

Key Elements Of A Successful Wilderness Program For Delinquents: A summary

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Abstract

This paper describes a successful wilderness-enhanced model used by a number of programs in NSW. An initial wilderness experience, coupled with an intensive and lengthy follow-up period, can have a lasting impact on anti-social and delinquent behaviour. To have successful outcomes a wilderness experience should be highly structured with some key elements. These include: an unfamiliar environment engendering stress; a series of unique challenges with real consequences and a high perceived risk; and of a time lengthy enough to provide an essential break in routine. A skilled leader is the lynchpin of a successful programme. He or she will challenge the thought processes of the young person and force them to rethink the situation. The follow-up is also vital. By linking the wilderness experience to everyday life with isomorphic metaphors, the leader can use the power of the wilderness trip to help in long-term behaviour change.

Introduction

This is the first in a series of articles attempting to explain a wilderness enhanced model used by a number of programs in New South Wales. The programs were based on the South Coast Wilderness Enhanced Program model, and this model was developed from previous research, both at home and overseas, and from experience in the field. The literature provided the basic framework, and ten years' experience allowed this to be utilised, modified and enhanced, resulting in a workable model which engendered success.

It was developed to meet the unanswered need for effective intervention with students at risk in secondary schools. The students had already been through many other strategies and programs within the Department of Education and nothing had changed their unmanageable behaviour. They are extreme in their behaviour, displaying aggression, violence, passive resistance or other unacceptable behaviour.

The program was designed for this specific clientele. It worked well with this group, confronting their thought patterns and providing space to allow experimentation with new responses. Each student brings to the wilderness their own special 'backpack' of problems: low self-esteem, relationship breakdowns, power struggles and so on. Before beginning the program the students invariably verbalise a wish to change but lack the skills to act out their desires. The program offers an experience of positive, socially-acceptable, risk-taking adventure-based activities. This article is intended as a summary of the elements this

wilderness enhanced model has found to be essential in bringing about positive behaviour change.

Much has been written about the powerful impact of a wilderness experience on participants who, for the first time, leave behind the security of their known world and venture forth into the great unknown of the natural world. Many report a life-changing experience: a time to get back to basics, to rely on themselves to accomplish challenges and to reflect on what they have done and the meaning of life.

Abbott (1990) talked about the importance of returning to basics and re-educating ourselves by connecting with the spiritual aspect and the wisdom of nature. Chase (1981) said that contemporary society has lost contact with nature and this has meant a loss of significant meaningful goals in life, feelings of alienation and general feelings of dissatisfaction. Hogan (1990) talked of the wilderness as 'sacred space' and of the importance of briefing people on the knowledge that they are going somewhere special, and that their travel through it can make a positive contribution to their lives. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) expressed this in terms of attaining a state of 'flow' where everything feels right for the individual and a state of harmony with nature is achieved.

In the wilderness enhanced model outlined in this article, the participants experience times of harmony and flow interspersed with other times of stress and disharmony. Poor decision making can

result in experiences of harsh reality but there are also times when everything will go well. An example of this is when, after four days of hard walking and high stress, the participants can still take time to appreciate the beautiful scenery opening up before them. Some even express their feelings: "Gee, I'd love to bring my Mum here."

Wilderness can be beneficial to everyone, but a wilderness program carefully structured and staffed can be a powerful therapeutic tool in working with delinquent and behaviourally-disordered youth (Brand, 1998; Roberts, 1988; Wichman, 1983). Wilderness can help to reshape many young offenders' lives. As Golins (1977) says about Outward Bound (wilderness) courses:

'Outward Bound impels a person to manage his behaviour in a resolute, socially-acceptable manner. For the delinquent, Outward Bound becomes a dramatic break in his pattern of social failure' (p1).

An initial wilderness experience, coupled with an intensive and lengthy follow-up period, can have a lasting impact on anti-social and delinquent behaviour by changing the thought processes and attitudes of the participants (Berman & Davis-Berman, 1989; Brand, 1998; Sakofs, 1992). However, for the intervention to engender lasting change, three key elements must be present. Firstly, the experience itself must be structured in such a way that the participants feel challenged continually and yet experience success. Secondly, perhaps the most essential element, the leaders must be skilled in interacting with delinquent and behaviourally-disordered adolescents. And thirdly, there must be a lengthy follow-up period where links are formed and strengthened between what happened in the wilderness and what happens in everyday life.

