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GEORGIE BINKS:

Troubled teen therapy: What are we doing to our youth?

CBC News Viewpoint | March 3, 2006 | [More from Georgie Binks](#)



Georgie Binks is a freelance writer living in Toronto. She is a graduate of Queen's University and writes for the Toronto Star, National Post, and Chatelaine. She has written for the Globe and Mail, Homemakers, Elle, Glow and Style at Home, as well as salon.com. Georgie is a former CBC radio and television reporter and editor.

Drinking, drugs, sex, violence, attitude overload: It's the disease that is teenagehood and way too many parents these days are running scared.

"As a society we have decided that adolescents are so dangerous that any help for them, no matter how humiliating, abusive or dangerous, is better than nothing," says Maia Szalavitz, author of *Help At Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids*.

Those fears have bred a growing industry in so-called troubled teen therapy, ranging from therapeutic centres to wilderness camps to military-style boot camps to behaviour modification schools. The facilities are all pricey, Szalavitz notes, charging about \$3,000 to \$5,000 a month.

How do they work? Tough love is the order of the day at a lot of them, she says.

"They use lots of forced exercise, food deprivation, sleep deprivation, stress positions, keeping the person out of contact with the outside world, isolation restraint and constant forced confessions. You can call that therapy or military boot camp. It's the same old tough love repackaged."

Keith Russell, a professor at the University of Minnesota who has conducted a number of studies on wilderness camps, notes that at their best and as a last resort, they can work.

"It's one type of treatment for kids who have tried other types and aren't being reached," Russell says. "The kids in these wilderness programs are pretty far down the road in terms of getting in trouble with the law, they've dropped out of school, 70 per cent have substance use issues and a variety of mental health issues. They've tried outpatient treatment."

But he adds: "A boot-camp-type program is not appropriate for kids. You don't denigrate and break down a young person who is in trouble."

Indeed, two years ago, a 13-member panel convened by the National Institute of Health in the United States concluded boot camps and other

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get-tough programs did not prevent criminal behaviour and might even make the problem worse because they brought young people together who were inclined toward violence and taught them how to commit more crime.

If a child genuinely needs a program away from home, Russell says, it must be regulated by a licensing or accrediting body, such as the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Programs, the Council on Accreditation or any state licensing agency for health, family or mental health.

Why? Because kids have died at some of these facilities.

In January, for example, Martin Lee Anderson, 14, died in at a military-type camp in Florida. Although an autopsy ruled out trauma or injury as the cause of death, Florida is conducting an inquiry. Anderson was sent to the Bay County Sheriff's Office Boot Camp and died the same day.

He wasn't the first. Teen Advocates USA, a not-for-profit children's rights and advocacy group, monitors the privatized troubled teen industry. Its [website](#) includes a list of youths who have died at these kinds of camps.

In some cases, they were suffering from medical conditions that were ignored, the kids considered whiners and manipulative. In other cases, restraint was used. And, sadly, some were suicides.

Other groups are fighting the use of unregulated privately owned facilities, including [teenliberty.org](#) and the [International Survivors Action Committee](#).

Russell says young people sent to these facilities must be able to talk to outsiders about possible abuse or neglect. But most of the camps allow no confidential communication between parents and kids for months at a time. Licensing and regulations, he says, would ensure contact and controls.

The lack of regulations is a worry for Canadian authorities because families here are sending their kids to these programs in the States.

"There are locked settings in Ontario but the child advocate has to meet with the child within 24 hours," Judy Finlay, the chief advocate in the Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy says. "In long-term closed secure settings, there is a whole court process. Once parents learn that's the case, they ship their kids to the States, where there aren't those requirements and restrictions. Its horrifying."

Finlay also worries about the possible long-term harm in sending kids away for extended periods.

"What kind of reconciliation process are they going to have to bring a kid back home and reintegrate into the family?" she asks. "They have severed the attachment. If there was difficulty in that relationship previously that kid will never trust them."

Another serious issue is: Who is being sent to these facilities?

In many cases, it's a last resort for out-of-control kids, in trouble with the law, whose families have tried other methods and are at their wits' end. In some cases, they're sent by the courts.

But Szalavitz contends that other kids who end up in these places shouldn't be there at all.

Youths who may simply be a pain in the ass can spend months, even years, away from home, she says, their parents unduly frightened by program officials who convince them they need to put their children in the facilities to save their lives.

"These programs tell all the parents their child will be dead within weeks if

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they don't enrol them. The kids are told they would have died. If they don't believe that, they are told they are in denial."

Furthermore, she adds, parents are overreacting to teens' experimentation with drugs and alcohol. "Parents are taught if you smoke pot you will die, you will be shooting heroin tomorrow. Seventy to 80 per cent of the kids in these places have smoked pot a few times. They're nowhere near any diagnostic criteria for addiction."

David Wolfe, a psychologist with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, agrees.

While parents have to watch for kids who try drugs at an early age, for the average teen, "smoking marijuana is a rite of passage. ... It's not a gateway drug. It's considered by our organization as a low-risk drug compared with others. Tobacco is much higher risk. Would you send your kid away for smoking cigarettes?"

Wolfe says parents have to understand that "you can't keep kids safe all the time. They're going to experiment. But if a parent has a concern, they should talk to a family physician and they will refer them to a hospital-based service. Unfortunately, it takes months before they can get a private referral, which I advise is the first step."

In the meantime, they've likely been exposed to the growing cachet of boot camps. The British reality TV show *Brat Camp* – where harried parents sign up their kids and watch as their "spoiled and lazy" teenagers get the "shock of their lives" at a camp in Utah – is so successful that it's into its third season. And last season on *Desperate Housewives*, an out-of-control teen was dragged out of bed in the middle of the night and whisked off to a "teen boot camp."

