

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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The Healing Outdoors

By: Lon Woodbury



The therapeutic value of wilderness is well documented. The popularity of wilderness therapy programs has been reported in my newsletter at www.strugglingteens.com for years. For example, Dr. Keith Russell has done extensive research that shows the positive impact of wilderness therapy.

Recently I ran across a couple of additional studies showing how wilderness therapy reduces the risk of homelessness among the young and is key in helping disordered eating problems. The studies showing the positive impacts of wilderness just keep piling up. Many wilderness professionals have told me that although the therapy is important, the most important healing element continues to be the wilderness, which of course includes a lot of physical exercise and fresh air found only in the outdoors.

However, it seems deeper than that. A recent poll of public elementary school principals conducted by Gallup and reported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation had, as one of its findings, that "the most unexpected opportunity to boost learning lies outside the classroom: on the playground at recess." The "principals overwhelmingly believe recess has a positive impact not only on the development of students' social skills, but also on achievement and learning in the classroom."

It seems research is confirming the intuitive sense that just being outdoors is uplifting and helpful in many ways. Visits to national and state parks remain high, and activities that take people outdoors remain popular, such as camping, hiking, biking, skiing, fishing and many other sports. The outdoors, especially the wilderness, obviously fills a deep need in people. Otherwise, these activities would not be so popular.

With all this intuitive and research evidence showing that people need contact with the outdoors, it is a tragedy that when it comes to our children, we are allowing two fears to cut our children off from the outdoors, let alone the wilderness.

The first, from fear of predators, we are tending to restrict our children to indoor activities (like computers and video games) or closely supervised activities in the yard or on play dates. Pretty much gone, especially in urban areas, are children playing around the neighborhood or exploring surrounding outdoor areas on their own.

The other fear is that of lower achievement in school. With the push for greater academic achievement, recess and playgrounds are rapidly being eliminated, to allow for more time on academic work.

The irony is the research indicates that eliminating play time, and especially outdoor play time, reduces potential academic achievement. And, by over protecting our children from predators and keeping them indoors, something important and probably vital is missing from their lives.

How can we maintain a civilized society if we teach our children to automatically fear strangers, and teach them to ignore their internal need for regular consistent contact with the outdoors?

Richard Louv, in his book "Last Child in the Woods" coined a term that seems to describe this: Nature Deficit Disorder. He claims that many of the problems we have in our society, and especially among the young, can be traced to an increasingly unfulfilled need for experiencing the outdoors. Not only do these fears negatively impact emotional health, but they impact physical health as well, which includes the buzz topic of childhood obesity.

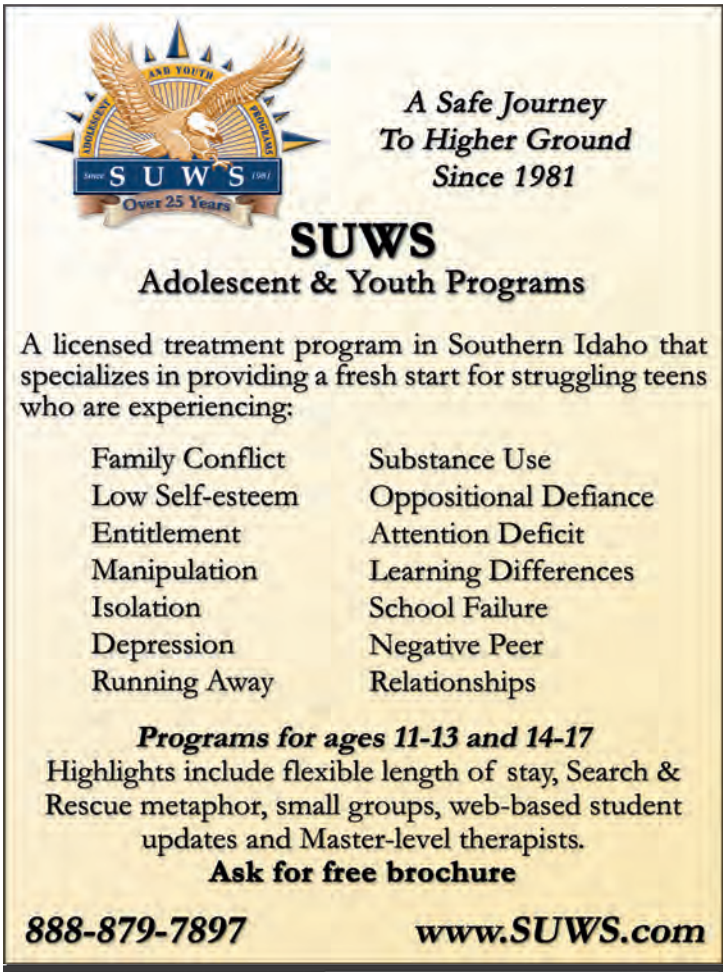
I think he is on to something.

