

Home-based therapy best for troubled teens, experts say

By Kirk Brown

Friday, December 17, 2010

Tough-love boarding schools have become a popular option for parents seeking to straighten out their unruly children.

But critics say that these schools are not always the best or safest option.

"There is absolutely no evidence that tough love works," said Maia Szalavitz, a journalist who scrutinized the troubled-teen industry in her 2006 book "Help at Any Cost."

Data gathered by the United States Government Accountability Office in 2005 revealed 1,503 incidents in which students were mistreated by staff members at boarding schools and wilderness programs.

In 2006, 28 states reported at least one death in residential facilities for troubled teens, according to GAO official Kay Brown's testimony at a 2008 congressional hearing. Less than a year after this hearing, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a measure intended to better protect teens at residential programs. However, the legislation never came up for a vote in the Senate.

Szalavitz said parents should consider home-based treatment options before sending their children away to a boarding school.

"The best treatments for teenagers involve the family," she said. "The idea that you can fix a relationship by exiling someone doesn't pass the common-sense test."

One highly regarded alternative to boarding schools is called multi-systemic family therapy. This approach, which was developed by faculty members at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, focuses on reshaping virtually every aspect a juvenile offender's life. This includes the youth's relationship with parents, school officials and peers.

"We work with all of these risk factors in the kids' everyday natural environment," said Sonja Schoenwald, a psychiatry professor at MUSC.

Clinicians, who are on call 24 hours a day, work with juveniles and their parents in the home for a period of several months.

A number of studies have shown youths who take part in this intensive form of therapy are less likely to be arrested and more likely to stay in school. At an average daily cost of \$59, the therapy also is less expensive than most boarding schools.

Multi-systemic therapy programs have been created in 31 different states and 12 nations. In South Carolina, the state Department of Mental Health has placed multi-systemic therapy teams in five different counties. The newest team has worked with about 50 families since it was formed in Greenville County in 2008.

"We are getting better outcomes" said Gregory Wright, the multi-systemic therapy supervisor for Greenville County.



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