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Top 5 Common Myths About Wilderness Therapy For Youth: Understanding The History and Today's Reality

/Jeremy Whitworth/Last Updated May 3, 2023

If you've spent time looking into wilderness therapy as a therapeutic treatment option, there's a good chance that you've run into talk of the "troubled teen industry" and a number of distressing misconceptions surrounding the efficacy and practices of wilderness therapy.

As a leading therapeutic wilderness program, Trails Carolina, founded by Graham Shannonhouse in 2008, is dedicated to working with other professionals in the field to contribute to continued research into the efficacy and best practices of wilderness therapy.

At Trails Carolina, we are dedicated to aiding in the development of industry standards that prioritize the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of students and their families.

We feel it is necessary to address broad inaccuracies about wilderness therapy as a way of demonstrating respect for our dedicated team members and other professionals in the field who are committed to helping others, as well as for the students and families who have placed their confidence in our services and found lasting success.

A Historical Context: The Evolution of The Wilderness Therapy Program

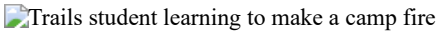
Like all other residential treatment centers and programs, wilderness therapy has a history.

Many criticisms of residential and wilderness therapy programs are from individuals who went through "troubled teen programs" fifteen or twenty years ago.

Over the years, outdated punitive models of behavioral modification that were used in such programs, often called "boot camps," have since been largely investigated and replaced by standardized holistic and integrative relational therapy treatment structures.

These standardized, holistic treatment structures are the basis of the programs of today's leaders in wilderness therapy.

Wilderness Therapy Today


Trails student learning to make a camp fire

Today, families have access to supportive, safe, and nurturing therapeutic treatment programs. Modern wilderness therapy programs, like Trails Carolina, are far from the punitive boot camps they are often portrayed as.

While these programs can involve adventure activities and physical outdoor challenges, they are carefully designed to be therapeutic and supportive environments for students.

Participants in these programs receive individualized attention and support from highly experienced and compassionate mental health professionals, including licensed therapists and trained wilderness guides, who are experienced in working with youth.

Trails Carolina, along with other wilderness therapy programs dedicated to providing a safe environment where students can heal, grow, and thrive, is continuously committed to improving the field of wilderness therapy for the benefit of all students and families seeking help.

Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare & Residential Treatment Risk Management

Modern wilderness therapy programs must meet certain strict industry standards in order to run. These include:

Staff Standards

At Trails Carolina, all staff must undergo meticulous background checks alongside rigorous onboarding and in-service trainings.

Safety Standards

Trails Carolina periodically undergoes a rigorous evaluation process with the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), an independent accrediting agency. This accreditation requires extremely high standards for safety, business practices, and services. Trails Carolina was recently granted a 3-year CARF accreditation renewal certificate.

Facility Standards

As part of Trails Carolina's state licensure, our program facilities are annually surveyed by the Department of Human Services (DHS). Our program is also accredited by the Outdoor Behavioral Health Council and is a member of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs.





The goal of wilderness therapy programs is not to punish or control students, but to help them develop the personal insight, skills, and tools they need to overcome their challenges and make positive changes in their lives. This is achieved through a range of therapeutic interventions, including individual and or group therapy sessions, experiential learning, and personal reflection.

Wilderness therapy programs also emphasize the importance of community and social support, helping participants to build relationships with peers and mentors that can provide ongoing support and encouragement. Moreover, actively involving and educating parents and siblings is a priority as well.

Top 5 Misconceptions About Wilderness Therapy Debunked

Myth 1: Wilderness therapy is a punitive boot camp.

One of the most persistent myths about wilderness therapy is that it is a punitive boot camp that relies on using punishment and harsh discipline in a dangerous environment to effect change in teens who have misbehaved. This misconception is often fueled by media portrayals of wilderness therapy programs as harsh, austere environments where participants are subjected to grueling physical challenges and military-style discipline.

The Truth: While it is true that wilderness therapy involves physical activities such as hiking, camping, and bouldering, these activities are not designed to be punitive or excessively demanding. Instead, they are carefully designed to be challenging but achievable, helping participants to build self-confidence, resilience, and a sense of accomplishment.

