The Montcalm Outdoor Challenge Program

Martin Mitchell and Herman J. McCall

Starr Commonwealth has served troubled children and youth and their families for nearly a century. Starr’s Montcalm Schools operate from campuses in Michigan and Ohio, enrolling students referred by families and educational consultants. The Montcalm Outdoor Challenge Program is a key part of Starr’s network of nonprofit alternative education and treatment programs. It operates from a base camp and involves treks in wilderness settings. Positive peer cultures are created in a rich experiential learning environment. Trained staff guide students through a process of building trust, exploring problems, and creating transformational change. Families are integral partners in the Outdoor Challenge program.

Starr Commonwealth was founded by Floyd Starr in 1913 with the credo that there were no bad children and that all youngsters could thrive in an environment of love and activity. Starr is a nonprofit organization which operates a range of schools and treatment programs for children and youth who present a variety of emotional and behavioral problems. The Montcalm Outdoor Challenge Program offers intensive short-term treatment in a wilderness adventure setting. Montcalm also operates year round residential schools on the campuses of Montcalm School for Boys in Albion, Michigan, and Montcalm School for Girls in Van Wert, Ohio.

The Montcalm programs were named for Montcalm Lake located on Starr’s Michigan campus, a registered historic site. While Starr’s treatment programs have long served youth from courts and social agencies, the Montcalm programs are geared to accept direct referrals from families. These settings offer a fresh start for boys and girls 12-18 years old, providing living and learning environments that foster healing, restoration, and growth. To maintain that positive changes continue after program completion, Starr staff keep ongoing contact with the student and family during transition to the community.

Cultivating Strength and Resilience

Students referred to Starr’s Montcalm programs typically have experienced conflict in relationships within family, school, and community. Many carry diagnostic labels describing oppositional behavior, conduct problems, learning disabilities, autistic behaviors, adoption issues, attachment difficulties, and relationship trauma. Starr’s philosophy is to look beyond the labels to discover and cultivate strength and resilience, even in the most difficult young persons (Marquoit & Dobbins, 1995; Seita, Mitchell, & Tobin, 1996). The Montcalm Outdoor Challenge program is a 60-day program at a fixed-base camp with bi-weekly, three-to-five day wilderness trek experiences. The natural setting of a 350-acre wooded campus around Montcalm Lake provides ground-based group challenges, including outdoor and indoor rock climbing and rope courses. Outdoor experiences enhance understanding and care for the natural environment and ultimately those around them. This holistic experiential learning provides opportunities for youth to develop healthy physical, social, emotional, and academic skills.

School success is not part of the profile with many youth in conflict, however intelligent they might be.
Thus, academics are not an appendage, but a centerpiece in all Starr programs including the Montcalm Outdoor Challenge experience. University of Michigan researchers studying Starr’s treatment programs found that developing school competence was a strong predictor of positive outcomes, even if other problems and stressors in the youth’s family or community environment could not be eliminated (Gold & Osgood, 1992). Many youth who come to Montcalm Schools with lags in school achievement become reinvested in school and make significant gains in academic achievement in a short period of time. Starr is a leader in developing alternative learning environments to engage school-wary students (McCall, 2003).

School in the Montcalm Outdoor Challenge Program operates three to five days a week. Instruction is tailored to the student’s individual academic needs, ranging from special education to advanced placement. Students also have the opportunity to participate in project-based activities that focus on building knowledge about science and the natural elements. Students receive academic credit that they can transfer to their community schools. Some students who complete the Adventure Challenge program choose to enroll in the year-round curriculum of Montcalm School to continue their education.

Physical activity is a healthy and important part of development. The purpose of cooperative sports is for all youth to discover that when games are played cooperatively and when youth of all skill levels are embraced, that active recreation can be fun and rewarding. The creative arts are also a rich part of this experiential curriculum (Rizzolo & Schuler, 2003).

On a daily basis, youth participate in Service Learning, Experiential, and Electives (SEE). The goals of SEE activities are to enhance group dynamics, increase interpersonal skills, and offer opportunities for youth leadership, choice, and engagement. Activities under this unit include primitive fire building skills, ground-based group building initiatives, water navigation skills, orienteering skills, earth shelter construction, art projects, creative writing activities, earth oven cooking, and music. A range of regular service projects take students into the community to “de-center” and contribute to others in need.

Students also are given time alone to participate in self-reflective activities including journaling. The period after lunch is set aside for relaxing, writing letters, reading, and journaling. Each student upon arrival at the Montcalm Outdoor Challenge Program is given a hammock to use during their stay. These hammocks provide a personal space for each student to reflect about deeper matters. Such activities are designed to enhance self-awareness and a sense of personal autonomy.