The structure of a wilderness experience

Wilderness intervention with behaviourally-disordered youth is founded on a number of premises. Kimball & Bacon (1993) stated that, to achieve results, a wilderness program must provide an unfamiliar environment that promotes feelings of isolation and remoteness. It must also offer a series of unique challenges with real consequences and high perceived risk, but where the participant is most probably going to achieve success. However it is important that they voluntarily take part, be mentally prepared for it, and not feel as if they have been shanghaied into it. Lastly, it must be long enough to provide an essential break in routine and the opportunity for change to occur outside the influence of the family and peer groups. Luckner

(1987) had previously thought that it should be long enough to give a great sense of achievement on completion. The participants may come to recognise that they are capable of much more than they had previously thought. They may begin to experience a sense of power and control over their own lives, perhaps for the first time. As this becomes internalised, self-discovery and personal growth can follow.

Chase (1981) stated that a primary cause of behavioural problems in youth was due to a lack of a significant relationship with the natural world. He felt that wilderness appeared to address these feelings of anomie and alienation, so contributing to healing. Handley (1990) saw the wilderness as 'unforgiving but fair' and Chase (1981, p. 9) said that the wilderness becomes a powerful teacher and the consequences are direct, immediate and impartial:

There are few rules other than those imposed by the environment. There are no walls, little luxury and much freedom. There is freedom to accept or deny responsibility for one's self and others, to be clean or dirty, to be hungry or well-fed, to be miserable or to have fun. In the true spirit of Rudolf Dreikurs, there is no punishment except that prescribed by nature for failure to plan and anticipate consequences. One soon learns that responsibility for oneself is a necessity.

Participants are deliberately placed outside their comfort zone by dropping them in a carefully thought out series of unfamiliar, and seemingly alien, environments where they are forced to continually make behavioural changes to regain equilibrium. Therefore a wilderness experience can be quite stressful. The expedition alternates periods of equilibrium and disequilibrium where the students are continually confronted with the quality of their solutions and the limits of applying their habitual responses to new situations. When the patterned behaviours (such as fighting, threatening, abusing and withdrawing) don't work, they are forced to seek other behavioural solutions.

Positive use can be made of stressful situations by providing an orientation towards success (Reid & Matthews, 1980). Handley (1994a) wrote that stress should be used intentionally as it is central to the change process. Stress levels should be kept fairly high, making students cope with situations as they arise. However, stress can also be a trigger for misbehaviour and leaders should have

strategies ready to deal with it effectively when the inappropriate behaviour arises.

The power of the wilderness forces personal commitment and responsibility. For the behaviourally-disordered adolescent this can often be for the first time. Ingrained attitudes and behaviours can be challenged. The harsh and often unforgiving environment created by the program in the wilderness can provide an ideal setting for lessons to be learned. The participant can move towards an acceptance of personal responsibility and feelings of empowerment and trust.

Ewert (1982 & 1989) wrote that wilderness and wilderness-enhanced programs are successful with juvenile delinquents because they are an appropriate way of helping them overcome three common problems: an unwillingness to assume personal responsibility for actions, being a learner who makes hurried decisions and does not consider alternatives or consequences and having low self-confidence, which is often accompanied by defensive posturing and a resistance to learning.

Roberts (1988) added that juvenile delinquents generally have no memory of a major, successful, socially-acceptable experience that has required co-operation with others. He felt wilderness was very useful for these adolescents who have become adept at conning and manipulating others, for they quickly discover that they are not able to get away with ignoring their responsibilities or giving only a half-hearted effort to a task in this environment. McGrath (1990) was in agreement and said that they learn the value of foresight and planned action over impulsivity.

Clearly, a wilderness experience can be a very useful tool in reshaping young lives. However, without skilled leaders its power is significantly reduced. Competent leaders are essential if the seeds of behaviour change are to be sown during the experience.