In reality, wilderness therapy is a time-tested and proven approach to promoting sustainable personal growth and positive behavioral change in adolescents and young adults. Wilderness therapy uses therapeutic intervention that is designed to help young people develop the skills they need to overcome their challenges and lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

Myth 2: Wilderness therapy is only for “troubled teens.”

It is a common misconception that wilderness therapy programs are a part of the “troubled teen industry” and that these programs are designed to make money off of “troubled” teens.

The Truth: Wilderness therapy is designed to help young people who are struggling with a range of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, trauma, and who may be challenged with learning differences. It is not just for “troubled” teens.

Myth 3: Wilderness therapy is inherently dangerous.

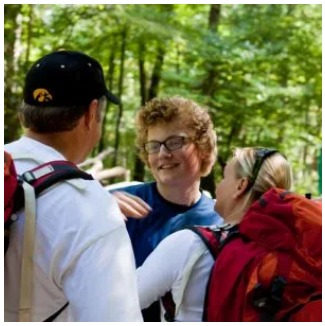
Critics of wilderness programs point to the use of adventure experiences and outdoor activities when claiming that wilderness therapy is inherently dangerous for teens.

The Truth: While wilderness therapy involves being in a natural environment, it is not inherently dangerous. Wilderness therapy programs are carefully designed to minimize risk to all participants, with trained staff supervision and access to medical professionals at all times.

A 2013 study by the University of New Hampshire notes that students participating in wilderness and adventure therapy programs are at significantly less risk of injury than those playing football and are three times less likely to visit the emergency room for an injury than if they were at home. (University of New Hampshire. “Wilderness therapy programs less risky than daily life, research finds.” ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 28 March 2013. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/03/130328124804.htm>.)

Myth 4: Wilderness therapy is isolating and restrictive.

Another misconception about wilderness therapy is that it is an isolated and restrictive experience.



The Truth: In fact, wilderness therapy programs involve group therapy and process sessions, allowing participants to connect with peers, learn how to work collaboratively together and explore healthy peer relationships based on trust and respect. Additionally, while participants may be living in a remote outdoor location, they are not cut off from the outside world entirely. Wilderness therapy programs allow for regular communication with family members.

Myth 5: Wilderness therapy is not effective:

The Truth: There is a growing body of research that supports the effectiveness of wilderness therapy in treating a range of mental health issues. While it may not be the right approach for everyone, many young people have found success in wilderness therapy programs.

Let's Look At The Evidence: The Success of Wilderness Therapy Programs

Research has shown that wilderness therapy programs can be highly effective in promoting positive behavioral change and personal growth in teenagers.

Trails Carolina's Ongoing Research Initiative

Since 2014, Trails Carolina has taken part in an ongoing research initiative launched and conducted by the Center for Research, Assessment, and Treatment Efficacy (CReATE) and the University of Arkansas to track the effectiveness of nature-based therapy on children and adolescents.

The study tracks teens' and families' progress in treatment and well-being:

- Upon admission to Trails Carolina
- At graduation from Trails Carolina
- Three months after graduation from Trails
- One year after graduation from Trails

The research initiative utilizes a variety of assessment tools, including the Treatment Outcome Package (TOP), the gold standard for measuring response to therapeutic interventions, and the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessments.

The most recent (December 2022) empirical evidence indicates wilderness therapy is highly effective for children and adolescents with over 98% of student participants reporting continued improvement in at least one problem behavior or mental health symptom 12 months post-graduation.

One reason for the success of wilderness therapy is that it offers a unique and immersive experience that can help participants to gain new perspectives and develop new coping skills. Being immersed in nature can be therapeutic in itself, helping participants to feel more grounded and connected to the world around them.

Additionally, the physical challenges of wilderness therapy can help participants to build resilience and confidence, which can translate into improved emotional and psychological well-being.

Trails Carolina Will Always Prioritize the Well-being of Our Students

Trails Carolina demonstrates a strong commitment and sense of responsibility toward helping youth and their families achieve long-lasting success through their program. This dedication extends to Trails Carolina's support of and contributions to the continuous assessment and improvement of the entire wilderness therapy field.

