

THE DECISION MAKING JOURNEY OF PARENTS TO ENROLL THEIR TEEN IN AN  
ADVENTURE THERAPY PROGRAM

By

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### Abstract

Many parents choose to send their children to adventure therapy programs for the potential benefits these programs provide. Research has shown that the potential benefits of adventure therapy programs include changes related to enhanced self-concept, improved social skills, and decreased substance abuse (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012), however little research has been done on whether parents choose AT programs for these same reasons. Using a theoretical framework of mindful inquiry this study analyzes ten interviews, of parents who had teenagers enrolled in an adventure therapy program, to understand parental expectations and perceptions of the program, and to comprehend why parents chose this kind of program for their children. Thematic analysis was utilized for the data incorporating the six stage model of Braun and Clark (2006), including: 1. Familiarizing yourself with your data 2. Generating initial codes 3. Searching for themes 4. Reviewing themes 5. Defining and naming themes 6. Producing the report. The parents interviewed chose adventure therapy for various reasons including difficulty in the home situation, lack of available support within the community, the positive challenge of a new environment, separation from their teen, the opportunity for personal growth, and the hope of a different future. Implications for strengthening family relationships, the impacts on society, and the development of adventure therapy programming are discussed in relation to the findings. Parent interviews took place at a residential therapeutic wilderness camp for youth located on Vancouver Island, Canada.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Many parents that choose to send their children to adventure therapy (AT) programs do so for the potential benefits these programs provide. Primary research and meta-analyses have shown that the potential benefits of AT programs include changes related to social competence, such as enhanced self-concept, improved social skills, and decreased substance abuse (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012). Most AT programs focus on the maladaptive behaviours of the adolescent population in relation to self and others. It is possible that AT programs are researched and chosen as alternative treatment modalities when traditional or conventional practices prove unsuccessful in meeting the adolescent and/or family needs. The process by which parents choose this therapeutic format has often been left out of the research on AT programs and participants. This could be due to the focus of program developers and operators on the adolescent as the participant and the family as playing only a small part in the process. Because of this lack of involvement by families in the AT process, they may perceive themselves as separate from the therapeutic process presented to the adolescent. Harper and Russell (2008) say it may be critical for the family to perceive themselves as participants, as well, in order for meaningful change to occur at the family systems level. Research on family interrelatedness reports that parental nurturing and monitoring felt by youth relates to better health, higher-self-worth and lower levels of anxiety (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2006). Involving the family in the research process in order to gain perspective of their involvement could have benefits for youth and their families in the future.

### **Definition of Adventure Therapy**

Due to an ongoing, lengthy and challenging attempt to find a definition that encompasses all of what AT is, this paper will use the most recent definition written in the literature. Gass, Gillis and Russel (2012) define AT as “the prescriptive use of adventure experiences provided by mental health professionals, often conducted in natural settings that kinesthetically engage clients on cognitive, affective, and behavioural levels” (p. 1). This definition adequately describes the AT program studied within this research and thus will be the meaning behind the term “adventure therapy (AT)” as it is mentioned in this paper.

### **Current State of Youth and Family**

The family continues to be the primary social environment of a child and where the adventures of life begin. The family environment looks increasingly varied within Canada as laws and policy around divorce, common-law partnerships, single parenthood, adoption, and foster-parenting evolve. In addition, changing societal norms and values adapt the family environment to fit within a more liberal framework. Regardless of family structure, individual family members could have behavioural and emotional issues related to mental health, substance abuse, or relationship matters. In Canada it is estimated that 10-20% of youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder, such as depression, yet only 1 in 5 children who need mental health services actually receives them (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2012). Substance abuse continues to be a problem among Canadians including the adolescent population. The Canadian Center on Substance Abuse (2011) reports that, between the ages of twelve and eighteen, 46% to 62% youth are past-year drinkers and 17% to 32% are past-year cannabis users. It is suggested that substance use increases as youth get

older (Young, et al., 2011). Statistics relating to family relationship issues are hard to measure but it could be suggested that no family relationship structure is picture perfect. Regardless of the problems which may result in behavioural or emotional issues within a family, each family will likely respond in the way that they feel will potentially help an individual family member, or the family as a whole, resolve the issues. A portion of families will choose AT programs to help alleviate behavioural or emotional problems that arise among family members.

### **The CanAdventure Education Program**

This study is based around parents or caregivers who have chosen the AT program delivered by CanAdventure Education, located on Vancouver Island, and thus a review of this program is discussed here. CanAdventure Education is an Adventure Therapy organization accredited with the Association for Experiential Education and has been in operation since the late nineties. Their website describes the creation of the organization:

CanAdventure Education was born out of a desire to increase access to therapeutic wilderness programs for troubled teens in Canada. Our camps are based on the most effective elements of our past program development experience, and we are pleased to make them available to all troubled teens in Canada and abroad. (CanAdventure Education, n.d.)

Teens stay at the camp for thirty two days and participate in personal growth activities, experience day and overnight wilderness trips, learn environmental stewardship, and are encouraged to connect with nature. The youth are asked to consent to participation in the program through signing a document of rights and responsibilities. The teens are typically



applied to the program by their parents and are screened for exclusionary behaviors and accepted based on appropriateness of personal issues matching program objectives. The website discusses youth and instructor participation as well as envisioned outcomes for the youth:

Our instructors guide individuals and the group as a whole through the experience, enabling each struggling teen to achieve heights that may not have been thought possible prior to arrival. Struggling Teen Journey participants, as a result, return home more confident, self-reliant, and focused.

(CanAdventure Education, n.d.)

Families are involved throughout the process beginning with a detailed application form outlining their child's issues, concerted contact with the executive director of the program in the decision making process, weekly phone calls with instructors during the program, letter writing with their teen, and a 3 day parent/family workshop at the end of the program. In this workshop they learn about the program as well as participate in therapeutic activities as a parent group and with their child, in natural settings.

### **Research Rational**

The overall purpose of this study is to qualitatively provide an understanding of how parents perceive the AT program that they have chosen for their child and what they expect from the experience, in an effort to understand why they made that particular therapeutic decision. In addition it will offer an indication of the reasons behind parental choice of AT as a therapeutic form and whether they would participate in this kind of program for their own therapeutic benefit or for the therapeutic benefit of their family as a whole. These kinds of

decisions have implications for family, society and adventure programming, thus these will also be discussed. Another purpose of the research project is to add to the current research on AT and further the knowledge of the field. There exists a gap in current AT research on adult populations in general and on perceptions of AT and why parents decide to send their children to this form of therapeutic experience. AT programs continue to strive for legitimacy and professional standing within the wider disciplines of psychology and mental health, and seek to be seen as an evidence-based practice (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012). Although outcomes are important to document, it is also interesting to compare the myriad of outcome findings with possible parental expectations of these programs. It is also the adults who have AT on their 'radar', due to searching for programs, and who may choose this therapeutic format for themselves. This knowledge could help in development of a theoretical framework by which future AT programs could provide experiences for adults as well as youth. In addition, an understanding of parental expectations compared to possible outcomes could have implications for family relationships and society. This research could also be useful for programs to enhance fidelity through the ability to focus on developing a program, and then offering, what it is that families feel is important. Tucker and Rheingold (2010) say fidelity is the consistency and quality of interventions and programs that are happening based on their outlined models. An enlarged understanding of fidelity in AT will help all AT practitioners be able to come up with best practices for the field (Tucker & Rheingold, 2010). Harper (2010) believes that the voices and specific needs of the people being served in AT programs need to be taken into consideration and heard, yet interviews are considered the least valued form of evidence in the evidence-based practice hierarchy. My research will endeavour to let the voices of the people investing in AT be heard.

Hopefully this will be a good investment for the construction of new knowledge around perceptions and expectations of adventure therapy as opposed to attempting to prove existing ideas with measurable evidence. It is just as important for emergent new outcomes to be discovered because, as Gillis and Gass (1993) have outlined, the goals of therapeutic intervention, and thus programs structures, need to be based on clients' needs.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Adolescence**

It is assumed that the adolescents of today face increased risks and demands, resulting from crises and turmoil, as compared to adolescents of the past (Hill, 2007). It is approximated that among today's youth, 5% of males and 12% of females, age twelve to nineteen, have experienced a major depressive episode, and in Canada, the total number of youth at risk for developing depression is reported to be 3.2 million (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2012). These numbers are staggering and indicate that treatment for youth is necessary, yet lacking. It is well known that adolescents are in a period of transition where physical, emotional, and cognitive changes impact growth and create challenges (Hill, 2007). Erik Erikson place adolescents in a stage of development characterized by identity versus identity confusion, and Jean Piaget believed the adolescent stage was characterized by formal operational thought (Santrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Ho Leung, & Malcomson, 2008). According to Piaget, this stage of thinking is portrayed by logic, abstract ideas, subjectivity, idealism and egocentrism (Santrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Ho Leung, & Malcomson, 2008). The frontal lobe of an adolescents' brain is not fully developed, and because this is considered the primary decision making area, it is suggested that children at this stage cannot be expected to have the same levels of understanding or decision making skills that an adult possess (Santrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Ho Leung, & Malcomson, 2008). Yet adolescence often has increased decision making and experimentation with different identities and roles (Hill, 2007). Brendtro and Strother (2007) say that youth have inherently more adventurous brains than adults, and thus are more vulnerable to being swept by turbulent emotions into high risk activities. Studies have found that dopamine levels play a role in the thrill seeking

behaviours of adolescents and may be a cause in increased drug and alcohol use (Laucht, Becker, & Schmidt, 2006) (Spear, 2000). Dopamine is a neurotransmitter involved in the pleasure-reward circuits of the brain and “kicks in” when we do something that makes us feel good, such as a thrilling activity (Santrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Ho Leung, & Malcomson, 2008). Some teenagers may have more of a built-in urge to experience life on the edge than others based on their dopamine levels (Santrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Ho Leung, & Malcomson, 2008). Another theory is that stressful situations, such as identity confusion in adolescence, decreases dopamine, thus causing the body to crave it and teenagers to seek it out via risky activities (Santrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Ho Leung, & Malcomson, 2008). “At-risk” youth are particularly susceptible to high-risk behaviours like substance use, behavioural problems, and delinquency which can exacerbate difficult situations and cause increased challenges such as pregnancy, emotional problems or academic difficulties (Hill, 2007). It is thought that developing a positive self-concept in adolescence may be a precursor to the alleviation of behavioural problems (Larson, 2007). Adolescents are identified, by mental health counselors, as being a difficult demographic to work with due to the challenge of engaging them in the counseling experience (Hill, 2007). According to Arnett (2010) prevention programs for “at-risk” youth could include individual or group therapy, vocational training, outdoor programs, school based programs and programs that scare youth by showing the horrible consequences. Adventure Therapy programs have proven to be useful in the prevention of delinquent behaviours among “at-risk” children and adolescents (Glass & Myers, 2001). Prevention is important when it comes to the effects of adolescent delinquent behaviour and may be a reason for parents to choose to send their youth to an AT program.