The role of the leader

A skilled leader is the linchpin in a successful wilderness program. The experienced leader will be adept at creating and maintaining constructive tension throughout the wilderness experience and in composing situations where nature can impose consequences on decisions taken. The successful leader will not be perceived as a leader in many situations. The participants must be allowed to feel in control, even though they are being very cleverly and very indirectly manipulated by the leader to achieve the planned outcomes of the experience.

Successful wilderness experiences generally report the importance of close, trusting relationships between the participants and the leaders, even though the participants are left to solve their own problems and feel the consequences of all their decisions (Kelly & Baer, 1971; Gass, 1995a). With delinquent youth it is important that leaders be perceived as participants by the participants, so avoiding the negative consequences of 'authority' figures and power struggles. Also because the adolescent has volunteered for the program, and they feel in control of the decision to participate, they are much more likely to be motivated positively towards the experience. However, this does not ensure success. As Golins (1977) said:

No one changes who does not want to change, (p2).

Despite being voluntarily involved, many delinquents initially lack motivation to change. McGrath (1990) wrote that this is because they lack any real belief that they could successfully do so. Sometimes the adolescent is not at all interested in changing and cannot see a need to change, as life is comfortable the way it is (although usually not for the people around them). As Kauffman (1992) said:

Many delinquency prevention and remediation programs assume that the delinquent wants to change. This is not always the case. Often the delinquent or behaviour-disordered child gets great pleasure out of disrupting and being naughty. S/he has found that seldom are consequences so bad that it is not worth it, (p5).

Therefore, the timing of a wilderness experience is critical. Leaders, through experience, should be able to ascertain whether a nominated participant is ready for the experience. The delinquent must be at a stage where they are ready, or almost ready, to accept change. Mental preparation by the leader beforehand can assist in this. The participant should be well-informed about the experience to come, with realistic descriptions of the challenges and the hardships likely to be encountered.

The wilderness environment will demand change in the participant in order to survive the experience. Nature will impose immediate and harsh consequences on poor decisions. The experience must be well-planned so that the choice of opting out by the participants is minimised. They should be drawn into a commitment to complete it and, at

times, should have few other options (Abbott, 1989). This new environment should foster the freedom to experiment, and the trialling of new responses and behaviour patterns, away from the entrenched lifestyle patterns and negative peer culture of their everyday world. The skilled leader will continually contrive situations which will encourage the participants to do this.

Many of these adolescents have had little chance to develop socially acceptable ways of solving problems. Hains & Ryan (1983) and Kennedy (1984) stated that juvenile delinquents possess problem-solving skills but are deficient in recognising situations in which they may be used constructively, which therefore increases the likelihood that they will seek inappropriate and illegal solutions to their problems. A wilderness experience has the potential to give this practice in problem-solving.

In appropriately constructed situations the leader, both directly and indirectly, can offer the adolescent the opportunity to do things differently and to break lifelong patterns of failure. The leader can challenge the 'students' ingrained thought processes and force them to rethink in order to survive by posing questions, confronting their thinking and inviting them to assess the effectiveness of their solutions (without judging them). They can begin to see that they can make different responses, they can behave differently and they can achieve and have success in situations where they would have expected themselves to fail in the past.

Out in the wilderness they have the freedom to test out new responses and the freedom to make mistakes and learn from these mistakes. It can provide the medium in which to learn to accept responsibility and to think before acting. And it can enhance self-confidence and give the juvenile delinquents their first taste of success (in socially-acceptable terms), through providing opportunities for them to apply their decision-making skills in positive ways.

However, as powerful as a wilderness experience can be, and with skilled and dedicated leaders, a short-term response to a long-term problem would be destined to fail. Long-term problems need long-term solutions. It would be naive to expect permanent change from one fairly short experience. Clearly a wilderness experience needs to be placed within a more substantial intervention program with a significant follow-up period.

