

THE ASPEN GUIDE TO WILDERNESS THERAPY

An introduction to the principles, philosophies, and practices that have enabled thousands of formerly struggling adolescents and teenagers to transform their lives and achieve to their greatest potential.



The information you need to make the best decisions for your child and your family.

Introduction

*"Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better."
Albert Einstein (1879-1955)*

The destructive power of nature is a staple on many television news broadcasts and Internet sites, with shaky videos of raging tornadoes or heartbreaking footage of a hurricane's aftermath making for compelling viewing.

But professionals working in an innovative and effective branch of the adolescent therapy field have discovered that the awe-inspiring effects of the natural world aren't limited to destruction and devastation.

For decades, wilderness therapists and outdoor educators have been incorporating the healing and restorative powers of nature into programs designed to help troubled adolescents overcome personal challenges, regain control over their lives, and put themselves back on the path to health and happiness.

And though experts have yet to agree on exactly *why* the wilderness experience works so well, years of case histories and several studies have documented the dramatic effectiveness of properly managed and operated therapeutic wilderness education programs.

To provide parents with a comprehensive introduction to wilderness therapy for adolescents, teens, and young adults, this e-book is organized into the following sections:

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A Brief History of Wilderness Therapy

Following the migration of the Outward Bound program from Europe to the United States in the 1950s, several programs throughout the country began to incorporate the principles of wilderness therapy and outdoor education.

According to an article by Stacy B. Shaw that appeared in the Spring 2003 edition of UCLA's *Undergraduate Psychology Journal*, the "noticeable emotional and psychological benefits" experienced by Outward Bound clients prompted the development of formal wilderness therapies designed to meet the specific needs of at-risk clinical populations.

Today, hundreds of wilderness experiences are available, with dozens of programs offering therapeutic treatments for individuals such as adolescent substance abusers and teens with behavioral disorders.

As Dr. Keith C. Russell of the University of Idaho's Wilderness Research Center wrote in a 2000 paper entitled "Why Wilderness Therapy Works," the field has developed "a growing reputation for economy and therapeutic efficacy when compared with other mental health services."

One of the nation's leading providers of outdoor therapy and wilderness education for adolescents is the Aspen Education Group, a network programs that offer enlightened, innovative approaches to help young people who are struggling with behavioral challenges, emotional issues, or substance abuse.



How Wilderness Programs Work

Though significant variety can be found among therapeutic wilderness education programs – influenced, for example, by the philosophies and policies of the providers, as well as by the specific needs of the clients for whom the programs have been designed – most effective efforts are constructed around a relatively standard framework.

As Dr. Russell outlined in his research paper, many programs follow a three-phase model:

Phase #1: Cleansing

- In this stage, clients are removed from the environments that were conducive to their unhealthy behaviors, and prepared for their wilderness experience.
- The cleansing stage usually involves a healthy diet, physical exercise, and instruction in basic survival and self-care skills.
- Participants in the first stage of a therapeutic wilderness program begin to learn personal responsibility through the natural consequences of their actions – a concept that will be strongly reinforced as the process continues.

Phase #2: Personal & Social Responsibility

- Building upon the early lessons of the previous phase, the second stage of a therapeutic wilderness program emphasizes the results of an individual's actions – for example, students who don't learn how to make fire will eat cold meals, while those who fail to prepare for rainy weather will get wet.
- In addition to developing self-reliance, students in therapeutic wilderness programs also learn the value of effective interpersonal communication through their interactions with their field instructors and the other members of their group.
- The close and constant interdependency at the core of effective therapeutic wilderness programs can have effects that are both immediate and long-lasting.



- Writing about an effective therapist who he observed at the Aspen Achievement Academy, author Gary Ferguson wrote that he believed that her successes were founded at least in part by “her willingness to huddle under the tarp in a downpour or dine with the kids on a few bites of burned beans a ten o’clock at night.”