### **History of Adventure Therapy**

There is approximately a 100 year history, in modern Western psychology, for dealing with psychological problems using therapeutic interventions (Neill, 2003). The very first adventure programs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were organized around summer camps for children and youth (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). According to Gass, Gillis, and Russell (2012), the first use of outdoor adventure for therapeutic purposes, related to adolescent behaviour, occurred in 1881 at a camp in New Hampshire. It is widely accepted, however, that AT has its major roots in the Outward Bound process developed by Kurt Hahn in the 1940's, which spread to the United States in the 1960's (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012; Houston, Knabb, Welsh, Houskamp, & Brokaw, 2010; Hill, 2007; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Russell K. C., 2001; Glass & Myers, 2001; Gillis & Gass, 1993). Increased demands for rehabilitation programs for at-risk youth in the 1950's and 60's resulted in more outdoor programs as alternative treatment modalities (Hill, 2007). Another program, influential to the growth of AT, which was based on the Outward Bound model, was Project Adventure, developed in 1970's (Houston, Knabb, Welsh, Houskamp, & Brokaw, 2010; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Gillis & Gass, 1993). Many other programs sprang up in the 1980's and 90's, mostly in the United States, and research also began during this time, as programs had been operating long enough to begin to show outcomes. Many programs moved away from the Outward Bound model throughout their evolution and now the scope of theory and practice varies widely among AT programming. Understandably, a single intervention strategy will not benefit all youth with their wide variety of presenting issues (Houston, Knabb, Welsh, Houskamp, & Brokaw, 2010). Because of this variety, the fight for a definition also began based on key components, wilderness dependency, theoretical

foundations, and licensed staff (Russell K. C., 2001). There is an ongoing struggle among AT organizations to agree on a definition due to the variety of programs and their non-standardized nature. The wide array of AT programs available to parents presents a challenging decision making process as they sift through the various components of a program to see which one may serve their youth and family in the best way.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

The conceptual frameworks and practical applications of AT are well established (Hill, 2007). Many AT programs involve assessment, treatment planning, and service delivery by trained mental health practitioners (Hill, 2007; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Often the programs will integrate behavioural, cognitive, and affective components to promote positive change (Glass & Myers, 2001). There is also often a focus on solutions and successful behaviour, where the role of the therapist becomes important as assessment is on-going and strategies may change according to specific target behaviours of participants (Houston, Knabb, Welsh, Houskamp, & Brokaw, 2010; Gillis & Gass, 1993). Programs also may be established based on a specific theory of how substance abuse starts in adolescents, thus directing the ‘help’ a certain way. Different theories may not address the foundation of substance use or abuse in all teens in the same way. Stevens & Smith (2005) outline seven theories as to how substance abuse may initiate, so it follows that a program based on a moral theory, which says substance use starts from moral degradation and needs willpower to overcome it, would be very different from a program based on sociocultural theory, which examines cultural, social and environmental factors to explain substance use. Based on the literature, there are roughly twelve domains that could be involved in an AT program and its corresponding theoretical framework. The domains are described as physical challenge,

stress, or action oriented experiences often called “challenge by choice” (Hill, 2007; Glass & Myers, 2001; Gillis & Gass, 1993), natural consequences (Russell K. C., 2001), rites of passage (Russell K. C., 2001), group orientation (Hill, 2007), the use of metaphor (Hill, 2007; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Glass & Myers, 2001; Russell K. C., 2001), the use of an unfamiliar environment such as nature (Houston, Knabb, Welsh, Houskamp, & Brokaw, 2010; Gillis & Gass, 1993), the use of real and perceived risk (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002), transfer of learning (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002), goal setting, trust building, problem solving, and fun (Hill, 2007). Most AT frameworks are founded in the experiential learning process, emphasizing the gaining of life skills through challenge activities and the transfer of those skills to usual life situations (Houston, Knabb, Welsh, Houskamp, & Brokaw, 2010). Other conceptual frameworks seek to enhance communication, cooperation and social skills in an environment that is balanced with a climate of empathy (Brendtro & Strother, 2007). Gass, Gillis and Russell (2012) identify skill development, strengthening a sense of self, insight, motivation and metaphor as five key areas that exemplify how AT is used to develop competence and motivation within individuals. Regardless of the program framework, it is important for the family system as a whole to adapt and flow with the process so that the adolescents’ problem behaviour is no longer supported in the family environment (Burg, 2001). In addition, it is important that the family identify and work to transform the areas, within the family system, that may be contributing to the overall behavioural and emotional issues displayed by one or more family members. The framework utilized by CanAdventure Education incorporates the family system theory in assessing issues, forming treatment, and executing program components to arrive at strategies and solutions for the family as a whole.



## **The Benefits of Adventure Therapy**

### **Youth Benefits**

The many people involved in AT have collectively agreed on certain benefits for the youth participating in AT programs. The agreed upon positive outcomes could be grouped into thirteen main categories which are, environmental awareness (Brendtro & Strother, 2007), increased success identity (Hill, 2007; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002), higher self-concept (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012; Wolf & Mehl, 2011; Houston, Knabb, Welsh, Houskamp, & Brokaw, 2010; Hill, 2007; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Glass & Myers, 2001; Russell K. C., 2001; Gillis & Gass, 1993), more internal locus of control/responsibility (Wolf & Mehl, 2011; Hill, 2007), higher self-confidence (Hill, 2007; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Glass & Myers, 2001), increased resilience (Beightol, Jeverson, Gray, Carter, & Gass, 2009; Ewert & Yoshino, 2008; Neill & Dias, 2001) higher functioning interpersonal skills, increased trust, better ability in group belonging (Hill, 2007), better team building/group cohesion skills (Wolf & Mehl, 2011; Hill, 2007), decreased recidivism (Houston, Knabb, Welsh, Houskamp, & Brokaw, 2010; Hill, 2007), increased well-being/physical benefits (Wolf & Mehl, 2011; Jelalian, Mehlenbeck, Lloyd-Richardson, Birmaher, & Wing, 2006; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Glass & Myers, 2001; Russell K. C., 2001), and spiritual benefits such as peace and personal contemplation (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). One of the main reasons that benefits are seen from AT programs could be because of the enhanced tendency for adolescents to spontaneously self-disclose through being in an environment outside a counseling office (Hill, 2007). Contact with nature also gives biological, physiological, mental, social and economic benefits (Pryor, Carpenter, & Townsend, 2005). Nature's role in the benefits of AT are not well researched or understood, and the process by which nature

influences positive transformation is an area ripe for research. In essence, by spending time with nature and its processes, people are reconnecting with themselves and other “relations”. Allowing nature to be a reflection of ones’ self can prove very insightful and often the use of metaphor can enhance the experience, providing beneficial life lessons that are transferable to the every-day environment.

### **Family Benefits**

As it has shown to be a powerful intervention tool for individuals and groups, it is logical that AT would be an effective strategy for families (Burg, 2001). Gillis (as cited in Burg, 2001), believes AT and family therapy could integrate well because they both deal with trust, communication, risk taking, managing fear and anxiety, problem solving, intimacy, and autonomy versus interdependence. Wolf and Mehl (2011) say that beneficial therapeutic effects have been reported for personal and family functioning through the application of AT. Fletcher and Hinkle (2002) believe that risk taken in the safe and supportive environment of the family allows family members to share mutual vulnerability and to increase intimacy in their relationships. Indeed many organizations involve the family in their programs to varying degrees, where one family member is in treatment and the other family members are included on a more limited basis (Burg, 2001). Parents can be included in the full program if it is a family treatment model, or one aspect of the treatment program, like the planning process, debriefing process or middle process such as a challenge letter. Family involvement is considered an integral part of AT programs offering a residential stay for youth. Having the family involved will get all members actively engaged in the treatment process, and expose families to the philosophy, practice and care that their child is receiving (Harper, 2009). Research has shown positive statistical trends in favor of AT for families,

but it is important to continue to explore how AT fits with the family system (Burg, 2001). One study found that adolescent self-reports using the Youth-Outcome Questionnaire (Y-OQ) indicated no significant improvement from wilderness treatment and yet parents indicated there had been significant improvement (Russell K. , 2004). Burg (2001) says programs are tailored to fit the needs of specific families, so it is important to know what those needs are in order to develop the program and have consistency of results. Parents have reported high levels of confidence and trust in a program's ability to address child and family concerns (Harper, 2009), but finding out parental expectations of a program could be a crucial factor to add to the process and fidelity of programs. The Harper (2009) study on family involvement within AT programs was designed to examine the parent decision making process of placing their child in an AT program, gain perceptions of their own involvement in the process, and assess parent perspectives on the ethical and clinical treatment their child received (Harper, 2009). The current study will fill a gap through examining parental expected outcomes of an AT program and what their understanding of AT is as a whole. In addition it will look at whether parents feel that AT programs are designed for limited participation by adult caregivers, or whether they perceive them to also be designed for families to participate entirely, or for adults singularly. The current research will seek to add to Harpers findings as well as potentially confirm the findings related to parental perception that crises was abated due to the removal of their child's behaviour from the household and relieving stress in the home. In addition, it could confirm Harpers findings that parents regained a sense of control in their home and were able to reflect on the circumstances which brought their family to the point of separating a member out of the family dynamic. The implied family member emotions Harper identifies from his interviews

were guilt and shame for not being able to take care of their family, but hopeful for new growth to happen once the youth returned home and had the appropriate support. Again the current research has the ability to confirm these parental views. This study hopes to help in the development of family oriented programs as a whole.