Our vow is to continue to regularly evaluate and update approaches to providing therapeutic wilderness programs to children and adolescents based on the latest research and clinical best practices in the field.

By constantly striving for excellence and a genuine desire to help those in need, Trails Carolina has established itself as a leader in the wilderness therapy industry, and a trusted resource for families seeking help for their struggling children.

Posted in Wilderness Therapy



Jeremy Whitworth

As Executive Director at Trails Carolina, a leading wilderness therapy program for youth and teens, I oversee operations and collaborate with our leadership team. Since 2022, I've also hosted the Common Ground Podcast for parents: https://trailscarolina.com/common-ground-podcast/ With a background in Wilderness Leadership and Experiential Education, I've managed adventure-based therapeutic programs across the US and Canada. My experiences in competitive athletics and adventure sports have honed my leadership, risk assessment, and decision-making skills, which I apply to running a successful business like Trails Carolina.

Get started today

Contact us today to learn how Trails Carolina can help your family

Contact Us LP

First Name * First Name
Last Name * Last Name
Email * Email
Phone * Phone
Address * Street Address
City * City
State * State
Zip * Zip
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Request More Info

Trails saved my daughter's life. Amanda is an amazing human and a brilliant therapist. I am so grateful to her, Science Steve, and the other wonderful people who could reach my daughter at a time when I could not.

