

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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Best Practices vs. Innovation

by Lon Woodbury



"Best Practices" has become almost a buzz word lately. The idea is very plausible, that is encouraging youth programs to use those practices that have been shown through scientific research to be most effective. This popular concept is simple and straight forward – nothing but the best for our children – right?

At the same time our society is rapidly changing in many aspects. Students now in private emotional-growth, therapeutic parent-choice residential schools and programs often present significantly different problems then they did even just ten years ago. For example, computer game addiction, or computer addiction in general, is becoming quite common. Ten years ago it was uncommon, and it was virtually unheard of only a generation ago.

Presented this way, the possible contradiction is obvious. How can you rely exclusively on "Best Practices" for problems that were almost unheard of a few years ago? Internet Addiction is a good example. It is true that treating Internet Addiction would be similar to treating Substance Abuse Addictions. However, reports are that putting an Internet Addict in with a group of Substance Abuse Addicts just doesn't work, despite the fact that they are all addicts. Although there are many similarities in the addictions, and thus treatment and healing, it is becoming apparent that Internet Addiction must be approached in a way unique to itself. Internet Addiction is a new enough phenomena that there are no "Best Practices" on which to rely. The professionals may be "informed" by Best Practices from Substance Abuse treatment, but to succeed they must innovate in new uncharted territory. There is no other way to keep up with the changes in society.

In my view, small owner-operated independent private programs are the laboratory of innovation. Not hampered by a multitude of state or corporation imposed guidelines, the operator is free to draw upon professional knowledge and mix this with his/her own creativity and experience with the primary focus being the good of the children. The results will speak for themselves as to whether the operator is on to something or not. As a result, some of these "experiments" will become the "Best Practices" of the future.

I see these innovations being created all the time in the schools and programs with which I work and have also read of others in the news. Sometimes the innovations are just minor tweaks to a long established approach. Other times the concept is a radical diversion from common practice. In both cases, some will succeed and some will fail. The ultimate result is a treatment and healing network gradually adjusting to the changing needs of a changing society. Without that, intervention will become static and not only will it not work well, it will become irrelevant.

One response to this newly perceived Internet addiction need is an Associated Press story claiming the formation of the first "Internet Addiction Center Opens in US." I know of several other schools and programs that have developed special "support groups" for their students with this problem, so obviously there are innovative responses developing for this new problem.

Another innovation lately in the news was when AIM House in Colorado developed a partnership with a local business for some of its students to work in the business. It was explained that the program is using local work as part of therapy. Not only do the students learn a work ethic, they also learn how a business runs. Both of these can be key to healing.

Another intriguing innovation is Greenbrier Academy in West Virginia. Their basic philosophy was developed with the help of a Brigham Young University professor, calling it "Strong Relationality." This school's program is based on some unique theoretical assumptions about human nature and human relationships and this new school has developed a program based on these concepts. My visit report, which explains a little bit about "Strong Relationality" can be found at www.strugglingteens.com/artman/publish/GreenbrierAcademyVR_090916.shtml. The school is now in its third year of operation, and the students seem to be quite positive about their school and their experience there.

Regarding my original question, of Best Practices vs. Innovation, it is obvious that there always needs to be a balance. The successful school or program for struggling teens will stay current with the changing needs of its students through continual innovation while staying grounded in what has been learned through what is called Best Practices. The good administrator is one that is skilled at maintaining this balance.

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Determination and perseverance move the world; thinking that others will do it for you is a sure way to fail.

– Marva Collins

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