### **Societal Benefits**

The central focus of AT programs is to transfer the behavioural and emotional learning participants experienced, into future behaviour within usual environments (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012; Gillis & Gass, 1993). Future behaviour is most likely going to take place within the family, peer, or community environment in which an adolescent situates themselves. Pryor, Carpenter, and Townsend (2005) believe “when small groups of people adventure together in natural environments, the health and wellbeing of humans, communities, and the natural environment are enhanced” (p. 11). Increased health and wellbeing of humans within communities could have far reaching impact. Mental disorders in youth are ranked as the second highest hospital care expenditure in Canada, surpassed only by injuries (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2012). In this way, positive mental health strategies incorporating nature could benefit the community economically. Canada’s youth suicide rate is ranked as the third highest in the industrialized world (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2012). Through adventure and connection with nature, the lives of Canada’s youth may be saved and more productive members of society may be recognized. The family structure is constantly evolving within Canadian society, and it is more important than ever to maintain the positive values retrieved from familial bonds that provide the stability and nurturance crucial to the younger generations.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

Qualitative research can take many forms. Attride-Stirling (as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006) offer that qualitative research should make the what, why, and how, of data analysis, transparent in the final research report. In addition Braun and Clarke (2006) iterate the importance of a theoretical framework and method which connects with what the researcher wants to know, and that these are recognized within the report as well as explained. In this chapter I will outline my research questions, explain my worldviews and philosophical positions which influenced this research process, discuss the theoretical interpretive framework by which the research was conducted, and review the methods used in data collection and analysis. In addition I will introduce the study participants and talk about participant selection, consent and characteristics.

### Research Questions

The intentions of this study are to understand the perceptions and expectations of parents who chose to send their youth to an adventure therapy (AT) program in an effort to appreciate their journey through this process and comprehend why they made the decision regarding AT and how this can affect society. Thus my research questions are as follows:

- Why do parents choose Adventure Therapy for their teenagers?
- Would parents choose Adventure Therapy for themselves or their family altogether?
- What are the implications of Adventure Therapy programs on societal institutions?

## **Worldview**

To better understand the basis for my social research, and the perspectives by which it was approached, I will outline my worldview in terms of human nature and non-human nature as well as four relevant philosophical positions: epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology/context.

### **View of the Natural World**

**Human nature.** How I perceive human nature and the activity of human beings will lead me to assume certain ideas in regards to the meaning and interpretation of data, and it also influences the organization of analysis. Related to this point, Baranov (2004) warns:

...the researcher must remain alert for two dangers... fundamentalism and relativism. In the case of fundamentalism, the danger is that a researcher will simply construct a vision of human nature and all conclusions will mechanically follow from this. These conclusions cannot be challenged because they follow from the fundamental premises of what the researcher asserts a human being to be. In the case of relativism, the danger is that a researcher will be forced to acknowledge that his or her conclusions merely follow from an arbitrary set of assumptions regarding human nature and will, therefore, be unable to defend those conclusions beyond this point when confronted by researchers with opposing sets of assumptions regarding human nature. (pp. 153)

My definition of human nature keeps this warning in mind and I seek to present my honest outlook of how I characterize the activity of people. The nature of human beings includes self-evaluation and interpretation of self to figure out a reason for living. Comparing oneself

to other people, other cultures, and the universe can aid in this process and provide clarity of purpose. People also search for meaning and purpose in life through finding activities which have meaning for them and doing work that they consider useful to themselves, others, or the greater universal good. Another aspect of human nature is the desire for happiness and personal fulfillment. This search is often subjective, but universally includes connection of the heart to people, places, or things; tangible entities which provide desirable emotions. In totality, much of human nature is about the self; choosing actions for self, finding meaning for self, gaining things for self, and making self fulfilled or happy.

**Non-human nature.** My worldview, as described in relation to this study, needs to include how I see non-human nature, both in its tangible and intangible sense, because it is just as important to my research as human nature. I believe that humans are a part of nature in the same way as other living things because they are created from the same kinds of molecules as rocks, trees, oceans, dirt, and animals, for example. Hence, I distinguish “nature” as human and non-human when referring to the physical entities of humans and other living things. I will refer to non-human nature simply as “nature” for the duration of this report.

I believe nature has in it an inherent spirituality. There is an aspect of nature which connects to the human spirit and is difficult to describe. This connection could partly be due to the sameness people and nature share in their molecular structures, but I believe it is deeper than the physical. Plotkin (2008) describes the spirit connection to nature like this:

Spirit both transcends all things and is immanent in all things. Spirit can be thought of as something “out there,” something removed from ordinary life, but it is

simultaneously that which infuses and animates all and everything – the land, the air, the animals, all peoples, our human creations, and our own bodies and selves.

Spirit is independent of any beliefs or knowledge you have about yourself, no matter how shallow or deep, ridiculous or sublime. Rather than calling you to your individual life path, spirit invites you to return to the universal essence of your psyche through a surrender to the present moment. (pp. 41-42)

The “nature” of nature can also reflect back to us about our own selves; we can understand patience when we see the slug moving across a trail to reach its destination, we can understand deep roots when we see a five hundred year old tree that has weathered storm after storm and still stands strong and tall, we can understand love when we see a mama bear with her cubs fishing for salmon, we can understand gratitude when we forage for the plants that will give us the nutrition we need, and we can understand potential when we are encouraged to conquer the mountains within our soul as we reach the heights of tangible mountain tops in the wild. Nature works in cycles and the rhythm of nature’s beat can be seen in the lifespan of such amazing creatures as the mayfly which is born, mates, lays eggs, and dies in anywhere from one to twenty-four hours, or in the geology of mountains which show the incomprehensible length of life and change over thousands of years. Over generations of the human population, nature remains and continues to cycle. This steadiness, continuity, trustworthiness, and unchangeableness of nature offers us a foundation and peace as it reflects who we are and is also a witness to something larger than ourselves.



## **Philosophical Positions**

**Epistemology.** Research is often conducted to formulate new knowledge. My philosophical position of knowledge formulation aligns with the hermeneutic position. I believe knowledge is based largely on experiences and how one interprets or makes sense of those experiences. Thus, groups of people with similar experiences may understand things in a similar way because of these shared experiences or interpret things very differently based on different meanings of the experiences. Within the qualitative research realm knowledge is a co-creation of subjective understanding as the beliefs of the researcher, or interpreter, and the participant, or creator of the phenomenon under investigation, are fused (Baranov, 2004). Phenomenologically this would mean the researcher is trying to make sense of how the participant is trying to make sense of their world (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Together, researcher and participant are also using their historical, cultural and social beliefs as they make sense of the phenomena and interpret its meaning. Part of the phenomenon under question in this study includes an understanding of nature. Although different experiences in nature can provide different meaning and be interpreted differently, nature itself also provides knowledge that isn't created, it simply exists. As the researcher I also acknowledge that my own subjective understandings of the world, as the primary interpreter, are integral, and will influence interpretation of the final report to a greater degree. In addition, any knowledge formed through this analysis is not final. The nature of knowledge is that it can always be changed to form something new and one word is not the final word on the topic (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

**Ontology.** Questions of existence are fundamental to humanity. A common position is to believe entities and ideas exist because we have been taught and experienced certain

things, which means reality is what our mind creates based on external and internal stimuli. This means every person, as an individually unique human being, has their own reality or truth by which they live based on how they interpret their experiences. Our experiences, however, are also influenced by social, cultural, and historical ideologies which will continue to manipulate our reality. Although it is important to see each person's reality as equally valid, there is an ultimate reality which transcends our shifting ones. The force which has set nature in motion, keeping the seasons and cycles of life in order, is greater than what can be touched, seen, tasted, heard, smelled, or even imagined.

**Axiology.** Inherent in life and decision making are the values we hold. What we consider as “right” or “good”, “beautiful” or “harmonious”, will influence what we choose for ourselves or others. Some of my fundamental values are honesty, compassion, generosity, helping other people, and helping the natural world. I also value the family and relationships between people, as well as the relationship people have with nature. These values stem from subjective experience giving rise to a belief system. It is not my place as a researcher to impose my values on others; however these values will influence the research process possibly giving bias to my questions and how I interpret the meaning behind participant revelations. Heidegger, one of the voices behind hermeneutics, contends subjective biases are not to be ignored but constantly referenced for truth to emerge (Baranov, 2004). My own experiences working with families and AT programs occurred as I held certain values, and also added to my value and belief system. Who I am as a researcher will inevitably be a part of analysis and findings, and through this human factor I will do my best to “fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study” (Patton, 2002, p. 433).

**Methodology/Context.** Baranov (2004) discusses Heidegger's argument that hermeneutics is not an abstract method, but simply a description of human nature, where we naturally try to make sense of the world around us. In this light true understanding will only occur if someone is fully or subjectively engaged in the world being observed, indicating bias, than if someone is distanced from the world and observing with unbiased, objective analysis. Dupuis (1999) agrees, saying that someone who has more experience with a particular social phenomenon may be able to have a more credible, honest and emotionally authentic understanding and interpretation of that phenomenon than someone who has never experienced it. Based on these arguments, my personal experience of healing through nature, instructing AT, and working with the teenagers of the parents interviewed, will aid in authenticity of interpretation and understanding. My view of parental understandings, expectations and reasons for choosing AT are also influenced by how their teenager viewed their own AT experience and felt about their parents' choice to send them. Although the teen views do not appear in the final report, their sentiments were pondered during analysis.