But what may make compelling TV, doesn't necessarily work in life.

Donna Culbert, executive director of Toronto-based support group Parents in Transition, says that, in her experience, results are mixed.

"I know five families who sent their kids to various and sundry boot kind of camps," she says. "One was very short term – six months – and they were absolutely thrilled with the results.

"The other four, when the kids were back in the real world it went back to the way it was before. If nothing else, when the kid is at their worst, it gives the family a rest. Parents think it will cure everything wrong and the kid will come out a different kid. The kid goes in and the same kid comes out."

Time will tell for Diane's daughter. Diane (not her real name) sent the teen to a therapeutic wilderness program two years ago, when she was 15. "She was completely out of control. She was smoking marijuana every day and had tried cocaine. She was a hair away from being a street person."

Diane and her husband had tried parenting groups and therapy, but nothing worked. They felt this was their only option. "We wanted to save our daughter's life," Diane says. "So we spent the money."

The teen went on to residential therapy and is now in a U.S. boarding school, which Diane calls a 'safe' environment. "She's getting a great education, but is she happy? Would any child be happy?"

Few parents send their kids away just to get rid of them. But they have to think long and hard about whether they're doing more harm than good.

Sometimes a trip down memory lane can serve as a powerful reminder that time and patience can be the best cure. Remember how crazy you drove your parents? Well, it's your turn now.

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Last week, a childless friend of mine confided to me that she was glad she didn't have teenagers. I didn't have the heart to tell her the only thing worse than having teenagers would be not having them.

LETTERS:

I have read Ms. Binks article with great interest but I think the 2 comments posted present the most interesting insight into this situation.

On the one hand we have a parent who faced a "difficult" teen with love, respect for them as an individual, vigilance and concern. On the other hand we have someone who is praising the "industry" of helping teens. It seems to me that the most effective industry would be that of parents putting the needs of their children first.

As a parent who has raised 2 kids into adulthood I can testify to the number of teens who moved through my home whose parents did not know what they were doing, did not seem to care and who took much more time ensuring that their careers were on track than ensuring that their kids were safe.

I picked up late and drove home many kids whose parents did not seem to think this was a normal part of raising kids. Parents who seemed to assume that somehow their kids would get home or rather that someone would get their kids home.

I suspect that it is this parenting style that is serviced by this "industry" parents who would rather pay someone else to do a tough job than knuckle down and do it themselves. It reminds me a great cartoon in which a man is drowning and a man on the river bank says "I'm sorry I don't swim but would \$20.00 help?" Some times money is not the thing that will do the job.

—*Barbara Kerson*

It at one time crossed my mind that it would work on my daughter. Fortunately, we don't have that option here so we sucked it up and went on what we called a roller coaster ride.

I realized all the fears I had, and with all the things I had gone through on my own had turned me into an overprotective mother with my three kids. That, combined with our oldest daughter's behaviour turned into a rough ride. I could have been more lenient, but the friends she was hanging out with at the time had no restrictions and never seemed to have to answer to anyone. We went through a few rough years.

We ended up in council ling, after months of what seemed like no progress, the councillor told us she would have to hit bottom on her own and we should just let her go. I was appalled.

We would always go find her if she didn't come home, we stopped her from leaving at ungodly hours. We were there and we always told her we loved her. We all have work hard at parenting. We need to make sure our children know we love them. We had them in the first place for that reason, and just because it really is work, we shouldn't look for the easiest way out.

Unfortunately, that councillor probably gave other parents this advice, and their kids are on the streets. Fortunately, my husband is a police officer and whenever he has to deal with others going through what we did with our daughter, he tells those parents to keep trying. Never give up. It was a difficult and exhausting time.

I realized that I had to stop and listen to her. My child doesn't have to see things the way I do. So, when she pierced her lip, I was angry, but I didn't call her down for it. When she coloured her hair outrageous colours, I didn't make her feel bad. She is her own person, and as we found out, she's

incredible. Our daughter is 20 now, in college, and we are all closer than ever!

—*Laura | Thunder Bay, Ont.*

I am an education consultant who has worked with youth and families across Canada for more than 20 years.

I share Ms Binks' concern for the welfare of teens in care. I also support her view that typical adolescent experimentation or rebellion should not require treatment, but rather should be an opportunity for child and family to differentiate from each other in a healthy way.

However, her piece on the perceived dangers and futility of residential therapeutic teen programs is not only misguided but irresponsible. Families in real crisis are vulnerable and often conflicted themselves; those whose children need this help deserve our understanding and support, not scorn and derision. Families who seek this sort of help beyond our borders have typically explored all alternatives without success, only to find nothing else is even being offered.

Ms Binks maligns a very necessary and misunderstood industry as a whole, which for the most part has considerable success assisting a very hard to serve population. The teen help industry, like many others, has had, and continues to suffer its share of rotten apples. Disreputable and poorly supervised programs have caused inexcusable harm to those in their care. However, the vast majority of adolescent residential therapeutic programs are licensed, regulated, well established and run by dedicated, ethical and competent staff who greatly improve the future lives of those they serve.

By writing without context, Ms Binks does not provide a cautionary tale. Instead, she exploits every parent's worst fears using the very scaremongering and reactionary tactics against which she herself typically rails. Even more disappointing is that this piece does not reflect the thorough research and human touch that generally characterizes her writing.

—*Janyce Lastman | Toronto*

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