Phase #3: Transition & Continuing Care

- After gaining the insights and achieving the successes that are associated with effective therapeutic wilderness experiences, participants must then learn how to take their new healthy behaviors with them as they transition back home.
- To accomplish this goal, many programs incorporate family training and education into their efforts.
- As one parent wrote in a testimonial that was posted on the SUWS wilderness program’s website, “SUWS was an enlightening experience for [our son], one where he has found confidence, self-worth and feels empowered. My husband and I also ... have learned a lot from the family component of the SUWS philosophy and program.”
- The transition and continuing care components of effective therapeutic wilderness programs also include connecting families with support resources such as program-related counselors or independent 12-step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous.



Why Wilderness Works

In recent years, health care providers have begun to recognize the therapeutic attributes of nature for treating conditions like attention disorders and depression. Researchers at the University of Illinois have shown that the greener a child's everyday environment, the more manageable their symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

In a UK study released in April 2007, a majority of people with mental health disorders reported that taking a "green walk" accomplished the following:

- Decreased their depression (71%)
- Reduced their tension (50%)
- Increased their self-esteem (90%)

Children & Teens in the Wilderness

Children and teenagers benefit from experiences in nature more than any other population, particularly in the area of academic performance.

A 2005 study by the American Institutes for Research demonstrated that students in outdoor science programs improved their science testing scores by 27 percent. Moreover, participation in outdoor education was directly associated with improved conflict resolution skills and cooperation.

Many parents are choosing wilderness camps and programs to help their troubled teens. Adolescence, an angst-ridden period of self-discovery, is the ideal time to discover the lessons nature can teach. When a teen is immersed into a wilderness experience, this "fresh start" presents the opportunity to develop a new self-image, a new way of relating to other people and the environment, and new ways to respond to the challenges of daily life.

In their attempts to discover and describe the reasons behind the successes of therapeutic wilderness programs, many researchers and experts have noted that the programs feature the development of intense interpersonal relationships, the opportunity to overcome significant emotional and physical challenges, and the encouragement to gain a greater understanding of oneself and one's place in the world.

Working together in settings that are free of the myriad distractions of today's stimulation-intensive world allows considerable growth to occur in relatively short periods of time.

The results can be both dramatic and long-lasting. Jessica H., an alumna of one of Aspen's therapeutic wilderness programs, said that the "complete spiritual journey" she underwent in the wilderness was literally a life-changing event for her.

"If I had gone anywhere else I don't think it would have worked," Jessica said. "I had never experienced anything like that in my entire life."

Humans crave a connection with nature. From gardening and horticulture to taking a stroll through the park or hiking through the mountains, man has found solace in nature for centuries.

But with a rapidly deteriorating environment, shortage of open spaces, fear of "stranger-danger" during outdoor playtime, and an emerging culture of technology-obsessed youth, American life is punctuated by nature deprivation and a disconnect with the world around us.

Although quality time in nature is hard to come by, there are many excellent reasons to make the great outdoors a part of daily life.

A strong body of research confirms that direct contact with nature increases mental health and psychological and spiritual development. Benefits include stress reduction, a sense of coherence and belonging, improved self-confidence and self-discipline, and a broader sense of community.

Stress Reduction

More than 100 research studies have shown that outdoor recreation reduces stress. In a study of individuals exposed to stressful videos of accidents, those who watched a subsequent nature video experienced faster recovery than those who watched a video with other content.

Another study established that a view of nature, even through a window, speeds recovery from surgery, improves work performance, and increases job satisfaction.

By observing the ever-changing environments in nature, individuals cultivate a positive attitude, renewed attention, mindfulness, and sensory awareness. In the words of renowned naturalist and essayist John Burroughs (1837-1921), "I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in order."

Finding Meaning & Purpose

Being in nature also bestows a sense of connectedness, meaning, and purpose. There is a sense of chaotic order in the way nature works; the plants and animals are interconnected in a series of complex relationships.