A second aspect to my methodology involves seeing the parents as participants in the research process and not as "subjects". Each person in the study is viewed as an individual and treated as such. Because of this idiographic approach statements can be made regarding individuals and not only regarding groups (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Each person interviewed had a beautiful narrative to tell, and although analysis revolved around thematic findings, as will be discussed later, I also attempt to give voice to the personal aspect of the stories. No two people's experience choosing AT for their teenager is the same and I feel it is important for the unique aspects to be highlighted.

## **The Research Process**

### **Interpretive Framework: Mindful Inquiry**

The goal of this social research is to engage in mindful inquiry in an effort to share the experiences of participants as they describe them; search for meaning using insight, awareness, and rationalism; and provide personal and social understanding through interpretation of self, individual cases, and across cases. Mindful inquiry, as developed by Bentz and Shapiro (1998), is a framework based on multiple cultures of inquiry including: hermeneutics, phenomenology, critical social theory, and Buddhism. These individual cultures of inquiry have been used across disciplines, such as religion, sociology, psychology, education, history, communication and political science, as chosen modalities of working within specific fields, to understand reality (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). This interdisciplinary research study has taken place at the intersection of psychology, sociology, adventure, education and religion, and thus adopted a form of mindful inquiry.

It is the study of created social phenomenon as expressions of human subjectivity by which hermeneutics gets its purpose (Baranov, 2004). Baranov (2004) explains subjectivity as encompassing various forms of human expression such as emotion, ideas, and desires as well as including the meaning that people attribute to their words, thoughts or actions. Choosing to send their teenager to an AT program is a social phenomenon based on the subjective emotions, ideas and desires parents have. The action of choosing this program, and the various actions that led up to this choice, have meaning for parents. Hermeneutics deals primarily with interpreting this meaning using an understanding of human nature. Patton (2002) explains interpretation:

Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world. The rigors of interpretation and bringing data to bear on explanations include dealing with rival explanations, accounting for disconfirming cases, and accounting for data irregularities as part of testing the viability of an interpretation. All of this is expected-and appropriate-as long as the researcher owns the interpretation and makes clear the difference between description and interpretation. (pp. 480)

Both description and interpretation are included in my research.

Describing how participants make sense of their experiences, in essence trying to see their perspective of the world, is an aspect of phenomenology (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Bentz and Shapiro (1998) include tolerating and integrating multiple perspectives as a value within mindful inquiry also related to the phenomenological framework. Accurately describing participant perspectives and experiences with thick, rich description acts as the foundation for qualitative analysis (Patton, 2002). Within phenomenology this rich description is then integrated with meaning and interpretation of the lived experience (Smith & Eatough, 2007). A phenomenological framework is often used when a particular question is raised at a critical juncture of a person's life (Smith & Eatough, 2007). The parents participating in this study have come to an important point in their lives which has significance on personal and social identity thus giving the study a transformative milieu.

Critical social theory involves “the analysis of domination and oppression with a view to changing it” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Bentz and Shapiro (1998) offer the idea that, within qualitative research, it is important to keep in mind that historical, social, economic, political, and cultural structures have suffering built into them, and that accompanying inquiry should be the diminution of suffering while having “critical judgement about how much suffering is required by existing arrangements” (p. 6). This process involves the critique of existing values as well as societal practices or institutions which may be harmful (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). I wanted to include an aspect of critical social theory in the current analysis because society often sees adolescents as part of a social problem. Gaining the parent perspective on adolescent issues, societal roles, and possible issue resolutions can offer society an evaluation based on subjective experience and first hand knowledge. Mindful inquiry also advocates that research may contribute to social action (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Upon completing this study my own desire to continue working with adolescents and their families has increased and it is my hope that readers may also be enlightened or encouraged to take action in the lives of today’s youth.

Finally, mindful inquiry adopts some principles of the Buddhist tradition. Bentz and Shapiro (1998) list these:

- awareness of self and reality and their interaction is a positive value in itself and should be present in research processes;
- knowing involves caring for the world and the human life that one studies;
- inquiry should contribute to the development of awareness and self-reflection in the inquirer and may contribute to the development of spirituality;

- inquiry usually requires giving up ego or transcending self, even though it is grounded in self and requires intensified self-awareness;
- the development of awareness is not purely intellectual or cognitive process but part of a person's total way of living her life (p. 6-7).

Although I don't personally follow the totality of the Buddhist tradition, this research process has included the development of self-reflection; spirituality; transcending self; caring for human life; and awareness of both self, others, and nature that I hope to convey accurately as well as integrate into my own being.

The combination of hermeneutics, phenomenology, critical social theory and Buddhism thus provide a mindful inquiry framework for this study which fits best with the outlined goals, methods, and analysis.

## **Methods**

The methods of inquiry I used to obtain data for my study were interviews and personal reflection. Below I describe each of these as well as the location and circumstances surrounding how data was collected.

**Interviews.** Data was collected from nine face-to-face interviews and one telephone interview, all with a semi-structured format. To understand the situation of each parent the interview questions included the following, in no particular order:

- When did you first hear about Adventure Therapy programs? How did you hear about them?

- Do you have knowledge of or experience with more than one Adventure Therapy program?
- From your understanding of Adventure Therapy, how would you describe what it is?
- How do you think an outdoor based activity can be therapeutic?
- How do you think AT differs from traditional therapeutic treatment?
- What made you choose to send your teenager to an Adventure therapy program? Vs. other outdoor programs or other kinds of therapy?
- Did you look at other therapeutic options before choosing Adventure Therapy? Other outdoor based options?
- What were the major events/instances that led to the decision to choose this therapeutic program?
- What were/are your expectations of this Adventure Therapy program?
- Would you consider your family to be the “participant” in this program or your teen?
- Would you participate in an AT program for your own therapeutic purposes?
- Would this kind of therapeutic format work for adults or families all together?

The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed for a guided interview to take place as opposed to an interview dictated by the question schedule. Smith and Eatough (2007) describe the co-determined interaction of semi-structured interviews as follows:

The investigator has an idea of the area of interest and some questions to pursue. At the same time, there is a wish to try and enter the psychological and social world of the participant as far as is possible. Therefore the participant is an active agent in shaping how the interview goes. The participant can be seen as the experiential



expert and should therefore be allowed maximum opportunity to tell his/her own story. (p. 42)

Parents were told at the onset of the interview process that there was a set of questions that would be referred to throughout the interview. However, they were told that the question schedule was a guide and not a rigid structure which allowed the conversation to flow where they felt that it needed to. Some parents took this liberty and entered into narratives with rich detail and others gave heartfelt, yet shorter, answers which stuck closely to the questions asked. Overall I wanted to allow participants to have the freedom to express their experiences in the ways which were most meaningful to them. Another aspect of this freedom was the personal nature of the interviews. Nine of the interviews were done on a one-on-one basis and one interview was done with a father and step-mother together.

I found the interviews flowed from question to question even when the parents took the liberty of telling lengthy stories and changing the course or order of the questions. One of the benefits of semi-structured interviews is the independence to explore the ideas that parents bring up and alter how or when certain questions are asked to fit the cadence of the interview process (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Even though the questions were the same for each person, each interview was colored with the particular parent's subjective experience and reality of what they were going through with their particular teen. If the parent's main issue was finding resources for their child then that was the topic of the interview. If the struggle was around getting their child out of the house, then that was the perspective the interview took.

**Personal reflection.** The subjective elements of hermeneutics and phenomenology give rise to the necessary addition of personal reflection in the attempt to answer research questions. My process of personal reflection regarding the current research questions began with reflections about my own understandings of AT. I considered how my own personal adventures have helped me therapeutically as well as how I saw the AT program help the youth who were enrolled in it. As an instructor who is fully engaged in all elements of the AT program, I also reflected on the expectations I have regarding the effects of the program on youth behaviour, attitude, emotions, and physicality.

**Location.** The face to face interviews took place at the CanAdventure Education base camp located on Vancouver Island. The one telephone interview took place with the parent at home and me at the base camp. The surroundings of the camp include large old growth forest, lush vegetation, walking paths, fireside areas, streams, and rivers. The atmosphere of the location is peaceful and welcoming, often including a friendly dog wagging her tail to greet you and a friendly face saying hello when you arrive. Interviews were conducted in various locations around the property such as around a fire outside, sitting under the canopy of the huge old growth trees, or inside the lodge on couches. I found sitting around a fire the most comfortable, with the least intrusions and felt it helped people reflect as well as provided comfort and care.

**Data collection.** Parents were sent an introductory email about the study being conducted. This took place two to three weeks before they arrived at the base camp location for the workshop they were asked to participate in, as part of the completion of their teens' program. This email included the study title and purpose, as well as information about confidentiality, informed consent, and the goal of furthering scholarly understanding of

parent perceptions, of which they were uniquely situated to contribute to. This time frame gave them ample time to respond about whether they wanted to participate. Most parents responded back via email and a few parents told me, once they arrived at the program location, that they would be willing to participate in an interview. At the time of sending the email most parents had spoken to me, on a few occasions, in the context of being the head instructor of their teens' program. This brief, yet contextual familiarity may have helped in their willingness to participate in the study.

Seven of the ten interviews took place between the times that parents arrived at the base camp and actually reunited with their teenager. The plan was for the interviews to take place prior to reuniting because this continued to leave parents in a state of expectation as to what the effects of the program may have been on their child. Two of the interviews took place the day after parents reunited with their teen, however they were still at the base camp and thus limited interaction had taken place. Some responses may have been altered due to this contact. One of the interviews took place after the teen had returned home and been home for a couple of weeks.

All of the interviews were recorded with an audio recording device and then transferred into audio files onto my computer. Once the interview was transferred onto computer it was deleted off the audio device. The audio device was kept in my possession at all times. Once all interviews had been conducted and transferred onto my computer, I personally transcribed them verbatim into written format. This process allowed me to begin immersing myself in the interviews and gave me, as the primary data analyser, more time with the voices of the parents. Patton (2002) offers that the process of transcription can also generate insights as data is reviewed.

