

RESPONSE

practice. Too many parents speak of "our" college list and "our" essays rather than letting their kids develop their own with parents' help and advice.

There was a piece in the Times Education section this week about how colleges are inventing ways to separate parents from their freshmen and how some parents are hanging around town just in case their kids need them. The real problem is that parents can't let go. And too often that reflects the history of how they were raised.

My point is that too many parents are also manipulating their kids – for reasons that inhere in the parents and not necessarily for the benefit of their child. Consequently, some aren't ready to deal effectively with adult decisions because they've had little practice in making age-appropriate choices and dealing with consequences.

Of course parents need to know what to do when their kids 'play' them. But they also need to let their kids take real responsibility in things that won't do permanent harm – so that their sons and daughters can learn the skills of self-actualization and adulthood before they go off to college.

About the Respondent: *Dodge Johnson is an Educational Consultant from Pennsylvania. You can contact him via email at dodge.johnson@comcast.net.*

Be not angry that you cannot make others
as you wish them to be, since you cannot make
yourself as you wish to be. ~Thomas à Kempis

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VISIT REPORTS...

FALCON RIDGE RANCH

Virgin, Utah

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Visit by: Lon Woodbury, MA, April 2010

Falcon Ridge Ranch is located in a remote part of the southern Utah Red Rock country. The program is for girls, age 12-17 with behavioral and/or emotional problems requiring therapeutic intervention that is more intensive than traditional therapy but short of what might be found in a hospital. The typical student has been diagnosed as being on the spectrum with high functioning Asperger's being common. They also have had success with students with Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD).

The capacity at Falcon Ridge Ranch is 22 girls, and there were 17 girls there at the time of my visit.

The drive to it from St. George passes through fantastic vistas of flat-topped mesas and through the tiny town of Virgin (no more than a wide spot in the road). It looks like an interesting little town, complete with an Internet cafe. A couple of miles past the town I came to Falcon Ridge Ranch, a green oasis in the bare rock, brown grass, and dryness that is common to valleys in this part of the country. The well-maintained campus stood in stark contrast to the surrounding hills.

There are three basic elements to the Falcon Ridge

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program – academics, a full equine program, and Positive Peer Culture (PPC).

Falcon Ridge Ranch is accredited by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, the standard accrediting agency in this part of the country. Class sizes are small, the teachers are all certified, and each student has a Student Education Plan (SEP), and/or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Classes are five-days a week and the school works with each student on the level she needs. Techniques offered range from direct classroom instruction, tutorial or one-on-one, self-paced independent study, and/or GED preparation and testing, as well as collegiate academics.

The most obvious element is the equine program. The school has 47 horses on 12 acres. Each girl is assigned a horse for which she is responsible. It becomes much of her focus while at that school as she learns how to properly care for it. In addition to being responsible for the basic care of the horse, each girl learns about relationships by developing a relationship with her horse in the Equine Therapy activities. The honest straight forward attitude of the horses with no subtlety helps the girl learn how to develop honest relationships. Work with horses also helps reduce low self-esteem.

Showmanship, which is common in many other programs with horses, is minimal since that doesn't have the healing benefits that Equine Therapy has. The school tries to have horses at all stages of life, from young horses to geriatric, so the girls will have a good sense of the whole life span of a horse.

The primary structure of the program is based on PPC, a conflict resolution approach where the young women are encouraged to be creative in solving their own problems. The staff has found that PPC and Equine Therapy go well together

in working with the type of student they enroll. This success is due in part to the care the girls exhibit toward the horses, and their desire to problem solve. A major part of the PPC culture is to help the girls learn natural consequences and to become accountable for their choices through the interactions found in the Falcon Ridge Ranch community. The staff received training in PPC by Larry Brendtro, one of the early pioneers of this approach. The girls are taught to focus on handling issues that would come up, largely through looking to others for help. They are taught to serve their own needs first, on the assumption they couldn't help others until they themselves were clear. This isn't a self-centered focus but simply the best way to be able to help themselves, their peers, their group and staff in that order.

I was given a tour of the facilities, which were, as horse ranches go, immaculate. It showed a lot of care being given to the horses, their stables and the barn and outlying buildings. While I was there, a farrier was traveling through the area and giving a demonstration of how to care for horses' hooves. He was not only showing the girls how to trim horse hooves, but the blacksmith techniques of making horseshoes. It was a fascinating demonstration and he was good at getting the girls to participate so they could experience what he was doing.

Falcon Ridge Ranch has always done well in the survey process for the Parent Empowerment Handbook (the annual survey of professional educational consultants around the country) and after visiting I can see why. The girls looked good. They were both active and positive about what they were doing at their school. The affection they showed for their horses was obvious, as if their horses were their best friends, and in many ways that was true.



Photo by Skyler Jepson

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