Everything coexists in nature without the necessity of outside intervention. It is a system that has existed successfully since the beginning of time, which provides a sense of structure, coherence, and reliability for those wise enough to use nature as a model for life.

Realizing that human beings are an essential component of this larger structure can supply a sense of purpose and belonging. The wilderness teaches that each individual is unique but also part of the larger whole.

In a world bogged down by social pressures, standards of conduct, and the demands of others, nature gives people a chance to appreciate a grander sense that the world is alive, fascinating and meaningful. This universal appeal crosses all cultures and time periods.

Heightened Awareness & Physical Activity

Outdoor settings beg for activity rather than passivity as the world is best explored on foot. Hiking through the wilderness merges a heightened sense of awareness of one's surroundings with the need to take action to move through and be part of nature.

People understand and process environmental information through mapping, exploring, and interpreting the landscapes, obstacles, and surroundings. This type of physical activity reduces depression and anxiety, reduces the risk of disease, and improves psychological well-being. In fact, research suggests outdoor exercise has even more beneficial effect than indoor exercise.

A strenuous trek through mountains or desert can represent both a physical journey and a journey of self. Spending time in nature's silence better acquaints people with their own thoughts and feelings, leading to a sense of calm and inner peace.

As expressed by early preservationist and Sierra Club founder John Muir (1838-1914), "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you... while cares will drop off like autumn leaves."

Rising to the Challenge

In nature, people learn that challenge is actually the opportunity to improve oneself, develop an internal locus of control, and build confidence. Wilderness experiences give people an optimistic confidence in the predictability of nature and the pace of life, combined with a healthy ability to surrender control.

Nature-goers learn to trust their innate ability to overcome both expected and unexpected obstacles and to appreciate that things work out even if they aren't in complete control. In short, they learn they can cope with whatever comes their way, which in turn builds confidence and a sense of self-efficacy and achievement.

While rising to a challenge is important for developing self-esteem, shared challenge offers the added benefits of affiliation, social support, intimacy, and the ability to help others. This sense of community and intimacy that develops by facing challenges in the company of others translates into other group settings as well, such as the family unit.

A Culture of Nature-Deprived Youth

Natural spaces stimulate children's imaginations and creativity, and playing outdoors enhances cognitive flexibility, problem-solving ability, and self-discipline. However, fewer and fewer children are availing themselves of the many benefits of the natural world.

For many American children, quality playtime outdoors has been replaced by televisions and computers indoors.

A Hofstra University survey revealed the following:

- 70 percent of mothers reported playing outdoors every day when they were young, compared with only 31 percent of their children.
- 56 percent of mothers reported that, when they were children, they stayed outside for three hours at a time or longer, compared with only 22 percent of their children.

A study by Sandra Hofferth at the University of Maryland reported that, from 1997 to 2003, there was a decline of 50 percent in the number of children ages 9 to 12 who spent time doing outside activities like hiking, walking, and playing at the beach.

A third study noted that children between the ages of 6 months and 6 years spend an average of 1.5 hours a day with electronic media, while youth ages 8 to 18 years of age spend an average of 6.5 hours a day (more than 45 hours each week) with electronic media.



Wilderness Program Guide

The following are among the nation's premier therapeutic wilderness programs for teens, adolescents and young adults.

All of the accredited wilderness programs listed in this section are affiliated with the Aspen Education Group network of youth treatment programs.

Adirondack Leadership Expeditions

82 Church Street – Saranac Lake, New York 12983

www.adirondackleadership.com

877-252-0869

Adirondack Leadership Expeditions is a wilderness program for troubled teens ages 13 -17. Our program's nurturing approach helps adolescents address personal issues, achieve success in a safe environment and develop their leadership potential. Set in the beautiful Adirondack Mountains near Saranac Lake, New York, ALE's leadership expeditions offer individualized growth plans, flexible lengths of stay, master's and doctorate level counselors, individual counseling and a powerful family involvement component.