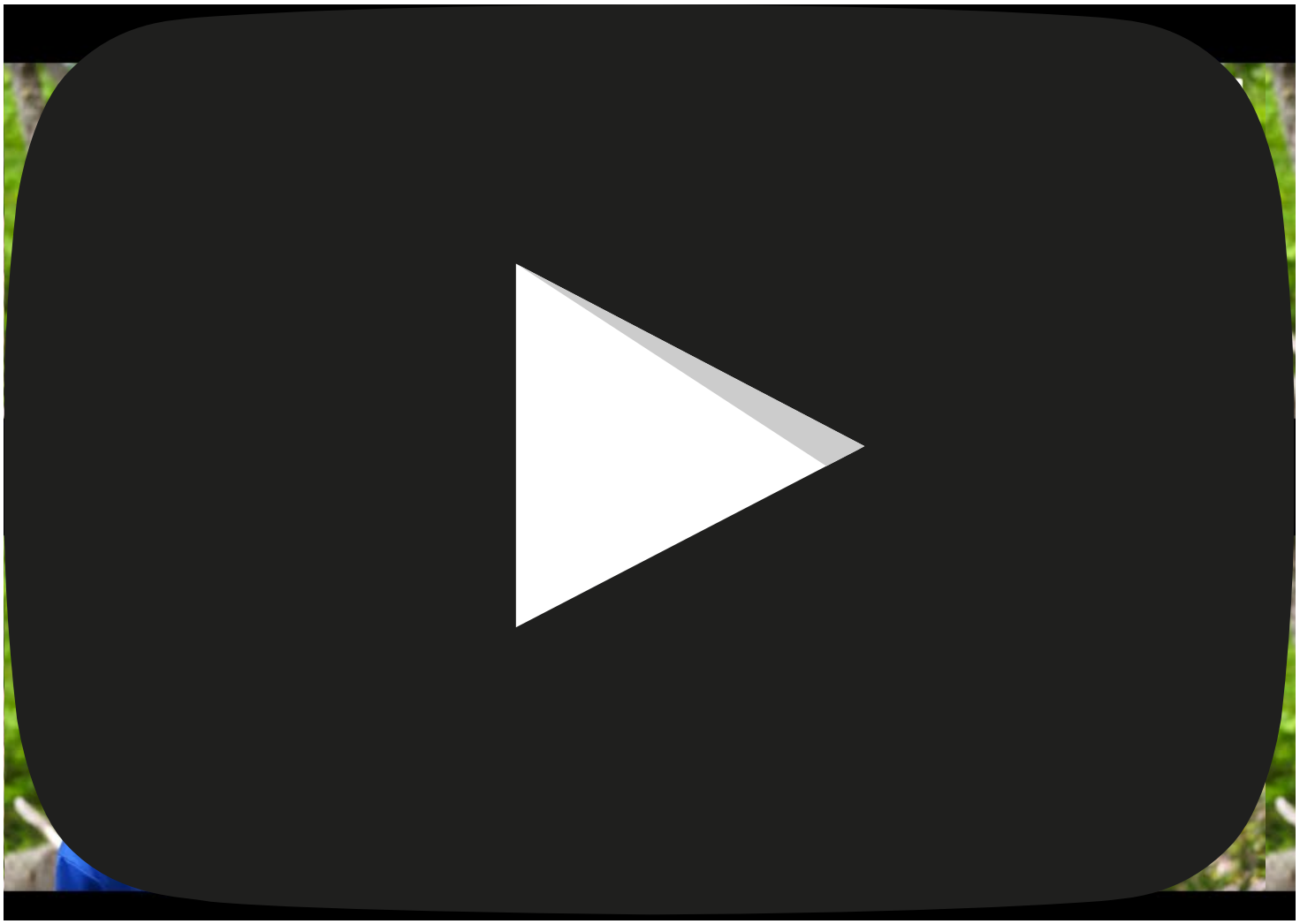
Margot Lowman August 2022

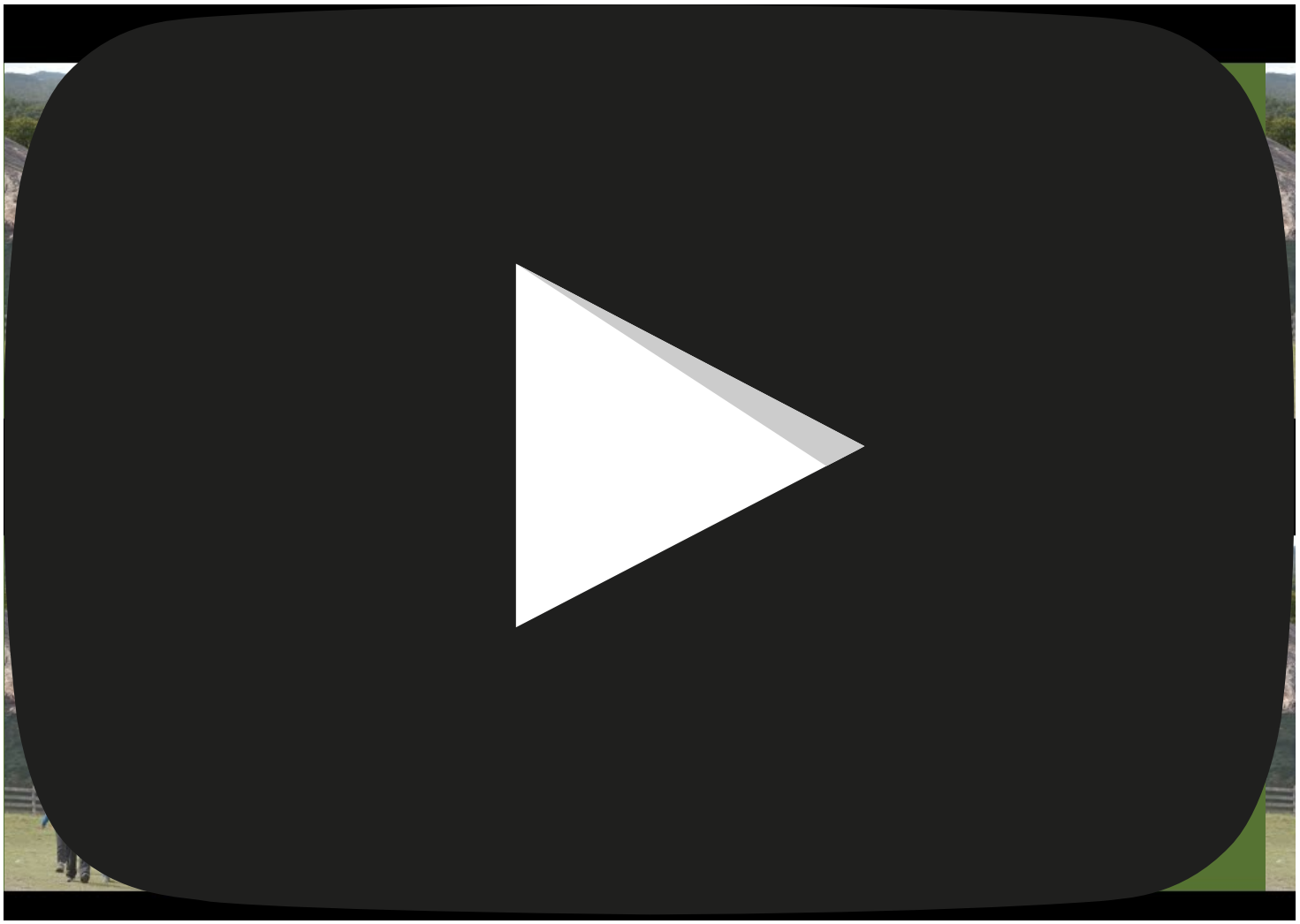
Great life changing experience for our son. After becoming addicted to gaming during covid he was very depressed. At Trails he experienced the wilderness, Science Steve, learning survival skills and top notch therapy and support etc… I highly recommend! This gave our son and our family a renewed family bond full of love and excitement about his bright future.