Evening Council Fire offers a time for therapeutic personal reflection and sharing with the group. Several nights per week harness the power of a camp fire. The youth are given the opportunity to express themselves in a group setting more natural than formal peer group helping meetings. The Council Fire is a serious time for students and staff to speak from their hearts, review the day’s events, and share their life experiences and goals.

**Building Respectful Alliances with Youth**

When troubled youth come together, they can reinforce one another’s rebellious or antisocial behavior. These antisocial climates can sabotage educational or treatment goals. Further, pecking orders can emerge where weaker youth are exploited and victimized by more powerful bullies. This negative peer influence can have destructive effects on any programs which aggregate youth, including alternative schools, residential group settings, and even camping programs (Dishion, McCord, & Pulin, 1999).

Positive Peer Culture (PPC) has been specifically designed to counter such negative peer group influence (Toch & Adams, 2002; Osgood & Briddell, 2006). Starr Commonwealth has been a leader in developing successful Positive Peer Culture group treatment programs. The rich history of PPC programs spans a half century (McCorkle, Elias, & Bixby, 1958; Quigley, 2003; Opp & Unger, 2006). In PPC, youth become active agents for positive change in their peers. A climate is created where youth abandon self-centered and antisocial pursuits and instead become “hooked on helping” one another. In a peer group setting, youth are continually challenged to examine the choices they make and consider how their actions affect themselves and others.
At a research symposium at Starr Commonwealth, nine youth from various PPC groups described how they were able to overcome negative peer influence by active involvement in helping one another grow toward responsibility. The following is an interchange between delinquency expert Joan McCord of Temple University and a boy in a Starr peer helping program:

**Dr. Joan McCord:** I do a lot of research and I work with teenagers trying to understand what would help most. A lot of times, the teenagers seem to be saying being in a group makes it tough. It is clear that all of you are saying being in a group makes it good. Can you tell me some of the differences?

**Starr Student:** I think it is beneficial to be around teenagers your own age with similar issues. I listen to adults but they don’t have the same effect as somebody you see everyday or interact with every day. A peer tells me, “Man I used to do the same stuff that you do. I used to get mad and hit people and I have been at Starr longer so I know how to change and how to help you.” I am more willing to listen because it is from someone my own age. He has changed and is making progress and is about to leave. We have a relationship so I know this is the truth and this is what his life is because it is working for him. You know their issues and you know your issues and you know how they changed and you want to make progress. (Longhurst, McCord, & Starr Students, 2007, p. 198)

In the ethos of Starr, all students are expected to help one another with problems. None are permitted to hurt, and the failure to help is hurting (Tate & Wasmund 2000). Such a value system is essential in order to bully-proof school climates (Berkey, Keyes, & Longhurst, 2000). Rather than reacting to problems with zero tolerance punishment, a strength-based philosophy reframes problems as surmountable “challenges” that can build strengths (Laursen & Oliver, 2003).

Humans are on a lifelong journey to find meaning and fulfillment in their lives. But many contemporary youth are spiritually adrift, feeling that life is without purpose and value (Ponds, 1997). Spirituality is facilitated through supporting the religious traditions a young person might bring and by encouraging exploration through participation in service and religious activities. Groups take regular excursions into the community for service projects, such as improving the ecology or entertaining children in a homeless shelter.

The Starr campuses and wilderness areas reflect the belief that “beauty is a silent teacher.” There is restorative power in living and working while surrounded by the healing beauty of nature, away from the distractions of the materialistic and consumptive lifestyle that can get in the way of positive development. By reaching out to others and living in harmony amidst the grandeur of Creation, life is brought into what psychiatrist Karl Menninger (1962) called “the vital balance.”

Without positive adult-student bonds, challenge programs deteriorate into coercion. Staff use natural opportunities to build positive bonds with youth. All meal times are opportunities for the group and staff to interact and bond through informal conversation and the sharing of food. Youth and adults join together in meal planning and cleanup, promoting responsibility and a sense of community.

While many wilderness model programs seek to separate youth from family influence, Starr embraces family involvement as a key component to effective healing. Children will have their families for a lifetime, so positive changes need to continue beyond the program stay. While family counseling is available, parents are seen as partners with staff rather than patients to be fixed. An important component of adventure-based learning and personal growth is the “Family Challenge.” These activity-based enrichment experiences focus on identifying and building upon family strengths and problem-solving skills.

**The Process of Growth and Change**

The entire milieu of the Montcalm Adventure Challenge Program creates a powerful educational and therapeutic experience. Trained outdoor challenge therapists, educators, and youth care staff guide students through a process of growth and change which proceeds in this manner:

1. **Getting a Fresh Start.** As youth enter the program, they leave behind the familiar and confront the challenges of coping with a new environment as they learn the basic skills to live simply in nature among a close community of peers and staff. Students begin to clear their minds of
previous distractions and patterns of thinking and behavior. As youth begin to build trust with their group, members share their personal life story. They also begin journaling and self reflection. They have an opportunity to send an impact letter to their family, and an initial family counseling session is held, perhaps by a conference call. With the support of staff, peers, and their family, youth reflect on their problems and goals and begin to develop an individual growth plan.