Camp Huntington

56 Bruceville Road – High Falls, NY 12440

www.camphuntington.com

866-514-5281

Established in 1961, Camp Huntington is a co-ed, residential summer program for children and young adults (ages 10 to 21) with special learning and developmental needs, including Learning and Developmental Disabilities, ADD/ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Asperger's, Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD), and other special needs. Camp Huntington offers three programs that address social, emotional and environmental issues for students in each group.

Outback Therapeutic Expeditions

50 N. 200 East – Lehi, Utah 84043

www.outbacktreatment.com

800-817-1899

Outback's wilderness program for teens ages 13-17 blends the best of the "ancient cultural systems" with the most effective and proven therapeutic processes. We have worked with teens struggling with family conflict, negative peer groups, Internet and video game addiction, academic underachievement, low self-esteem, drug and alcohol abuse, and other emotional and behavioral issues.

Phoenix Outdoor

363 Graphite Road – Old Fort, North Carolina 28762

www.phoenixoutdoor.com

877-305-0904

Phoenix Outdoor is a therapeutic wilderness program for teens ages 13-17 who are struggling with substance abuse, as well co-occurring behavioral and mental health issues.

Located in the stunning Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, Phoenix Outdoor blends clinical assessments, wilderness therapy, the 12 Step model and traditional therapeutic interventions to help teens realize the extent of their substance abuse problem and commit to the process of change.

SUWS Adolescent & Youth Programs

911 Preacher Creek Road – Shoshone, Idaho 83352

www.suws.com

888-879-7897

SUWS Adolescent and Youth Programs offers therapeutic wilderness programs for adolescents ages 11-17 with a focus on clinical intervention and assessment.

Since 1981, SUWS programs have provided guidance and support to thousands of misdirected and at-risk teens experiencing low self-esteem, defiant behavior, attention deficit, depression, substance abuse and other behavioral issues.

Students are strategically separated into groups based on age, gender, and presenting behavioral concerns, in order for treatment to be highly specialized. The wilderness program uses the outdoors as an alternative to conventional treatment environments, while engaging students using traditional therapeutic methods.

SUWS of the Carolinas

363 Graphite Road – Old Fort, North Carolina 28762

www.suwscarolinas.com

888-828-9770

SUWS of the Carolinas offers therapeutic wilderness programs for young people ages 13 to 17 who are struggling with a range of behavioral, emotional, and substance abuse issues.

While in the wilderness students participate in daily outdoor activities, group processing sessions, and staff/peer counseling. When in base camp students participate in individual and group therapy sessions while completing program curricula and therapy assignments.

SUWS Seasons

363 Graphite Road – Old Fort, North Carolina 28762

www.suwsseasons.com

888-828-9770

SUWS Seasons is a licensed wilderness-based treatment program for preadolescents and young teens (10-13). This program designed to identify the limiting beliefs and unhealthy behaviors that can often prevent the pursuit of constructive goals and personal achievement. SUWS Seasons features a flexible length of stay (4-9 weeks). Students benefit from individual and group therapy as well as a low staff-to-student ratio.

