

Places for Struggling Teens™

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"It is more important to get it right, than to get it first."

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TROUBLED TEEN VS. STRUGGLING TEEN

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The terms Troubled Teen and Struggling Teen are frequently used interchangeably. I think that is an error because the connotations for each are different.

The term Troubled Teen is usually heard in the mental health field, most often referring to children with serious disorders and with serious problems that do not respond to normal family or society interventions. A bi-polar child or one who is severely depressed would be examples. These children seemed compelled by what in a previous age would have been called "demons." Something internal is driving the child to the extent that the child is unable to control it, and the child is unable to respond positively to external interventions like punishment, encouragement or discipline. The connotation is that the child needs treatment in order to lessen, control or eliminate these compulsions.

The term Struggling Teen has broader connotations. As we use it at Woodbury Reports, it can include a Troubled Teen with serious disorders but primarily includes teens who, for some reason or other, are floundering or failing in mainstream society and schools. These might include children floundering because of an undetected Learning Disability or Learning Difference. It might also include children that have an "entitled" mentality, or ones who internalized some criticism in the past and have lost all semblance of self confidence.

The Struggling Teen child might also appear to be "driven," but the cause is closer to being a gross misunderstanding of how the world works. The cause might not be traced to a serious diagnosis; but these Struggling Teen self-destructive behaviors, apparently throwing away their future, were of serious concern. Serious enough that residential placement was worth considering since they seem to be their own worse enemy.

I first learned of this difference when I was the Admissions Director for an Emotional Growth Boarding School in the 1980s. Many of the teens I was enrolling had been tearing their families apart and were engaging in serious self-destructive activities, thus the reasons the parents decided on residential placement. For many of these children, psychological evaluations had indicated they were more or less psychologically intact.

The most frequent manifestation was that they were emotionally immature for their age. The term often used at the time was "sixteen-years-old and going on four." That they seemed mature by demanding all the rights of an adult was misleading because they were reacting emotionally like a young child. For a child like this, treatment to a diagnosis was often ineffective, but emotional growth structure and experiences often were effective. In essence, what these children needed was to learn how to grow up.

It is important for a school, program, professional or parent to know the difference between a Troubled Teen and the broader implication of a Struggling Teen. Relying primarily on therapeutic treatment of a child whose primary trouble is a Learning or Immaturity problem is ineffective and sometimes can be harmful.

By the same token, emotional growth experiences for a Troubled Teen is ineffective and can be harmful, except when done in conjunction with professional treatment and therapy.

A good school or program will know the connotations of Troubled Teen and Struggling Teen and will act accordingly.

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> The child-centered, therapeutic style of education under which boys do not do well appears deeply entrenched in many of our 'best school systems.
>
> ~ Christina Hoff Sommers

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