## **Participants**

**Selection.** Parents who had teens enrolled in the 32 day therapeutic wilderness program operating at CanAdventure Education on Vancouver Island, Canada, were chosen as appropriate participants for this study. Criterion sampling was used in which only parents of enrolled teens in the program were contacted to participate in the study based on their particular life experience. The parents of three separate program dates were contacted to participate in the study, thus not all parents had met or interacted with each other. In addition, this was a sample of convenience because the researcher was employed at CanAdventure Education at the time of the data collection. Parents were travelling to the camp location as part of the parent participation aspect of the program, so the researcher took advantage of this opportunity for research participants to come to her.

**Consent.** University ethical approval was granted to recruit research participants via this adventure therapy program, where the researcher was working full time as a team leader and wilderness instructor. Participants were given a consent form to sign and informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Participants were also given a copy of the consent form with my contact information as well as the contact information of my research supervisor, if they had any questions or wanted to withdraw from the study.

**Characteristics.** Participants consisted of nine women and two men. The woman of the couple interviewed together had limited participation because the husband, as the biological father of the youth, participated primarily. Participants varied in educational attainments and occupational status. Most had post-secondary education with three of the participants having PhD's, two of whom worked as medical doctors and one as an educator,

three who worked for city or government organizations, two women who worked full time in the home, one woman who worked in television and two of unknown occupation.

Participant's ages ranged from 40's to 60's and all had at least one teenage child. Family demographics ranged from families with nine children to families with one child, mixed families with step-siblings or adopted siblings and families with biological siblings only.

Marital status of the research participants included four divorced parents, two parents who were married to the other biological parent of the teen, one parent separated from the other biological parent of the teen, two parents who had adopted the teen, and one parent separated from a common-law partner who was the other biological parents of the teen. Study participants lived in various locations with nine locations in Canada and one in the United States. Two participants were located in British Columbia, two in Alberta, four in Ontario, one in the Yukon, and one in California. Participants were all from city locations with seven from larger cities and three from smaller cities.

### **Data Analysis**

The style of data analysis adopted to answer the research questions is thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data analysis took place during the fieldwork stage as well as after all data had been collected and transcribed.

According to Patton (2002) data analysis begins while still in the field as thoughts and ideas emerge from collected data and records of analytical insights are written and tracked. Data collection in the field occurred as personal reflection memos were added to the transcripts throughout the transcription process. These memos provided relevant insight when read later on because they triggered memories of experiences I had with the parents

outside of the interview process. These outside interactions provided more context to the analytic process.

Braun and Clark (2006) believe thematic analysis can give a thorough and rich account of data because of its theoretical freedom and flexibility as a research tool. Boyatzis (as cited in Braun and Clark, 2006) says “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, it often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic” (p. 6). In addition Braun and Clark (2006) describe that a theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 10). The thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) includes six main phases: 1. familiarizing yourself with your data 2. generating initial codes 3. searching for themes 4. reviewing themes 5. defining and name themes 6. producing the report (p. 16-23).

### **Familiarizing Yourself with Your Data**

Becoming familiar with my data set began as I listened and transcribed verbatim the interviews I conducted. I also read the interviews to begin to gain ideas and continue to become familiar with the content.

### **Generating Initial Codes**

To generate open codes I went systematically through the interviews line by line and wrote the interesting aspects of each line or group of lines beside the line itself. Through coding, various topics were summarized and written down as the interviews were gone through. The codes came from the data itself and were not thought out beforehand in a way

that the data were made to fit preexisting codes. Each line, or group of lines, of data was taken as a separate entity and given the code that best fit its content.

### **Searching For Themes**

My research has three main topics, parent understanding, parent expectations and overall reasons for parents choice of an AT program for their teen. Hence, during this phase the interviews were read again, three more times, to solidify the codes under each topic and search for themes among the codes by combining the codes in different ways. During the readings I highlighted various data excerpts which related to the codes and then wrote them out interview by interview. After this process I compared the lists of codes from each interview and began to draw a thematic map with main themes and subthemes coming from them.

### **Reviewing Themes**

As each code list was analysed and added to the thematic map of each topic area, themes began to develop more fully. Certain themes became distinctly definable and others joined together to form larger themes, and still others faded. During this phase I also reviewed whether my codes clearly fit the theme and whether the themes that were created accurately represented the research questions and the data set as a whole. During this time the story of the parent decision making journey began to form.

### **Defining and Naming Themes**

The entirety of the thematic mapping picture was taken into account and pondered during this phase in an effort to capture the data in its entirety and put it together with an

outline of an accompanying narrative. In this phase each theme began to tell a part of the story together with its subthemes. Braun and Clarke (2006) say that at the end of this phase you should be able to tell the scope of each theme in a couple of sentences.

### **Producing the Report**

During this phase the intent was to “tell the complicated story of the data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The write up itself provides a coherent and interesting story representative of the data and includes data extracts to demonstrate themes and the over all answers to the research questions.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline five main pitfalls that can occur in a poor analysis. The first is neglecting the interpretation of meaning within the analysis and primarily paraphrasing content within the data. The second is using data questions as themes instead of identifying themes from within the data based on patterns. The third is a weak analysis where the themes don't work because of overlap, inconsistency or incoherence. The fourth is the possibility of analytic claims and data that do not match or where claims cannot be supported by the data. The fifth is when the theoretical framework does not match the analytic claims. It has been my intent to negate these pitfalls during analysis to produce a more than adequate qualitative report. Although it has been claimed that thematic analysis is chosen as an analytic option when someone doesn't know or understand how to do analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) believe it can be an approach that produces insightful analysis giving well arranged answers to research questions.



## CHAPTER FOUR: THE NATURE STORY TOLD BY PARENTS

An individual's story is always unique and sacred. To accurately convey a person's story with meaning and clarity is a difficult undertaking. As I immersed myself and reflected on the narratives of the parents involved in this study, I felt honored to have witnessed and been a part of their journey.

True motivations and intents are challenging to recognize. Often decisions have many motivations, some of which are willing to be shared and others which are not divulged. In researching the decision making process of parents regarding sending their teenager to an adventure therapy (AT) program, some reasons were strikingly clear and others rather murky. I hope to do justice to the journey of these parents and accurately convey some of the meaning behind their decision making process.

The story told by parents is a nature story. This may be no surprise since the story deals with outdoor adventure, however, with or without knowing it these parents told the story of a seed. Four parts of the story are discussed within this section: falling from the tree, planting a seed, nurtured in the soil, and the emerging sprout. Each of these parts is also a theme that represents parent understandings of AT, their expectations of the AT program and the reasons behind choosing AT for their teen. The themes corresponding to the parts of the story include: community departure, new environment, personal growth and a different future, respectively. In this chapter I will discuss each of these themes as parts of the nature story told by parents, with excerpts from the data.

### **Falling from the Tree (Community Departure)**

There is a popular phrase which says “it takes a village to raise a child”. The sentiment behind this phrase expresses the idea that one person or one family alone cannot provide, or be enough, for a growing human being. There are other people, besides family, and other places, besides the usual environment, which can teach and offer children and teenagers necessary life tools. This idea goes somewhat against the North American value of individualism. The societal perspective of the individual being able to take care of oneself, or be successful on their own, can limit the view that help from others is necessary or beneficial. The manner in which Canadian society is structured promotes individual attainment through competitive means. This also outlines a certain definition of success and having “made it” in life or a way to look at people as “being ok”. When teenage behaviours escalate or change to the point that they don’t fall within societal standards parents break out of the individualistic norm of parenting on their own and seek their “village”.

Often external signs are used as a measurement of internal realities. Parents also use this technique when perceiving whether there is something out of the ordinary occurring with their teen. Changes in behaviour are often the first sign leading to the thought that action is necessary. This takes keen observation on the part of parents and a desire to be active in their teens’ life through interaction and communication. As one parent expressed:

...he experimented with marijuana and he liked it and he was having his whole sense of self and his, was not in a good place and it was obvious because he was still respectful and kind of going through the motions but he was developing an alter ego, almost like a fragmented person when he was with his friends or when he was away

from home he was doing things and acting in a certain way and then when he was with his church group or when he was at home he was acting a different way, so I could see for me as a parent, I felt like his fragmented selves were starting to collide and the collision of it was causing him stress and anguish. So just him self-medicating was obvious that he was experiencing emotional pain and had a hard time figuring out how to sort things out and where to turn...

In another instance, a change in behavior indicated to the parent that her son needed inner strengthening and that action was necessary.

...everything seemed to be going along ok and then I saw a flare up...and I'm concerned that there is something inside that needs to be addressed and fostered and developed so that he has the tools to make smarter choices in life and that he comes from a place of strength within himself...

She also describes her concern:

...I watched and all of a sudden he was really spiralling very quickly, very quickly, smoking more pot, disobeying the rules. He stayed out all night one night and then got up early one morning...I saw the change in my son's behaviour...and I was very concerned...

Another parent describes the blatant behaviour that led her to feel that her teenager needed something to happen when she says: "Yeah so...things started to escalate, he was getting more verbally aggressive and more physically aggressive too...when he threatened suicide and when he was physically aggressive I knew then that we needed to do something".

