

False allure of the boot camp

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Having spent my career assessing troubled children for possible residential placement (NOT BOOT CAMPS) I can say unequivocally that boot camps do not work. Such programs, in my view, have no concept of the fact that so-called "problem behavior" is always indicative of some sort of emotional problem. Such problems generally stem from long term dysfunctional family settings (of course there are other causative factors but in my experience this was always at or very near the very top of the list). I don't think that responsible child welfare agencies or professionals use boot camps (if they do they are not worth the name of professional). Boot camps appear largely based on the premise that problem behavior stems from some sort of moral failure and that the failure can be remedied by the application of iron discipline. This is a totally fallacious assumption which ignores the underlying emotional genesis of behavior "problems."

Troubled teenagers distrust all adults (often with some justice depending on the nature of the treatment they have received from the adults in their lives). Generally, it is only when a troubled kid is treated with honesty and respect by the adults working with them that they will begin to have a chance to face their problems and try to make changes. This sort of work is very hard, it takes a lot more than good intentions on the part of the helper, you have to find ways to show kids they matter and count for something no matter what they may have done. There is no one formula by which this might be done. When I speak of the importance of honesty in helping kids & their families face their underlying emotional issues, you would be mistaken to think that this means giving them a free ride. You expect them to face their issues, but not alone, rather it is with the support of adults who are honest and who care. If you think kids don't know the difference on these issues you are sadly mistaken.

One of the great problems in treating emotionally troubled teens is finding a viable modality of treatment for them. In principle the best choice is a combination of individual & family therapy. Many parents are very resistant to the notion they play a role in why their children have problems. It is not that they are to blame (even though that may be the case sometimes, especially in situations of child abuse), rather it is the idea that no child grows up in a vacuum. Even those who can understand intellectually, often have problems when it comes to owning up to their own failures/dysfunctions.

The complexity of the issues involved can often be quite intimidating to all parties involved, which is one reason why illusory solutions like boot camps can be so attractive. Unfortunately there is no quick fix, only hard patient work possibly for years with no certainty it will pay off. But with the kids I worked with, I found that when I could take the time and establish a caring, honest supportive relationship with them, they invariably did at least somewhat better. Of course our so called social services are generally not committed to an intensive casework approach for a variety of reasons, all short sighted and self defeating.

Another reason for the false allure of the boot camp is because it allows the family to avoid its responsibility/role in the problems. When parents successfully avoid facing their part in the problems the child becomes the victimizer (some kids learn to exploit this, generally much to their sorrow) and the parents become the victimized. Boot camps and their ilk all too often consciously/unconsciously punish the child for the role it often never sought.

Boot camps are by their very nature inherently abusive, the only thing that varies is the degree of abusiveness. Children are placed in such facilities due to ignorance, denial, belief in the idea of a quick fix, but most likely by parents unconsciously interested in punishing their children for their failures/dysfunctions. Such facilities help perpetuate the failure of society toward our troubled children because they cannot, will not and do not know how to treat the underlying emotional problems of the young people they are supposed to serve.

The author, now retired, has had 31 years of experience in working for the New Jersey Division of Youth & Family Services. He held the position of Family Service Specialist 1, and worked mostly with troubled teenagers at risk of out-of-home placement in residential facilities. See "My 31 years working with kids and their families," at www.nospank.net/lawton2.htm

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