The follow-up

To be truly helpful to juvenile delinquents, a wilderness experience must be able to be seen as a metaphor for life (that is, to be very similar to the young person's own life experiences), so that the powerful lessons learned in the wilderness can be transferred back into their real life situations. These metaphors must be isomorphic (Bacon, 1983) and most adolescents need assistance to transfer wilderness learnings back into their home environment. This is why sustained follow-up after a wilderness experience is deemed so important.

The leader should try to make use of metaphors in working with the participant after wilderness to assist them in changing their behaviour. This process of being able to use the strong experiences of the wilderness (which evoked certain feelings and responses) back in their 'real world' when other stressful situations arise, can be a very powerful tool. To be an effective metaphor, however, the situation must be isomorphic, that is, have a great deal in common with the situation now being faced in real life. But it must have a different, and positive, ending.

For example, a participant lost in the bush may become stressed and begin to swear profusely. This action is unhelpful; it does not solve the problem. The participant then may find he must rely on himself and search for other solutions. Eventually he finds one that works: a positive ending to being 'lost'. When another stressful situation later arises, say in the classroom, the participant may remember the bush experience and 'live' two experiences simultaneously through the metaphor. He may realise that swearing, although the familiar and well-used response, will probably be unhelpful here as well. So other responses are considered. The process by which the participant recalls these responses is called the transderivational search. It is the strategy used to interact with reality and make sense of an experience. It recalls concrete or emotional experiences from memory and uses them as a response to the present situation (Bacon, 1983).

Virtually all studies have shown an initial reduction in poor behaviour patterns in the period immediately following a wilderness experience. Success is usually defined by a lessening in the frequency and extent of problem behaviours. Kimball (1988) saw wilderness as simply a component part of a larger therapeutic plan:

There is great pressure in our society to find a quick fix for social ills - delinquency being one of them.

Unfortunately, wilderness therapy as pill-popping doesn't work. Long term behavioural change is, for the most part, a long term process (p31).

It has been found that when follow-up programs utilise the same leader or leaders used in the initial wilderness experience there is greater transference of learning leading to positive behaviour change. The same leader helps to ensure that close links between the two (wilderness experience and follow up) can be maintained. Using the same leader has two important advantages. Firstly, the participant and the leader have shared the time in the wilderness and so have a common experience. The leader will draw on the wilderness experience and, using metaphors from the experience, link different responses used there to everyday life. Secondly, the participant has a close and trusting relationship with the leader. The successful leader will continue to use the same skills in interacting with the participant, with emphasis on cognitive restructuring theory and behaviour modification techniques.

Most of the follow up will not bring the whole group together. Work is mostly done with individual students or sometimes with two or three together. The students are also linked with mentors within their schools so that the support is more accessible.

Adolescents' perceptions can be sometimes mistaken or biased. Because this is how they are perceiving reality, so it is reality to them. A behaviour always makes sense to the person who is behaving in that way. To them it is the most appropriate way of behaving in that situation to fulfil the need to belong. Cognitive restructuring attempts to change behaviour by changing an individual's motivation to behave. This is done by challenging the way they think about things. Emotions are not the driving force behind behaviour. Before feeling comes thinking, so it is necessary to challenge the thought processes to instigate change. The aim should be to modify faulty cognition. Because all behaviour is purposeful, some adolescents choose to misbehave. As such they are responsible for their behaviour and should not be excused for behaving badly or irresponsibly.

In cognitive restructuring therapy, an individual is challenged to work through how thoughts or feelings can lead to actions which invariably have consequences. By comparing different thought processes leading to different actions and outcomes, they hopefully can be led to consider alternatives in other situations before making a decision which

they may later regret. Therefore, the key to understanding and changing behaviour is to identify the purpose of the behaviour and then to create a situation where that behaviour does not achieve its goal. The wilderness environment appears to be an excellent milieu for this, as entrenched behaviour patterns are frequently of little use in responding to the harsh demands of nature. The wilderness can also be used as an environment where adolescents can become aware of their own inner authority and an ability to choose, thus gaining the resultant sense of responsibility, freedom and increased self-esteem. The follow-up program then helps to link this awareness to everyday life.