Behaviours that are illegal and/or quite blatant such as dabbling in drugs, disobeying house

rules, or aggression can be obvious signs that a change needs to occur. Behaviours that are still blatant and yet along different social lines are described by these parents when they verbalized: "...it was our son not able to help himself...he wanted to be well, to be happy, to be normal...but he was not able to function in life. He didn't participate in life", and, "...he just lost, um, the desire to interact with the rest of society, he stopped going to school...so it was just insulating himself from the world...", and, "...our son was really stuck and didn't know how to move forward in life...he was withdrawing more and more and more, spending less time with people". The emotions that parents displayed when describing their teens' behavior were identifiable and raw. As these parents indicated, it is difficult when a loved one is observed going through pain and suffering or participating in behaviour which may lead to later challenges. Often these current difficulties or later challenges are related to social issues. Appropriate functioning in life often implies participating in societal institutions or cultural norms, such as going to school, getting together with friends, or even simply getting out of bed in the morning and interacting with family. Stopping these behaviours is just as scary for parents as the blatant and/or illegal behaviours discussed previously. Why do parents, and often the rest of society, feel these social behaviours are necessary? Behaviour always has a purpose and if a teenager has stopped going to school, stopped getting together with friends, or stopped getting out of bed there could be a reason that is more painful to them than this behaviour itself. As humans we seek to ease our pain and desire happiness, and this is true for parents as well as teens. Proper social behaviour can often be seen differently by parents and teens however, so using this as a way to create ease or better health may be difficult. One parent describes the behavioural phenomenon when she says: "If there's behaviour issues or acting out behaviour it's because they don't have the

tools to solve their problems so then the problems just get worse and they create different problems...” Although parents and teens may differ in their ideas around the purpose of behaviour or what behaviour is considered “good” or “bad”, gaining tools for life is beneficial for all people. The meaning behind parents talking about behaviour escalation revolves around their concern for their teenager who will one day be an adult who will make decisions without parental influence or advice.

The word “village” implies a community in which people live together in close proximity. The search for “tools” often begins in the home community of the family when parents get to the point of realization that they cannot parent alone. Indeed parents first sought out help from what was available directly around them and eventually found their “villages” lacking. The necessity for help was expressed by this struggling parent:

...and one of the big things that I realized was that I couldn't do this myself. I couldn't do it alone, I needed support and the help of other people who have knowledge that I don't have in how to help my kids and how to support them in whatever situation is going on...there is a lot of times that people will say, “where do we send them?”, “what's going to work?”, cause there is a lot of troubled teens out there...

Traditional therapy is often the first route that parents take when searching their “village” for help for their teenager. Psychotherapy or counselling is often seen as an adult treatment, but when teenagers show signs of needing mental help this is often seen as the only avenue. Parents articulated their feelings towards trying traditional therapy such as psychologists, counsellors, and medication, as illustrated in this conversation:

I was thinking he needs something other than therapist, some other than psychologists looking at him and definitely something other than anti-depressants because those weren't working.

Those clearly weren't working.

...weren't working and also I just don't necessarily think, I always think they are hugely the last resort.

One parent communicated the experience of having her son in traditional therapy through using her son's reaction to having been in therapy for over three years. She iterated: "Well, my son actually said, like nothing is working for me, it's not working, sitting in that office is not working mom, I'm not getting better, I'm not getting better, it's not working. So we had to find something that was going to work". Parents also hesitated to seek out traditional therapy because their children had strong negative reactions to it, they believed it lacked certain necessary benefits, or they were not happy with the results of the therapeutic process. These sentiments were expressed by these parents who said: "I tried to get him to see somebody and he flat out refused. He said to me there is absolutely no way that he is going to go into a doctor's office and talk about his feelings", and, "Traditional therapy I find doesn't get to the root of the person...and it doesn't teach you the skills to be able to solve your problems...it doesn't get to the root of the disconnect", and, "We had gone the professional route available to us including psychologists, um, the guidance counselor, the vice principal...and that wasn't working". The story of one parent's lived experience also leaves one feeling like families need something more than the traditional route of talk therapy. When asked about her experience of traditional therapy, she replied:

Didn't work, we've tried them, we've had many psychologists, psychiatrists, um, we've had family therapy and you kind of walked away feeling something's missing...she had a therapist and they were just, like they were just like silly sessions and "why don't you buy me a car, I want a car, I've got my driver's licence I want a car" and your kind of sitting here and you're looking at the psychologist or psychiatrist and you're going "uhhh is this what we're here for?" Like really it just got to the point where it's all about monetary things, we're not dealing with the family issues here. So to this day it is bizarre and we bought her a car and it just about killed her. You know and um, so the tradition...no.

When parents begin to realize that traditional therapeutic methods aren't working, they also search for methods which may fit youth more specifically. Gass, Gillis and Russell (2012) believe traditional or outpatient talk therapy often can't seem to provide certain youth with what they need. Parents looking for help also continue to run into a lack of program availability such as described by these parents' experiences:

So I phoned here and found out there was availability, and I asked some questions and they explained, sort of, the program how it works and then I phoned some other programs and, to be honest with you, there is very little out there that I could find...  
 , and,

I don't know, we just couldn't find anything...but this was the first camp I've ever heard of like this, which is quite shocking really, and maybe there are more out there and we just aren't able to find them but we have actively looked...  
 , and,

Well when I first was searching we looked at some things but then...I found it really difficult to find something that was appropriate, that I thought fit...You know I was looking for maybe some like different programs and you know it's difficult to because it's what your child is interested in doing and what they are willing to do.

Subsequent to parents having searched in the community, having tried various helping options with little success, and being unable able to find appropriate alternatives, they begin to feel frustrated and helpless. Only a parent can know these feelings in relation to their child who they feel needs support. One parent describes her feelings after trying various therapeutic elements that weren't working, when she says: "I really, as a parent, work so much off of intuition and for me it was, nothing was really hitting, I knew that we needed to find a resource or find a catalyst for him that would hit him and nothing was hitting..."

Other parents describe the progression to the point of helplessness in their experiences:

It was a little bit too of that frustration around don't know what else to do for my son. Can I just ship him off somewhere, I mean ya know, it's that feeling of I give up. I give up, can I find something. So in a sense it's not giving up but it's that feeling of giving up...

, and,

So then I knew that nothing that we were doing was really helping him, was really hitting home for him, it wasn't really resonating for him so um, the last straw, the last straw...was when my husband reached the end of his rope...

These parents are heart-achingly desperate. Words can't adequately describe the feeling when somebody just cannot find what they are looking for. The feeling I got from listening



to parents was that they had progressed to a point of weariness after repeated disappointment. One parent tries to explain how she felt as she saw her daughter descend into what she called a “vortex”: “I saw this vortex and I became powerless and the, um, we didn’t know what to do, there was no wrong or, we couldn’t go get help anywhere there was just, we didn’t know, we were frustrated...” This discouragement led parents to look outside the community for alternative help. Sending their child away from home seemed difficult for parents, yet the desperation they had come to after all of their thwarted efforts was enough to leap that hurdle. Parents showed resilience as they continued to search for help or try yet another avenue that was presented to them in the form of alternative therapies. Half of the parents interviewed found the AT program, they eventually chose, during an internet search and half of the parents heard about the program through a school guidance counselor or family friend. How parents heard about the program seemed less important to actually choosing the program than the present behavioural and emotional situation going on within the family. I interpret this because of the focus parents had on the family situation when talking about what led to their decision. What is also interesting is the intangible reassurance parents describe when talking about the decision to send their teenager away from the community for help and support. One particular parents’ faith in God was woven through her experience and played a large part in her decision and comfort level to send her daughter to AT:

...I just started going on the internet and, I’m like, I need stuff for troubled teens, I need I need, and I was asking God and this camp came up...I looked at other things to see what was the right thing but I also prayed about this a lot and it was so clear that she was supposed to come...I really felt God led to have her be here, and if that

wouldn't have been a sense for me she wouldn't have been here. So this was His design too, not just mine...I knew I needed something big and that was direct orders from God.

Other parents talked about the comforting feelings and beliefs they had about their decision to send their teen to AT using various descriptions such as: "...why, you know, why did this, why did we have our neighbour next door and he knew this here, you know everything kind of fell into place for our daughter...so I think this is all part of the plan", and, "I just got the sense that, you know what, this was going to be a safe place, and a good place for my son...and it just came to me and I think sometimes that's the way things happen in life...and going back to why I sent him here, I just felt it was what he needed", and, "I truly do believe everything happens with a purpose, I've always believed that, um, and I truly happy that this is come over our path for him to come here...", and, "...so we knew it would be good...so intuitively we knew that would be the right kind of program...", and, "...you know there are forces up there, whatever they are, I don't know what they are, but that lead us into a direction."

It became apparent that parents sought something outside of themselves that would help alleviate anxiety and encourage them that they had made the right decision to allow their teen to "fall from the tree" and thus leave home and community. Looking for something greater than humanity could be a way to help trust the decision making process for all of us. My own self-awareness regarding decision making grew as a result of searching for meaning and purpose within these parents' decisions. In addition, the way society works in systems also became evident as parents talked about their search for help and the lack of available support. The social systems put in place to aid families don't always work to

alleviate suffering. These families are testament to having tried the ‘system’ and having been disappointed by it. The current state of our youth mental health support is in need of change.

### **Planting a Seed (New Environment)**

The parents I interviewed commonly spoke of the benefit of being placed into a new environment as a catalyst for change and growth. The nature story told by parents continued as the youth “falls from the tree” of community and gets “planted” into the soil of a new environment, within the AT program. But just how does a new environment evoke change? Gass, Gillis, and Russell (2012) explain the process as follows:

...the prescribed unfamiliar environments where AT occurs, especially when conducted in natural settings, help to disrupt familiar patterns, create an inherent motivation to acclimate to the environment, and provide real and concrete experiences that can be drawn upon in subsequent therapeutic processes. All of these factors can help reduce defensiveness and shift client motivation. In this way, a prescribed unfamiliar environment provides an autonomy-supportive atmosphere conducive to participants accessing an internal source of motivation to being thinking about change. (p. 76)

In other words teenagers need to adapt to new people and places which can help them change patterns and habits of connecting and interacting. The neutrality of nature is another aspect to AT environments which is thought to aid personal change (Gass, Gillis, & Russel, 2012). Through my own adventure experiences in nature I have been taught about natural consequences. Nature doesn’t try to teach lessons because it is better or more knowledgable, it simply stays on its course and shows a different way of being. The natural environment

can be harsh and unforgiving, although it doesn't purposefully hurt, and it is also completely accepting. A tree that is "met" in nature will welcome and accept a person completely as they are because it is neutral and enduring, simply as it is. Plotkin (2008) describes a relationship to a forest in a beautiful manner:

None of the nonhumans in the forest – or the world, more generally – are lost. Each one is precisely in its true place, and each one knows every place in the forest as a unique place. They are doing something you do not yet know how to do. You could apprentice yourself to them. The forest, the world, knows where you are and who you are. You must let it find you. (p. 39)

This kind of awareness has grown in me throughout my time as an AT instructor and I have seen it grow in the teenagers of these parents as they are taught lessons through their own experiences in nature. Parents' belief in the growth of awareness, through nature, was a part of their decision to choose AT for their teenager.

