

The Efficacy of Wilderness Programs with “at risk” adolescents.

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BA (Hons)

2002

A report submitted in partial requirement for the degree of Master of
Psychology (Education) at the University of Tasmania

Abstract

This document reviews literature regarding the effectiveness of adolescent wilderness programs as an intervention strategy with at-risk adolescents. It begins by exploring definitions of adolescence, the concept of adolescent risk, and briefly overviews Sveen's (1995) theoretical eclectic model of adolescent wilderness intervention (adapted from Walter & Marks' 1981 eclectic model of human functioning). An appraisal of the efficacy of wilderness programs with adolescents then follows. The accumulated evidence indicates positive effects of wilderness programs in areas such as self-concept, self-esteem, social skills, self-responsibility, and self-control. However, this evidence is presented with the caveat of the intrinsic difficulties particular to evaluating these types of programs, and individual studies and meta-analytic studies are used to illustrate substantive and methodological issues in the evaluation of wilderness programs. Suggestions for future research are presented with the aim of minimising the difficulties of previous research.

The use of metaphor and analogy is a common technique employed by wilderness program facilitators. In keeping with the spirit of wilderness program techniques, the popular analogy of the wilderness program as a catalyst and crucible will be used in this review.

A crucible is as a vessel used for fusing materials and is figuratively used to describe a severe test or trial. A catalyst is an added chemical substance that facilitates and speeds up a chemical reaction, and is not consumed in the reaction. Like the catalyst and the crucible, wilderness programs also have two components: the milieu of the wilderness, and the program structure. The milieu of the wilderness (the site of the program) acts as the crucible, it is the vessel within which the "chemistry" takes place. The program structure acts as the catalyst that facilitates psychological reactions and speeds up adolescent maturation processes. The analogy of the wilderness program as a catalyst acknowledges the influence of other agencies and individuals ("elements") in the process of change. The catalyst helps speed the process of maturational change, and like a catalyst, the wilderness program is recycled ready for the next cohort of participants. The question remains - Are wilderness programs effective catalysts? And what kind of components go into making good catalysts? Like the chemist, it is once again the scientist's job to find out!

The general aim of this review is to examine the research on wilderness programs in order to assess their effectiveness as an intervention strategy with

adolescents who are at risk of not making a successful transition into adulthood. As part of this aim, the review will identify factors that make the measurement of psychological changes in wilderness program participants difficult, and provide suggestions for future research inquiry.

The review is divided into six main topical headings, and these are described below in sequential order (heading titles are italicised). The first heading - *Adolescent Risk*, is concerned with defining the nature of adolescence and what is meant by adolescent risk. This is then followed by *Theories of Adolescent Risk and Intervention*, which comments on the range of theories that attempt to explain adolescence. In this section, Sveen's (1995) eclectic model of Adolescent Program Intervention is proposed as a useful scaffold in understanding adolescence. Sveen's eclectic model is composed of a wide range of stand-alone theories that are respected pillars of psychological theory, and only a cursory examination of each theory in the eclectic model (given space considerations) is provided under the heading of *Eclectic Theoretical Model Components*. *Wilderness Intervention Programs for Adolescents* follows the previous topic area by describing the general aims and structural features of wilderness intervention programs, and the wilderness as a therapeutic milieu, before moving on to describe the variety, range and quality of studies evaluating wilderness programs. Meta-analytic studies are particularly used to sum up general empirical findings, and in the section entitled *Individual Studies and their Methodological Difficulties*, individual research studies are used to illustrate key methodological issues. This is then followed by an examination of some more recent empirical studies that have attempted to take

into account difficulties from the past research. Finally, *Conclusions and Directions for Future Research* provides a very general summation of the finding that wilderness programs generally have positive effects on increasing adolescents' psychological wellbeing. However, these findings need to be moderated by several caveats concerning methodological issues and weaknesses in past research. From this, some suggestions for the evaluation of future wilderness programs are presented, as well suggesting several broader avenues of investigation in the field.