



ALLIANCE FOR THE
Safe, Therapeutic & Appropriate
Use of Residential Treatment

1

**ABUSE OF YOUTH IN
RESIDENTIAL PROGRAMS
FOR TEENS:
A CALL TO ACTION**

MARCH 2010

The Teen Years Present Challenges

2

As youth transition into adolescence, mental and behavioral health problems can appear or become worse.

- Youth may struggle with ADHD, depression, bi-polar disorder, substance addiction, suicidal thoughts, or a variety of learning disabilities or mental illnesses.
- Youth may become rebellious or take risks as they separate themselves from their parents as a normal part of becoming adults.

Some Teens Need Behavioral Care

3

Youth and families often seek help with a “struggling teenager.”

- Families face worries and conflicts beyond their capacity to cope.
- Parents can feel helpless, overwhelmed, scared, and desperate.
- Youth may engage in frightening, risky behavior, including trouble with the law, suicide attempts, or dangerous substance use.



Some Teens Need Behavioral Care

4

Youth and families need access to safe, therapeutic, and appropriate residential care.

- Competent, community-based care can be hard to find.
- Unfortunately, parents are turning to the Internet for help with their “troubled teens.”
- Desperate families are vulnerable targets for high-pressure sales from unethical residential programs.
 - Many programs lack qualified staff
 - Many do not use evidence-based treatment
 - The GAO documented widespread abuse, maltreatment, neglect, and death in residential programs

Protect Youth in Residential Programs

5

Youth deserve an adolescence free from:

- Abuse, maltreatment, neglect and death
- Group “treatment” that is not proven effective, and for many, is harmful and traumatic
- Ruptured family relationships, and separation from loved ones, community and advocates

Protect Youth in Residential Programs

6

Ensure youth receive the education, special education, and therapy they need.

- Youth with emotional and behavioral problems do need help—but many of these programs are not helpful. Characteristics of unhelpful programs include:
 - Do not follow any method of treatment practiced or taught by mainstream children’s mental health experts.
 - Use confrontational therapy which is shown to be harmful.
 - Special education needs often neglected.
 - Teachers may not be qualified; often ill-equipped to handle problems.



Protect Youth in Residential Programs

7

In poor quality programs, the power differential between staff and youth is a recipe for abuse.

- Staff control every aspect of the teens' lives:
 - Food, clothing, shelter
 - Youth not permitted to leave campus
 - Physical and mental health
 - Education; intellectual freedom
 - Religious/spiritual practice
 - Books, newspapers, television, radio, Internet

Protect Youth in Residential Programs

8

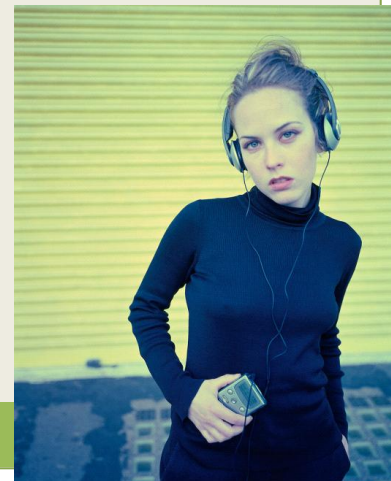
- In such programs, staff control every aspect of the teens' lives:
 - Relationships and sexuality
 - Work tasks—"chores," physical labor as punishment, or part-time employment—and earnings, if any
 - Access to communication with family or advocates
 - Civic involvement and political action
 - *And approval to graduate and leave*

Stigma of Being a “Troubled Teen”

9

Once a youth becomes labeled as a “troubled teen” and is placed in a poor quality residential program...