## **Separation**

Before parents begin to think about the benefits of the new environment, they often think about the value in separating from the usual environment. One aspect of the usual environment that parents feel their teens need to separate from is the parents themselves. The positive aspects of separation from their teen takes two closely aligned forms according to parents; the first is respite for them as parents and the second is a break from the family dynamic so both parents and teens can grow. One parent spoke of the advice that he had received from a helping professional: "...social workers had said that really he needs time away from you folk because the family dynamics wasn't working...and there didn't seem to

be anything else except to get him to a different environment, an environment where he could get intense help...”. Another parent expressed the need for separation from family dynamic more specifically when she said: “...as a parent it’s sometimes difficult to teach them...when they’ve gotten into patterns of behaviour and communication...”. Although parents feel that separation is a positive aspect of an AT program, it is also difficult, as this parent articulated:

I think it was good for us to have, for him to have only that limited amount of contact with us as hard as it was. It was good for me and it was good for him. I mean we are a little bit different as well because my kids have never really been away from me. So I mean, that was really really hard for us. But um, I think it was great.

The following parent touches on both aspects of the separation in the parent/teen relationship during the AT program when she revealed: “That was one aspect of it is the fact that we got a respite...As well as our son getting help from somebody that isn’t his parent. I think that was a big bonus”. A major focus of this next parent was the idea that separation could allow her and her husband to work on themselves and their relationship while their daughter was away. She says: “I was looking...for thirty days for my husband and I to get our act together...so that’s where this has allowed us to do, so this is like the respite...so this was something that was good for us...”. Instead of simply stating that separation was beneficial, one parent describes another reason for being apart from her teen that felt positive to her:

I mean I think that separation is actually important cause I think that’s really one of the rites of passage because you are starting to separate from your parents so having your parents around all the time, it’s really not what they need, they need that support

but they need to figure who they are so that they can come back to that parent and child relationship at a different level and the parents can accept them at a different level.

This parent touches on an aspect of adolescence that is often forgotten or skewed in North American society; the rite of passage. Another parent touches on her view of this aspect of the AT program when she says: "...the whole concept and philosophy of what the adventure therapy provides as far as that rite of passage made total sense and it rung true for me".

Many traditional cultures have a history of adolescent rites of passage that are undertaken when a young man or woman reaches a certain age. Arnett (2010) states that these rituals are often designed and practiced in such a way as to help a young person become ready to face life's challenges as a man or woman. Often the entire community is involved in a ceremony that will signal the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood for the young people, and which often includes some form of separation from the family or community. Some traditional cultures have moved away from these rituals, or do them less frequently, due to globalization and the change in traditional cultural thinking towards what is necessary for an adolescents future (Arnett, 2010). North American views of the transition from adolescent to adulthood have changed over the centuries. According to Rotundo (as cited in Arnett, 2010), the transition from boy to man in North American society has gone from a focus on teaching family responsibilities in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, to being independent as an individual in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and adding self-enjoyment and self-expression to individualism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The female transition from girl to woman has gone from being fairly constricted, guided, and supported in the past, to being more open and yet also more vulnerable and less

integrated in community (Arnett, 2010). Plotkin (2008) describes an inherent desire for some kind of passage that is within every young person:

Young people, everywhere and in all times, sense, in their blood, the need for a passage, not directly into “adulthood”, but into another as yet unknown world. In our egocentric society, high-school-age and college-age youth are blindly attempting to access the mysteries and to uncover a loyalty to something greater than ordinary social life... The most popular pathways are alcohol, drugs, music, and sex, any one of which could actually help, especially with the support of elders or guides. But for our unmentored youth, these pathways usually go nowhere or worse. (p. 238-239)

A parent’s version of the same adolescent phenomenon was described like this:

...by nature children are designed to disconnect from parents and they are designed to have entitlement issues in order to evolve and for issues in the world to progress. They have to want more, they have to want something different than their parents...

The parents interviewed intuitively knew that separation from the family environment is a positive aspect of adolescence and that benefits of separation are felt at the individual and relationship levels. The rite of passage element in the AT program resonated with them because it offered a picture of a healthy way to learn and transition through adolescence. My experience with the teens themselves, however, showed me that spending time doing adventure activities is not the kind of rite of passage that many of them had in mind for themselves. There is often resistance on the part of teens when they first arrive at the AT program, and many feel that their parents simply wanted to get rid of them for a while. So there is a battle inside these young people between the need for separation and the need for

continued belonging within the family. Part of the AT rite of passage is how to reconcile these two equally necessary aspects of family. Another view of separation that was seen as necessary by parents was in regards to severance from tangible possessions and access to activities. Parents saw a program that took their teenager out of the usual environment and away from the usual draw of substances, technology and spending time inside. This separation allowed for possible positive changes to the mind and mental state as described by these parents when they say: “Well first of all if the kids are involved in smoking, smoking pot or drinking or whatever it is, first of all they don’t have access to those things so they have a clear mind”, and, “I know with my daughter when she gets near electronics, TV, that brain starts spinning and its like a candy high and I see her change when she’s around that and that’s where the anxiety comes because she is very anxious”, and,

It sort of started with what our son was going through in terms of anxiety and depression and the environment that was around him in our world today. Or is around him when he is not here which is exposure to tons of computer games, tons of time inside, tons of time intellectualizing, tons of time thinking imaginatively in a positive way but also just being totally inside his head.

It isn’t unusual for parents to see time away from substances as a positive change in environment for their youth, but recognizing the value of time away from technology and the indoors means parents see the value in the “technology” of being outside. Going from a usual environment, which often meant the city environment and a lot of time spent indoors with technology, to a new environment of nature and outdoor activity was described by parents as a slowing down process. Parents saw the usual environment as one with a lot of distractions which led to a disconnection from self, others, and environment. This perception



is one that parents applied to their youth in various ways, but possibly represents how they viewed the experience as it may have felt for them. When asked about how nature can be therapeutic parents talked about the idea of slowing down. One parent said nature slows you down due to simplicity and quietness:

Because you are taking yourself away from those material things and its just quiet and you can, I mean I have to admit that, you are so busy with your day to day life that you don't notice the wind, you don't hear the wind, you don't notice that flower or the trees or the way the trees are moving in the wind unless you've stopped and taken that few minutes...

Another parent spoke of spending time in nature as follows: "I think it slows you down. I think that is really good, um it slows any person down...I think we're all so hectic and so chasing things and sometimes you wonder is that really the purpose of life"? And still another parent described the fast pace of the usual environment and what it does to children: "...we're creating environmental ADD children because we're not letting our children stop and smell the coffee...I think a lot of our children, especially in the bigger cities, they never see the wilderness and I think it's the rat race...". One of the positive aspects of slowing down, that one parent described, was the ability it allowed for looking at self: "Because when you're busy, busy, busy, busy, which we all are, you don't spend the time going in". This idea of slowing down was one of the over-arching themes among parent understandings of AT programs and spending time in nature. Parents spoke mostly about the mental slowing which came from their ideas of how time in nature is so different than time in the city and created meaning for them based on allowing the mind to take a break from the speed of city life. Another component of AT programs is the physical slowing down where,

metaphorically, the youth can't go anywhere because their movement is restricted. This new environment is where they have to be and it slows their ability to go places and be involved in usual activities.

### **Moving to the Outdoors**

Parents expressed that being in the new environment of an AT program also brought with it the idea of simply being outside. Parents had many ways to describe being in nature, some of which were: "alignment with mother nature", "getting back to nature", "exposure to nature", being in "natural clutter", "becoming one with the earth", being "in tune to the environment", being "in touch with nature", feeling the "energy of nature", and "connection to nature". It is difficult to describe the process of spending time outside in nature and what it offers and the parents did their best to try and verbalize that "connection". Re-connecting to nature implies that there has been a disconnect. One parent describes connection as follows:

Um, and I think the adventure camp is very much also about reconnecting oneself to oneself and...to nature and to each other, I think we are so disconnected and um being in nature, first of all I think makes you realize that disconnection and realize that's not the way it's supposed to be and realize there is a stirring within oneself and then a healing would be a desire to reconnect. I'm sure people leave from camps like this wanting to reconnect with people, with individuals, with communities, but also feeling the deep connection with the environment, with nature that they will hunger very deeply again. I think we were born in nature so that disconnection is happening slowly for a long long time...

To parents, spending time in nature and feeling a connection with nature were something that they wanted for their teenagers and believed was beneficial. Gass, Gillis, and Russell (2012) agree, saying that connecting with nature's processes, by spending time in nature, allows people to reconnect with self and others. It is a natural human desire to want for others what has been beneficial to ourselves. This was seen in parents wanting outdoor experiences for their teenagers because they had positive outdoor experiences themselves. A parent who recollected a meaningful personal time in nature explained her experience and how it influenced her decision:

...and I would go and I would walk along and I would, all along the ocean, walk for about three or four miles and I had a little site out there and I would have a little fire and I would invite a few very close friends once in a while and I really spent time reflecting and walking and learning and growing about me...and yeah I would say that that was probably a big experience for me to feel comfortable with my daughter coming here.