2. Exploring New Possibilities. Youth now can focus on the act of creating new goals, thinking, and behavior which defines their experience in the Outdoor Challenge Program. They develop growing competence to cope effectively within the primitive natural world and in their network of interpersonal relationships. They acquire new skills in coping with social, academic, and physical challenge. They strengthen innate abilities for communication, cooperation, and problem solving. Now more aware of the emotions of self and others, they become effective helpers of peers, demonstrating empathy, and genuine concern.

3. Creating Transformational Change. During the final stage, young people demonstrate growing responsibility and begin to make true value changes. As they reach beyond themselves to help create and inspire change in others, they have opportunities to continue developing and internalizing their own personal growth skills. They are involved in ongoing family counseling and show leadership with their peers by co-facilitating the community council fires. They begin to spend time reflecting and planning for the next phase of their journey. They develop a plan with specific goals for their future life pathways.

Important Questions

Many adventure and wilderness programs are well-marketed but fail to have the trained staff and program resources to offer the quality of services required by challenging youth. Some settings shield themselves from difficult students by only admitting youngsters who are not likely to present serious problems that overtax the limited competence of staff. It is questionable whether it is helpful to remove these young people who are going through normal adolescent development from their family and community. Other programs are so hungry for revenue from head count that they admit almost anyone, including young persons who have treatment or educational needs far beyond the limited custodial capacity of staff.

Credible programs serving youth are being challenged to adhere to what is called Evidence Based Practice. The standards for Evidence Based Practice established by the American Psychological Association call for interventions based on a) solid science, b) practice expertise, and c) a fit with the individual characteristics, culture, and needs of the youth (APA, 2006).

Since some programs have more high quality marketing skills than program capacity, it falls to the family or professional consultant who is considering referring a youth for admission in a particular program to ask serious questions about the nature of the program. Here are a dozen important questions:

- Is the program nationally accredited and licensed by the state?
- Is the program strength based rather than punishment oriented?
- Is the youth culture positive or marred by peer intimidation and bullying?
- Is there a clean record without neglect or abuse charges from authorities?
- Is there an attempt to maintain contact and communication between youth and their families?
- Are parents actively involved in their child’s treatment experience?
- Are teachers well-qualified and part of the therapeutic treatment teams?
- Are there quality resources for students who need special education?
- Does the program have reentry staff and intensive extended aftercare?
- Are there outcome evaluations and what is the success rate of students?
- Does the program specify the evidence base of its treatment model?
- Does the program support cultural and spiritual growth of its students?

True to Values

By their very nature, adventure programs that are poorly managed can cause challenge to mutate into
physical and psychological risk and danger. The very process of putting together groups of young people with emotional and behavioral problems can spawn a culture of peer conflict and adversarial contests with adults in authority. The core of quality control is a parallel program of staff, youth, and family development which binds together all stakeholders in a community of shared values. The accompanying table highlights the core values of the programs of Starr Commonwealth. (See Table 1)

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Catie Fraelich, MSW, is Senior Therapist in the Montcalm Outdoor Challenge Program.

Joe Bertoletti, MSW, is Challenge Coordinator for the Montcalm program. Both hold graduate degrees in social work from the University of Michigan.

REFERENCES


Brendtro, L., Mitchell, M., & McCall, H. J. (in press). Respectful alliances with youth. For information, contact the authors at Starr Commonwealth, 13725 Starr Commonwealth Road, Albion, Michigan 49224.


Table 1

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<th>Starr Commonwealth Core Values</th>
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<td><strong>We believe</strong> everyone has the responsibility to help, and no one has the right to hurt, physically or verbally.</td>
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<td><strong>We believe</strong> people can change and problems are solvable opportunities that facilitate growth and development.</td>
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<td><strong>We believe</strong> in recognizing and developing the strengths of all children and families.</td>
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<td><strong>We believe</strong> in the oneness of humankind and embrace all people as social equals, valuing their diversity.</td>
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<td><strong>We believe</strong> all children deserve positive relationships.</td>
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<td><strong>We believe</strong> in the principles of servant leadership and are obligated to help one another reach full potential.</td>
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<td><strong>We believe</strong> all people can be contributing community members with a commitment to social interest and volunteerism.</td>
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<td><strong>We believe</strong> all people are spiritual beings, and in order to reach their full potential, children and families must be given opportunities for spiritual growth.</td>
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