- Permission is somehow granted to treat her or him by a different, harsher standard than other teens.
 - Afforded no credibility
 - Given little or no freedom
 - Given no voice, choice or role in deciding the course of their own therapy; therapy is forced upon them

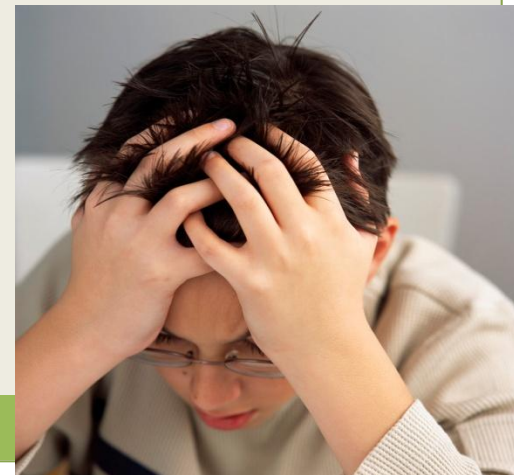


Protect Youth with Disabilities, Illnesses

10

This population includes many youth with disabilities and mental illnesses.

- Common for these teens to face learning disabilities, such as ADHD, and/or mental illness such as depression, bipolar disorder, substance abuse problems, and behavioral and emotional challenges.
 - Many survivors say they felt they needed help—some *asked* for help—but that's not what they got.



Protect Youth with Disabilities, Illnesses

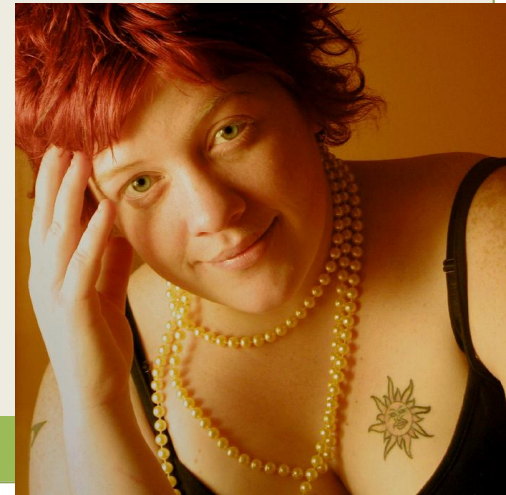
- Most are sent by their parents, not by juvenile justice, or by a psychiatrist (as with mental hospitals).
 - No judge or legal advocate has evaluated the need for placement; the child has no opportunity to appeal.
- There is no legal requirement that the child receive a formal diagnosis or treatment plan.
 - No objective criteria for “graduation”
 - Nor for judging the efficacy of the services provided

Adolescence is a Turbulent Time

12

But many are simply rebellious teens, taking risks and exploring adulthood.

- ASTART experts in adolescent mental health confirm that many are not ill but exhibiting age-appropriate developmental behaviors, i.e., “the teen years.”
- It is normal for teens to outgrow this stage by the time they graduate high school.



GAO Finds Widespread Abuse

13

- Investigations by the GAO found widespread abuse in some residential programs for teens.
- GAO documented thousands of cases of abuse, maltreatment, neglect and death of teens.
 - Legal system rarely holds staff or programs accountable.
 - Corporate attorneys most often settle civil suits out of court with nondisclosure provisions.
 - At the instruction of programs, children are often transported there by threat or use of force, against their will, by an “escort service.”

GAO Finds Widespread Abuse

14

- Investigations also showed some programs used deceptive marketing practices, including:
 - Erroneous information about treatment of mental and behavioral problems (such as that bipolarity and depression can “just go away after a while” through diet)
 - Lack of disclosure of financial relationships with referring educational consultants or other programs
 - Bogus advice about insurance reimbursement
 - Instructions for tax evasion

The Troubled Teen Industry

15

Many residential programs are owned and operated by two for-profit corporations.

- Universal Health Services (PA) is a Fortune 500 company.
 - Operates 113 behavioral health facilities in 32 states.
 - In 2007, UHS behavioral health facilities produced net revenues of \$1.15 billion and net profits of \$220 million.