Winnifred Wilson July 2022

Outstanding clinical work and superb staff! There's a great culture at this company and it shows with how they engage with families/clients.

Kristin Brace June 2022

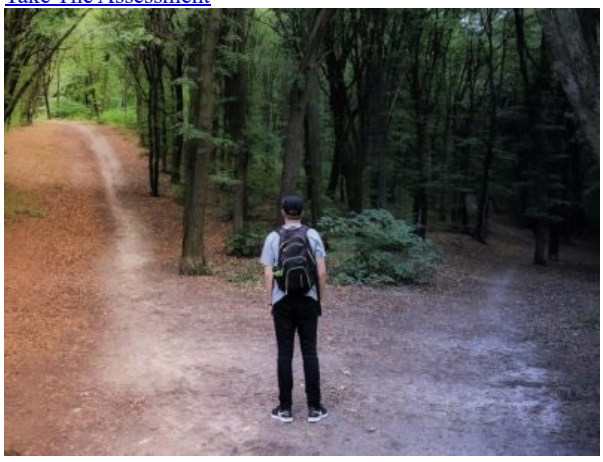




Discover If Trails Is The Right Program For Your Child

Take our short online assessment and help us better understand how we can help your family.

Take The Assessment



Top 5 Common Myths About Wilderness Therapy For Youth: Understanding The History and Today's Reality

April 27, 2023 | Wilderness Therapy

Today, families have access to supportive, safe, and nurturing therapeutic treatment programs. Modern wilderness therapy programs, like Trails Carolina, are far from the punitive boot camps they are often portrayed as.



Treatment For Anxiety In Teens: How Wilderness Therapy Can Help

January 13, 2023 | Anxiety, Mindfulness, Social Struggles, Wilderness Therapy

At Trails Carolina, we will give your child the skills to manage anxiety in real-time as soon as they arrive on our campus. They will very quickly gain a sense of belonging at Trails because of the sense of community that naturally occurs with the other students who are dealing with the common struggles of learning to manage adolescent anxiety.



Dealing with Defiance: Six Tips for Decreasing Defiant Behavior

July 20, 2018 | Defiance

Most parents know what is like to live with a defiant teenager. Teens often feel inclined to push buttons and test the limits enforced upon them. This can be extremely frustrating for parents and create a constant power struggle within the home. The teenage years are when one is trying to figure out where they…



Trails Carolina's wilderness camps for troubled teens are dedicated to helping teens work through behavioral or emotional difficulties, build trusting relationships with their family and peers, and achieve academic success.

Get In Touch!

Contact Us (800) 975-7303

500 Winding Gap Road Lake Toxaway, NC 28747

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