As stated previously, if a program was simply a wilderness experience, it would probably fail to deliver long-lasting behavioural changes. Powerful as the experience might be, it would not be powerful enough to withstand the real life pressures which descend on the participants once again as they return to school and home. There would be the initial 'honeymoon' period, where the participant responds differently and in a better way, but old, practised responses would gradually return. However, the 'brick wall' of old, familiar thought patterns will hopefully have been breached by the wilderness experience and the cracks should begin to appear. Breaking down the wall requires time and patience. The wilderness was needed to provide an internalising experience. The small seeds of alternate thought processes and responses in the participants can be carefully nurtured and stored by the leader, to be used later in follow-up sessions to help the participants assimilate them into their everyday thoughts, feelings and responses. This essential follow-up phase of the program is the process of externalising it and applying it in the real wilderness of everyday life.

In order to succeed, the continual debrief of the wilderness experience in the follow-up phase should be participant-centred and must come from them. Any imposed interpretation of the wilderness experience by the leader would only result in a reduction in the personal ownership of the experience and a loss of the metaphor. After the participant returns from the wilderness experience, the leader should maintain close contact with the participant, their family and their school. It is important that the participant comes to realise that the leader will be there to help, through all the bad times as well as the good. The trust relationship which began in the bush is a vital ingredient in providing meaningful help during the follow-up period.

Intensive follow-up is generally needed immediately after wilderness. Then it may taper at different rates depending on the individual and how their behaviour is improving. The seeds of attitude change that were sown in the wilderness need to be carefully nurtured and the participant should be encouraged to try out different strategies and behaviours to cope with problems that arise at school and at home. The leader will need to have a variety of approaches to use in helping the participant work through these behavioural changes. The follow-up program should aim to give continuous feedback to the participant. This can be done in a variety of ways including mirroring (where the leaders demonstrate what the student's response looked like), rewards (for achieving goals), reminders and visual stimulators (such as diaries and photographs of the expedition) and predetermined stages of consequences.

Just as the wilderness was unforgiving but fair, so too should be the consequences of behaviour at school and at home. Consistency and feedback are seen as very important in the intervention program, for these participants often need yardsticks to test out new responses and behaviours. Just as stress is central to the change process in the wilderness, so too should tension be used during follow-up. The motivation to change is provided by tension in the participant's life (Handley, 1994b). If all was going well, there would be little reason to change. Tension, through the real world falling short of the participant's idea of their perfect world, provides the fuel to engender change. The frustration or disequilibrium which flows from this tension can be reduced by a change in perception and a new response to the situation by the participant. Tension, often generated through a crisis, can provide the key to unlocking the mystery of the wilderness experience. Meaning replaces mystery. The follow-up phase is therefore crucial in developing the latent power of the wilderness experience.

Many of the variables accepted as relevant to juvenile delinquency can be addressed during a wilderness experience and then may continue to be addressed during the follow-up period. The challenge to locus of control, as part of the wilderness experience, continues at school when they are expected to take the consequences for decisions they make. Their high independence is encouraged by allowing them to make decisions, but in doing so they are fully aware of the consequences involved. Efforts to further raise their self-esteem continue in the follow-up program by working with

them in developing strategies to cope with crises and difficult situations and so experience a measure of success.

Their commitment to school is encouraged through fostering success by improved communication and strategies for handling stress. This, in turn, can help lower feelings of alienation towards the school and to authority. The challenge to their negative peer relationships continues, with strategies for dealing with negative peer pressure discussed. Their tolerance to deviant behaviour continues to be challenged by reinforcement of socially-acceptable behaviour and by giving them the opportunity to engage in further high perceived-risk, non-deviant activities such as abseiling and rock-climbing. Their relationship with their parents also continues to be challenged by working both with the participant and the parents, encouraging realistic expectations and teaching them conflict resolution skills.

The emphasis in all meetings with the participant should be on his or her thought processes. The basic model can be the simple one used in cognitive restructuring (Wragg, 1989). What you are thinking affects what you will do or how you will respond. As the participant becomes more familiar with verbalising how they think about situations and problems, they usually become more responsive to considering alternative solutions. As the situations are reviewed they can be challenged to consider not only what happened and what the consequences were, but whether it was worth it. They can be encouraged to give themselves mental self-talk, to stop and think about the consequences and ask 'Is it worth it?' before proceeding with a response, while staying calm and in control.