The Troubled Teen Industry

16

- CRC Health Group (CA) operates Aspen Education Group. CRC is owned by Bain Capital, a global investment group.
 - Earnings in 2007 of \$460 million, up 69.6% over 2006.
 - Increased revenue came mostly from the youth division, with an average net income per youth per day of \$233.80.
 - More profitable by far than its adult addiction recovery division which earns an average net income per patient per day of \$11.18.

The Troubled Teen Industry

17

However, this is not about a few “bad apples.”

- Patterns of abuse are persistent and occur in many large and small programs across the country (see GAO report).
- Programs support related industries such as escort services, and educational consultants.
 - Finder’s fees may be paid when referrals are made.
 - Parents of students often get a tuition discount for talking to parents who later enroll their child.
- *This is why federal oversight of all programs in all states is needed.*

The Troubled Teen Industry

18

An estimated 14,000 to 20,000 youth per year are enrolled (actual number not known).

- Programs include:
 - “Wilderness programs,” “boot camps,” “emotional growth boarding schools,” and “therapeutic boarding schools.”
 - Tuition is about \$60,000 - \$90,000 per year (twice the tuition at Harvard).
- Most are located in isolated, rural areas.
- Some wilderness programs operate on federal land.
 - BLM has recently become more involved

Appealing to Needs of Parents, Not Youth

19

“I just wanted someone to end the cycle of fear.”
Cynthia Clark-Harvey, mother of Erica Harvey. Erica died due to staff malfeasance in the Catherine Freer Wilderness program.

- Parents and their concerns and fears are the target of these unsavory parts of the industry—not helping adolescents.
 - Parents fear they are losing their children, and may doubt their parenting skills.
 - They yearn for someone to offer relief.
 - Programs offer a cure-all, and parents want to believe their children are in a safe place.
 - ✦ *“Because it’s expensive and hard, it must be good.”*



What's a Parent Supposed to Do?

20

Parents and caregivers seeking help for a difficult teen are vulnerable, exhausted, and often at their wits' end. What can they do?

- *Pause.* Do not be rushed into decisions.
 - People make poor decisions when they are afraid, angry or under stress.
 - For-profit programs take advantage of fear, vulnerability.
- Consider the whole picture.
 - Teen problems are usually family problems, and are best addressed together as a family, in the home community.

What's a Parent Supposed to Do?

21

Know the warning signs of unsafe residential programs (see www.isaccorp.org/warningsigns.asp):

- Child is diagnosed over the Internet or by phone.
- Written and/or verbal communication between the child and family members is restricted at any level.
- Parents are asked to sign a waiver releasing the company from liability should their child be injured.
- The program asks for, demands or recommends legal custody of the child.



What's a Parent Supposed to Do?

22

Seek help closer to home.

- Ask family, friends of the family, or others for help, or to give the child a place to stay for a period of time.
- Seek community-based alternatives.
 - Community-based care and counseling;
 - Parent groups—but beware of parent groups run by, or frequented by, program marketers.



Better Alternatives

23

Apply *evidence-based* community care models.

- Focus is on coordinated attention from multiple caregivers:
 - Parents, school, medical/mental health, faith community, juvenile justice (if applicable).
 - ✦ Systems of Care
 - ✦ Wraparound Care
 - Short-term stays (2-8 weeks) in licensed residential care, such as for detox or suicide watch, may be appropriate.
- Youth is kept in his or her own community and at home (unless home carries a risk of harm).



Support Legislation to Protect Teens

24

Help protect teens by supporting federal legislation to bring residential programs for teens under federal monitoring.

- Legislation must be have teeth and provide resources for enforcement, or programs may claim a level of rigorous oversight that does not exist.
- Visit www.astartforteens.org for updates and resources on passage of legislation.
- Contact your members of Congress to ask for their support of laws to protect teens from abuse.



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25

THANK YOU AND DISCUSSION

WWW.ASTARTFORTEENS.ORG