> The man who will use his skill and constructive imagination to see how much he can give for a dollar, instead of how little he can give for a dollar, is bound to succeed.
>
> ~Henry Ford

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VISIT REPORTS...
AULDERN ACADEMY

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Visit by: Stephen Migden, February 2010

Auldern Academy is a therapeutic boarding school designed for teenage girls who need a structured, clinically attuned educational and social environment. Located about a one-hour drive from Raleigh, NC, Auldern offers a college prep curriculum, small classes, and group and individual counseling by licensed mental health professionals to approximately 50 girls. The school serves students with a range of problems, including anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, trauma, and body image issues. Girls with a history of oppositional defiant disorder, substance abuse, cutting or an eating disorder may also be appropriate candidates for admission, although only if such problems are not severe or if the problem has previously been addressed in another residential setting, such as a therapeutic wilderness program.

Auldern is located in a rural area of central North Carolina. The pleasant looking campus basically consists of three groups of buildings arrayed around a small pond with a water fountain in the middle. The first set of buildings, closest to the entrance, houses administrative offices, clinical offices, the cafeteria, the library, a small computer lab (the "cyber lounge") and the school. Scattered throughout this set of buildings is some very lovely artwork - mainly paintings and ceramics - all of which, I was told, had been created by Auldern students.

Just a short walk from the first set of buildings, along a paved walkway, is the dormitory building, where all the girls reside. This two-story structure has two wings, one on each side, with a comfortable living room type of area in the middle of the first floor, by the entrance lobby. Each dorm room sleeps four girls and the occupants of the room share a shower, sink and toilet. Make-up and jewelry, in moderation, are allowed and the dress code is casual and modest: no low-cut tops, no ripped jeans and so forth. There are also a number of staff apartments in the dormitory. Night-time coverage is provided by awake staff and on-call clinicians and supervisors.

Nearby the dormitory building is the activities building. In here, there is an art studio, a couple of classrooms, a small gymnasium (large enough for half a basketball court) and, on the second floor, a spacious recreation room with a variety of furniture and equipment, including large screen TV, pool table and exercise equipment. It looked like a busy, well-appointed room, a place where the girls could relax and have fun. Outside, there is a tennis court and soccer field, as well as a path through the woods to a nearby river. I was told that, during the warmer months, the school makes good use of the fields and woods. Off-campus recreational activities include frequent trips to a nearby Y,

as well as other outings on the weekends.

The school area is simply but intelligently laid out, with five classrooms surrounding a central study area. In this study area, the girls attend two daily study halls, one during the school day and one in the evening. During my visit, which took place on a weekday afternoon, I saw four girls sitting in this area while classes were in session in the surrounding classrooms. Three of the girls were doing school work. The fourth, an older student in Auldern's post graduate Rites of Passage program, was sitting quietly, apparently enjoying some leisure time. The girls in the surrounding classrooms seemed actively engaged in class projects or discussions.

Auldern offers a college prep curriculum, with one foreign language (Spanish) and two to three AP classes available. Mild learning differences can be accommodated and, for an additional fee, individual tutoring by a special education teacher can be arranged. To attend Auldern, students should have at least average intelligence. Art is a popular special class. Colleges offering admission to recent Auldern graduates include Fordham, Temple, Northeastern, University of Denver, Rhode Island School of Design and Fashion Institute of Technology.

Auldern Academy offers a number of clinical services to its students. There are five full-time Master's level therapists on staff, and one half-time consultant who is a doctoral level psychologist. This psychologist, Dr. Vito Guarnaccia, serves as the director of the clinical team, which also includes, on a part-time basis, his wife Liz, a psychiatric social worker who has an interest in the treatment of trauma and specialized training in a type of therapy called Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR). I met with Dr. Vito and Liz, both transplanted New Yorkers, for about half an hour. Dr. Vito told me that he has been affiliated with Auldern for about three years. He and his wife described the clinical treatment program as consisting of individual and group therapy, family meetings (usually via telephone), and group substance abuse counseling for those girls who have a history of drug or alcohol use. Individual therapy is once a week, and group is twice a week. The substance abuse counseling is based on the 12-Step model and, in addition to the campus groups, selected students may attend an AA meeting in the local community. Dr. Vito described the therapeutic approach as largely cognitive behavioral, though he also stressed the importance of other factors, especially the client-therapist relationship, when working with adolescents. There are six parent weekends each year.

Auldern Academy was established in 2001. For the past 3-1/2 years its executive director has been Jane Samuel. The director of admission, who has been with the school about 3 years, is Joyce Latimer. The school is owned by Sequel Youth and Family Services, which also owns programs in Iowa, Florida and Arizona. Auldern is a member of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, and it is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. It is licensed as a non-public school by the State of North Carolina. It is also SEVIS approved for international students.

