will continue to learn and grow long after the program ends.

Four to six weeks in the outdoors also gives parents and their consultants an opportunity to assess children who might not have allowed such intrusions back at home. Some programs can arrange formal psychological testing in the field. Test results can be invaluable to understanding past behaviors as well as for planning whether the student comes home or goes on to a residential placement, and what form that placement might take.

In addition, the better wilderness programs have licensed therapists who are skilled at using the outdoor milieu to open up a counseling dialogue with each student. This not only teaches the child how to use therapy (and therapists) to make themselves feel better, it also gives parents and their consultants a new, objective, experienced professional to help with the step-down planning process. Wilderness therapists in the effective programs can help parents and their advisors determine what the “next steps” might look like. They have developed an intimate and objective view of the child throughout the trek and are, therefore, probably better qualified than anyone to give fresh insight and input to placement decisions that will help the child and family build on the gains and successes of the wilderness experience in their new school.

Selecting an appropriate wilderness program requires great care. Licensing documents, safety protocols, staff qualifications, insurance records, communications policies, type of terrain and company philosophies are some of the things a parent should learn about before committing to an outdoor program. It also is strongly recommended that recent parent references (and, if possible, student references) be obtained. The only way most parents can get comfortable with the notion of their kid deriving benefit from sleeping on the ground for four to six weeks is to talk to parents who once had the same reservations.

Wilderness works for most families.