Modelling and role plays can also be used to practice staying in control. Mediation and conflict resolution skills can be taught and encouraged, as well as giving the participant practice in staying on task.

Talking through situations with a participant after they have occurred can help them gain insight into why they reacted and behaved in a certain way. However, the emphasis should not be on the resultant action that occurred but on the thought processes which preceded it. The leader can 'do more by doing less'. They can facilitate a change in thinking by allowing the participant to slowly work out the process of what happened to them by reflective listening, influential summaries and reframing. Timing is important in this process. The participant must be ready to think things through. To reach this stage may take months or

years after the wilderness experience (Handley, 1994b). Often a crisis will allow the participant to re-focus. But it is useless to try and force this process. It must come from the participant when they are ready.

The participant must come to realise how an incident, no matter how small, can trigger certain thoughts and beliefs. These thoughts can then trigger feelings, which then affect responses and behaviours. Sometimes an emotion appears to be all that is experienced in triggering a response. Certain situations occur where a participant may feel an emotion strongly without any conscious cognitive process (a 'knee-jerk' response). However, whether these responses and behaviours are consciously cognitive or emotive-based, they can, in turn, trigger responses in others which then further inflame the thoughts and feelings of the participant.

This can quickly escalate into a conflict cycle (Wragg, 1989) from which the participant may find it difficult, if not impossible, to escape. The participant reacts again, and so the cycle continues and expands. This can escalate into a crisis, even though the original incident causing the stress may have been quite trivial. Gradually the participant can gain in confidence and be empowered to control their thoughts. Then their beliefs and feelings can be slowly challenged and changed, the cycle can be broken and different outcomes achieved. The participant can be encouraged to think ahead and use damage control, that is, ways of preventing a problem from escalating into major trouble.

Sometimes learning can be a slow process. It can be two steps forward and one step back. The first step is to empower them to own their own thoughts and subsequent feelings and responses. They should come to realise that they are in control, that they are responsible for their actions and they (and only they) can make changes possible. This lesson, learned in the wilderness, can be transfused into their lives now. The second step is to encourage them to try out these new responses in their real-life situations. The backward step is also part of the learning process: sometimes these new responses will work and sometimes they won't. It is important for the participants to set realistic goals and for the leader to encourage and praise the attempts they make.

Part of the participant's new survival kit will be the adoption of appropriate behaviours for school, home and neighbourhood. This can include an awareness that life will not always be fair and reasonable. Sometimes outcomes do not seem fair.

However, to resolve tension and to survive these situations, these outcomes need to be accepted and the participant must be able to move on. 'Life is not always fair but I can handle it' is the concept suggested in this situation.

A successful wilderness-enhanced program also needs to be a solution-focussed program. The past should not be dwelt upon; it should be seen only as learning experiences, useful in providing frameworks for future decisions and for avoiding the same mistakes or problems again. When the participant does something wrong, the emphasis should be on the context of the problem and how to fix it through working out the thought processes behind it, not on the action that caused it. Because all facets of life are interconnected, a problem surfacing in one situation will probably affect all other situations. So too, change in attitude will affect all facets of life: a small drip ripples the whole pool (Handley, 1994c). Therefore, as the leader, it is considered necessary to persevere and be patient; to observe small shifts in behaviour and reinforce these appropriately. Goal-setting can be used effectively in practising and achieving new behaviours. These should always be clearly set out and realistic. The participant may be encouraged to set their own reward for the achievement of a goal.

Concluding remarks

It can be seen from the contents of this paper that a well-researched, and diligently carried out follow-up program, should enable the power of a wilderness experience to form the basis of lasting changes in attitude and behaviour. The elements deemed relevant to juvenile delinquency are confronted and alternative response patterns can be encouraged. But the crucial ingredient in creating a successful intervention program is the leader. Without the skills to interact and encourage the participants, nothing lasting will be achieved.

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