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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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Helping Struggling Teens

By: Lon Woodbury



Raising adolescents was not considered much of a problem for ancient societies. As children, they were considered little adults and given adult responsibilities and privileges as soon as feasible (usually about the time of puberty). For the most part the girls were quickly married off and became housewives and mothers, while the boys joined the men in their work as seemed appropriate for their size and skill. Any teen angst that we know of today was absorbed into the adult culture with adult punishment if needed.

Childhood became recognized as a unique stage of life in the late middle ages in Western culture. What we now think of as the teen years was a kind of grey area. Childhood was sometimes extended but teens that acted out were punished as adult criminals. Another approach was to knock arrogance out of male adolescents by enlisting them in the military which was developed partly to make men out of boys, or sent them to sea or to the colonies for the same reason.

Urban areas in this country during the late 19th and early 20th centuries had the problem of gangs of young males (and a few females) running riot in the streets. The famous novel The Adventures of Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens describes some of what was happening in London, which was similar to what happened in the United States. The boy problem, or what we would now call Struggling Teens, was expected to be handled by the law, which included imprisonment, severe physical punishment or perhaps commitment to a mental institution.

What we would now call a teen problem was approached in several other ways in the US during the late 19th century and the early 20th century. Reform schools were established, which were basically a prison for young people. Significant public funds were expended on punishing and locking up young people, and yet the problem showed no sign of improving. As another attempt, the mandatory school attendance movement flourished at the beginning of the 20th century to redirect that youthful energy into something that was hoped would redirect these young people into a more positive direction and prepare them for adult work and life.

A backlash to the all too common punishment mentality occurred in the early 20th century. One of the best known was Father Flannigan who founded Boys Town in Nebraska in 1917. His philosophy was based on the idea that he had never met a bad boy, just those in bad circumstances such as loss of parents. This more humane approach caught on and over the years a number of other similar residential programs, both Christian and secular, were established, including later many boys ranches around the country.

However, the punishment mentality continued strong through the 20th century and up into the early 21st century with boot camps and juvenile justice facilities, all for the most part focused on compliance through punishment. In addition, by the middle of the 20th century, psychological treatment was being accepted and a large number of hospitals, residential treatment centers and drug treatment centers were established exclusively to treat teens and young people in general.

By the 1970's, in these teen oriented mental health residential programs, scandals erupted,

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