

Lifestyle

For parents and kids

By Amy Berkowitz

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Title: "Help at Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids"

Author: Maia Szalavitz

Local connection: Szalavitz was born in Manhattan and moved to Greenwood Lake when she was 6.

Her family moved to Monroe when she was 16 and she graduated from Monroe-Woodbury High School.

She is single with no children and lives in New York City.

Illustrator: cover art by publisher

Publisher: Riverhead Books, part of Penguin Group

Books in print: "Recovery Options: The Complete Guide," co-authored with Joseph Volpicelli

The book highlights how to choose treatment for drug problems.

Genre: Investigation

Illustrations: None

Availability: List price ranges from \$16-\$25.95 for hardcover.

The paperback version is out in January. Available at major bookstores and online at Amazon.com.

How long did it take? It took three years to research and write the book.

She logged hundreds of interviews and attended the Lulu Corter court case.

This book was published in February.

Summary: How does a parent deal with a child who has behavior, alcohol or drug problems?

Boot camp-style programs have tried to deal with these issues through participant isolation, hard labor, restraints, name-calling, humiliation, sleep and food deprivation and hiking into the wilderness or desert.

These programs often hire kids off the street to be counselors working for minimum wage.

Some workers, she discovered, had criminal records or little training, education and experience with troubled children.

She says it was rare if there was even a psychologist on the grounds.

Among the programs she tackles are Synanon, Tough Love, The Seed, Straight Incorporated, the Challenger Camp, Elan School, KIDS and World Wide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP).

Public officials including Nancy Reagan promoted these programs in the 1980s as the solution to drug abuse.

Talk shows used them to teach ungrateful rich kids how to behave, and other media outlets publicized boot camps as a miraculous cure.

Some children were sent because they admitted to being gay. Parents thought the camps could "straighten their children out" and make them heterosexual.

Szalavitz examines these programs through the eyes of the children who endured them.

She also speaks to parents of children who died horrific deaths in these programs. There were about 30 kids who died, many of them because counselors had little training to deal with desert conditions and lack of water.

Szalavitz investigates the lack of education provided to these kids during camp.

She also looks at the way panic-stricken parents are manipulated into sending their children.

There is also little regulation of these programs by the federal government. Many are outside the U.S.; some have been shut down, while others continue to thrive. There is still a WWASP camp called Academy at Ivy Ridge Boarding School in Ogdensburg.

Last year, there was a TV reality show called "Brat Camp," which followed kids at Sage Walk, a wilderness WWASP camp in Oregon.

Author background: Maia Szalavitz knows what a kid goes through to kick drug addiction. She was a drug addict in college, pursuing a psychology degree at Columbia University; she used cocaine. After she was suspended, she started shooting heroin.

Her mother didn't know what to do. So Maia entered a 12-step program and graduated from Brooklyn College. She has been drug-free for 18 years and says, "I may not have survived psychologically in these camps."

She became interested in the boot camps when she read a glowing New York Times Magazine article in 1986 about Lulu Corter's experience in KIDS in Hackensack, N.J. Outraged by the article, she wrote a letter to The Times, which was published. At the time, Szalavitz was still struggling with her heroin addiction.

Professional experience: Szalavitz worked as a producer for "The Charlie Rose Show" and as a producer and researcher for Bill Moyers.

She has written for The New York Times, The Washington Post, Newsweek, New York, O: The Oprah Winfrey Magazine, Salon, New Scientist and Reason. She has appeared on "The Montel Williams Show" and "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

She is a senior fellow at stats.org and has won awards from the Drug Policy Alliance for achievement in journalism and American Psychological Association for outstanding contributions to advancing the understanding of addictions.

The theme of the story: From the book: "The evidence shows repeatedly that honey works better than vinegar, that love works better than fear.

"Making love contingent on perfection only adds to the problem. If we err on any side of the balance, it should be toward love, not toughness."

Is there any reason a child should be sent to these camps? No. Only if there is severe mental illness or violence or they are injecting drugs. Even then, they should be sent to a compassionate residential treatment (facility).

Special features in the book: An appendix containing questions and answers for parents and reference notes for Szalavitz's research.

Dedication: To her father, the late Miklos Szalavitz, a Holocaust survivor and chemist.

"He inspired in me a rigorous need to find evidence of how things work. Of course, these camps are not the Holocaust, but you don't want to be encouraging people to be sadistic toward one another. We don't want to raise kids to think that hurting people is helping them."

Upcoming book: "The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog, and Other Stories From a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook."

She is co-authoring the book with Bruce D. Perry, a child-trauma expert.

If you became a famous author, what would you hope to accomplish with the notoriety?

"I want any kind of treatment for children to be done with compassion, dignity and respect, and residential treatment should be limited only to those who need it," she says.

She said she gets e-mails about these programs all the time from parents. And her work has prevented about six children from going. Even though that is a small number, she is happy with it.

To be reviewed in "Wordsmiths We Know," you must be a local author/illustrator or have a local connection to the area.

Send your book to Amy Berkowitz, Times Herald-Record, 1170 Route 17M, Box 4, Chester 10918.