

# How Does an IEC Choose a Wilderness Therapy Program?

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It is hard to explain how an independent educational consultant chooses a wilderness program without giving an overview of what a wilderness therapy program (WTP) is and what it is not, and what goes into choosing a wilderness therapy program for a child or young adult. Many people think a wilderness therapy program is an "Outward Bound" program or a "Boot Camp," neither of which provide the clinical sophistication that is offered at a WTP. As an "Outward Bound" graduate, I can speak from experience that their programs are accidentally therapeutic for some of their participants, but not intentionally therapeutic for all participants. For example, unlike a WTP, Outward Bound does NOT offer 1:1 therapy sessions or group therapy run by trained and/or licensed therapists or field staff that have gone through several days/weeks/months of training in order to facilitate the group process; nor are the groups run on a daily or weekly basis with the clinical oversight of a lead therapist and a staff to student ratio of 1:4. "Boot Camps" offer more structure and can have a military approach to the experience and do not offer clinical oversight and clinical milieu that is offered at a WTP. Boot camps are generally larger groups and therefore the staff to student ratio is greater. What distinguishes a WTP is that it is designed from beginning to end to evaluate, assess, and support a student and their family through a clinical process in a very intentional design. The entire experience is based on therapy, in an experiential model, rather than in an office.

Wilderness therapy provides daily structure, therapeutic sophistication, phases or levels to meet a student where they are, and begin to diagnose, assess, and evaluate the student using a particular outdoor model. There are several models and different lengths of stay. These models range from outdoor primitive living skills, learning a particular skill(s) from gardening to sailing to high adventure, and generally using the community living to help a student see where they are, to help move the student gently forward, and begin to unwind and examine the student's patterns or behaviors to aid them in their therapeutic process. Most students who are enrolled in WTPs are adolescents, and we all know adolescents listen to their peers; therefore, another level of the wilderness therapeutic experience is the peer group, and having "leaders" in the group to model and the opportunity for students to become leaders as they progress through the programs. The role of a leader is reserved for students that have been in the program longer. It is an opportunity to

demonstrate new skills and, for many of the students, an opportunity that they have never experienced. The group is run by a therapist. He or she drives the milieu and the therapeutic goals and interventions that are prescribed for each student.

The wilderness model generally does not have a concrete beginning, middle, and end. Therefore the student cannot game the system because the system is evolving and changing with the needs of the student. A WTP lasts 30 days to a few months, and this time period allows a student to be free from the distractions of school, computers, drugs, malls, hair products, drinking, cell phones, friends and family, in a variety of primitive environments to examine and explore their choices and patterns. A WTP can be, but is not always, a first step in a multi-step therapeutic intervention process for a student and his or her family.

There are as many different wilderness therapy models as there are many different approaches to special needs consulting. With all the different approaches independent educational consultants (IECs) have to working with a family and their child, there are many first steps for IECs, but every evaluation involves assessing the emotional, psychological, educational, and financial needs of the student and family. An IEC will speak to anyone and everyone who has worked with the child professionally (with the family's permission) to see what the child is like in different circumstances. The next layer of the evaluation is reading all the information about the student including neuropsychological reports or grade reports to see how the student achieved or did not over time. The key to this phase is to find out the clinical needs of the student, but also beyond the stories and paperwork, who is this student and what they want from their family. The length of this first phase can be 24 hours or several days or weeks. This step is also very dependent on where a family member is in their process of understanding and availability to therapeutic intervention of any kind.

Like their colleagues, special needs consultants visit programs and schools. There is one difference. Our visits include trips to the wilderness, and we meet therapists on our way out to the field (that generally involve a long car ride) or while we are in the field with the students. Many IECs spend the night out in the field before they refer to a program. We will go out on an expedition with a group of students, sit in a group session, get to know what that group is like,

and hear about its strengths and weaknesses from the students. We also get to see the students we have placed in the wilderness, see how clean they look, see the glow that comes from their faces when initially we only saw or felt the darkness from their inside. It is always amazing to sit through a session with a student you have met in the office and then see them away from the computer, cell phone, friends and family and begin to see the student as she was meant to be.

It is our job as an IECs to evaluate and assess not only which program, but which therapist is right for that student. This adds another layer of questioning for IECs when they are researching if a spot is available: We ask what the group looks like now; how many students are rolling in or out of the group; how many leaders there are at that time; and if there students with similar profiles. There are other questions IECs think about for a family as well: What type of parent program does this family need to help them move forward? Does the child need to be escorted?

The goals for each student in wilderness are individual and how they are obtained is an individual process for that student. Some students accept their role in what got them there; others barely move, but in the end we know more about the student and their capacity for insight and awareness.

Most IECs follow the student through the process at the WTP. Again, there are many different ways to support a family during this time, for example, listening in on the call with the family and the therapist weekly, or receiving updates from the therapist on how things are moving along. At the end of the WTP, a student is either going home or going to another school or program. There has been a therapeutic assessment, and perhaps additional formal testing. The student has experienced success experientially, personally, and interpersonally, has been sober and clean from friends or drugs or computers, slept eight hours a night for many weeks, eaten three meals a day, concentrated on the self and family for many weeks, and is beginning the next step with a level of awareness of his/her own process and has some ownership in it. The IEC has supported the family through the process in a way that suits everyone's needs, but more importantly, the family as a whole has begun their own journey to support each other and work on their own needs and begun to reconnect in a new way.