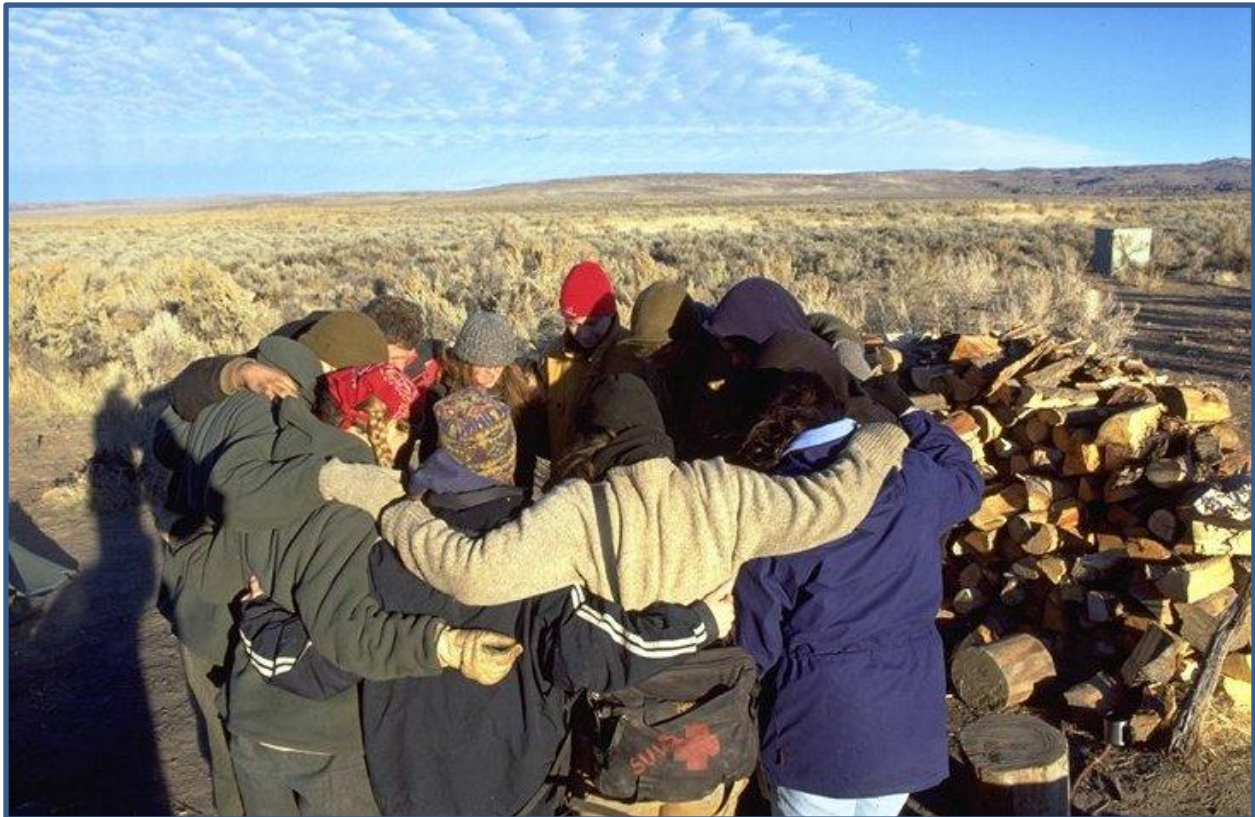
Talisman Camps and Programs

64 Gap Creek Road – Zirconia, North Carolina 28790

www.talismancamps.com

888.458.8226

Talisman Programs offers summer camps for children with learning disabilities, ADD/ADHD, Asperger's Syndrome and high-functioning autism, as well as Southeast Journeys, a school program for middle and high school students with Asperger's. With a highly structured daily schedule, a small staff-to-student ratio, in-depth social and life skills training, and plenty of fun and adventure, Talisman Programs have been a first choice of families since 1980.





About Aspen Education Group

Aspen Education Group is the nation's leading provider of education programs for struggling or underachieving young people.

As the largest and most comprehensive network of therapeutic schools and programs, Aspen offers professionals and families the opportunity to choose a setting that best meets a student's unique academic and emotional needs.

Aspen's programs exist at the intersection of therapy and education for students that have demonstrated behavioral issues that are preventing them from achieving to their greatest potential.

Recognizing that every individual is different and challenged by different needs, Aspen offers a wide diversity of educational programs, settings and solutions that match client needs with the right learning and therapeutic environment.

Our help and services range from short-term intervention programs to residential treatment, and include a variety of therapeutic interventions including: boarding schools, wilderness therapy, residential treatment, special needs summer camps, and weight loss programs.

Aspen Education Group is a proud member of CRC Health Group, the nation's largest provider of behavioral healthcare services.

For more about Aspen Education Group, please visit www.aspeneducation.com

For more about CRC Health Group, please visit www.crchealth.com