One parent recognized how his own outdoor experience played a role in his decision of AT for his son, and that the lack of outdoor experience his son had was primarily because he, as a father, didn't often take him outdoors:

...I think there was some other things that connected it for me. One is as a kid every summer we would go camping so that is an experience I always had as a kid. Of course we did not have the internet or computers...But, so we played outside, we played in the blackberry bushes and we made forts and we climbed in, you know we made rafts and went on the creek and did all those kinds of things that kids were,

probably shouldn't have been doing...and getting in to a little bit of outdoor trouble sort of thing, in a good way. And learning some things, so to me it was, I just realized my kids didn't have that at all, never really taken them camping much.

Other parents had spent time with their teenagers in outdoor settings and knew they enjoyed it, as well as used their own outdoor experiences to make the decision about AT for their teenager:

We believe in nature, we've always, I mean if we don't camp in a year or in a season we feel it...the year feels totally discombobulated now right. It's so part of our annual cycle that if we miss it we don't feel well. So we definitely have always believed we need it and so camp, both our kids have always gone to camp and they've loved it.

, and,

...Her and I would go out into the bush and...that was when we had our best time, we connected, she connected...and sometimes we would be out four or five hours, just walking, berry picking, just going, that holistic in the bush, that feel...when she hit puberty...I couldn't get her to go walking with me...I couldn't get her back knowing full well that that's what she needed. To get back into nature because I was raised in the bush, I go out, I'm constantly, I'm a berry picker...

So the parent decision of AT for their teenager was partially about their teen being in a new environment. After they had made the decision of departure from community, their teen was "planted" into nature and separated from them as parents, from technology, from substances, and from spending time inside. This "planting" caused a slowing down

physically and mentally for their teen, and being outside meant the possibility of reconnecting with nature. Something parents had experienced in their own lives.

### **Nurtured in the Soil (Personal Growth)**

In addition to slowing down and reconnecting to nature, parents desire more to occur during their teens' time in the "soil" of AT. The metaphor of being underground, being within the earth and enveloped by the dirt implies depth and fostering. It embodies the idea that "nature removes individuals from their accustomed culture and surrounds them with a natural world that is very calming and nurturing" (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012, p. 105). Parents are looking for support that is cultivating and goes deeper than surface issues; this is not "cookie-cutter" help, it is intimate help that gets to the root of the issues their teenagers are facing and leads to personal growth. This is a place of dirtiness; exposing the "dirt" inside, being in the dirt physically and emotionally, and working through the "dirty" issues.

### **Substance Abuse**

At this point in the narrative it is important to note the relationship between, how the program these parents chose presents itself, and what parents are looking for in terms of help. When parents read the website of the CanAdventure program they may have read this:

Our Struggling Teen Journey Camps use a unique wilderness adventure camp format to not only teach outdoor skills and academic curriculum, but to also provide in-depth personal growth work in the areas of self-esteem, interpersonal relations, and the development of positive behaviour patterns for the long-term. (CanAdventure Education, n.d.)

Parents may also have read the profile of a struggling teen that the website presents:

CanAdventure Education camps are most appropriate for struggling teen-agers who are demonstrating negative behaviour patterns but express a sincere desire to turn things around. Struggling teen applicants will only be enrolled on a voluntary basis - candidates who are strongly opposed to attending will not be admitted. Previous wilderness experience is not required. Appropriate ages are from 13-19 and most programs are co-educational. (CanAdventure Education, n.d.)

The website goes on to list 16 specific behaviours that parents may be seeing in their teen and 7 disorders the teen may have been diagnosed with, as well as 5 family history issues and 5 academic issues that the teen may be experiencing. In addition the struggling teen profile has 14 listed exclusions restricting participation in the program (See the Appendix for all listed behaviours and issues). Also written on the website is this caveat: “While many teens may display these behaviours, the CanAdventure Education screening process identifies candidates who are appropriate for our struggling teen camps” (CanAdventure Education, n.d.). The parents I interviewed spoke of seeing the specific teen issues written on the website and relating this to their own teenager. One parent describes the moment like this: “...so we got home, rushed to the computer and it was shocking to us that it just seemed like perfect. You know...I think there was even a note that said somewhere that this is not for kids with serious substance abuse issues, so we thought, that’s good...” Another parent speaks of his experienced searching for programs on the internet and his eventual conclusions regarding his own son:

...when you google camps for troubled teens a lot of the ones, that the most common ones that I found were with kids who had um...substance abuse or criminal records or problems with the justice system, which wasn't our situation but they seemed, um, a bit different...and there is a danger when you have a child who has mainly family issues, behaviour issues, interpersonal things, versus major problems with the law, crime, drug abuse, etc. and if he's a kid who is somewhat protected and our son is somewhat protected in the way he is brought up, um, it could do him as much harm as potential good.

Something about how the program was presented to her, as well as her comparisons to other program websites, allowed this parent to believe AT was the right setting for her daughter:

...but the other one that I looked at was a school...and I'm thinking what does that gonna do for her...There was some boot camps in the US, but I'm not, like are you kidding me? My daughters spirit is not, does not need to be pushed down it needs to be brought up and that's, you know, who she is right?...So I looked at other things to see what was the right thing...and it was so clear that she was supposed to come.

Interestingly, much of AT programming and practice is focused on the outcome of decreasing substance abuse (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012). Yet, overwhelmingly, the parents interviewed spoke or implied that the lack of focus on substance abuse was part of the reason they chose the AT program. This would make sense if it was purely because the teenagers of these parents didn't have substance abuse issues, however that was not the case, in all instances. One parent describes her daughters' use of substances and the struggle it caused as well as the decision about the AT program:

...she got involved with a bad crowd, she started experimenting with drugs and alcohol...I threw her out of the house one night cause she'd been drinking...and we read all of the stuff about this type of therapy...and we agreed that this was the life line that we'd been looking for...its about this, the wilderness...it's a seed...

Even though her son had substance abuse issues this mom thought beyond the externals to what would help her son with the internal issues:

I found it really difficult to find something that was appropriate, that I thought fit. Because I thought it was, you know there is the "oh my goodness if he's smoking pot you need to put him in a substance abuse program", like there is that bent and then there is the other one, you know have them talk to a counselor...but...they still don't see things differently...it doesn't get to the root of what's causing the disconnect...so that's kind of dealing with the externals. This is more about dealing with the internal.

As this parent shows, parents with teens who are substance users or abusers think about the possibility of substance abuse rehabilitation programs or settings that are more specifically geared towards those issues. Another parent spoke of her speculation around the program she choose and whether additional help would be needed for her son who used drugs:

...some people walk a very fine line and he's one of those people what walks that fine line of addiction... and I don't know what I would do if this doesn't work, I don't know if I will have to put him in drug rehab or something like that, I don't know, we will have to see.



AT programs based around decreasing substance use was not what any of these parents were looking for, in totality. The decrease of substance use as a side effect of the program however, was part of some parent's expectations, along with decreases in other behaviour.

### **Introspection**

The most common aspect of personal growth, that parents discussed, was introspection or self-reflection. More specifically, parents talked about the individual concerns they had for their teenagers and how personal growth would influence their child's inner being. I will first discuss the concept of inner reflection and its meaning for parents. Here a parent declares the desire she had for her son and what she believes happens through nature:

...but what we wanted for our son was a little bit more in depth and introspection and reflection of what was going on with him and not just learning science out in the wilderness...what comes from immersion in nature, of course, is often transformation, um, reflection and introspection...

Parents desire their teens to spend time looking at self, not in an external way but in an internal way. The belief that nature can help this process is supported by Gass, Gillis, and Russell (2012) who explain soft fascination:

Soft fascination occurs when involuntary attention is engaged and demands on a depleted direct attention are diminished, thus making restoration possible. A key aspect of restorative settings is their potential for eliciting soft fascination. Clouds, sunsets, and moving river water capture attention because they are visually and auditorily fascinating, but in a way that does not require direct attention. In this way,

cognitive reflection can occur as one is engaged in something fascinating and stimulating. (p. 106-107)

Parents described how nature can aid in self-reflection in their own ways through replying to a question about how nature can be therapeutic. Some of their understandings included: “To help find a better meaning to your life. A purpose. Definite I think nature is probably the only thing that can really do that, slow you down and make you rethink things”, and, “I would say that it is an opportunity for youth to...be in touch with nature and become more, have more of an opportunity to have self-reflection...”, and, “...spending that time in nature is really getting back into themselves and “hey wait a minute”, reflecting, enjoying, having good clean fun...”, and, “... a lot of deep introspection, reflection, that only can happen in a safe place...”, and, “...to me that’s what outdoors does to you is it gives you that reflective space it’s like it just, it slows you down, it just does...”, and, “I think it is a going in as well as looking out. So going in and going deep into what it is that you want and you need in your life for where you are...”, and finally,

I think it’s an opportunity to take all of the material things away from the kids and just put them in an environment where they have to think and not use the computer and look at themselves and just be able to get rid of all those external things that cause trouble and to be able to be in nature and...at the same time heal or learn to, you know, look at yourself...

How parents make sense of self-reflection and the meaning they give to the introspective space offered during an AT program is important. The ability to self-reflect was often talked about in relation to time. Parents felt that their teens didn’t take the time to become aware of

what was going on inside them in terms of emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression; desires around life decisions and the future; needs for love and acceptance; knowledge of self; personal healing; and spirituality. Parents felt that time spent reflecting on these individual issues would help their teen see where they needed to change and grow. In trying to make sense of how these parents make sense of self-reflection I also examined my own habits of introspection. I look at every opportunity as a chance for growth. A new job, a relationship, changing a usual sitting spot, trying new foods, all can offer a new environment or change of environment, which as described earlier, can provide different perspective. I recognize that life is a journey and thus change and growth are inevitable based on different experiences. I also know that self-reflection can be difficult and when we are faced with aspects of ourselves that we don't like it can be challenging to try and change them. When somebody else points out the aspects that need to change it can be easy to reject them and their idea that growth needs to occur. Parents and teens often face this dilemma of relationship. Teens are in a stage that they are finding their identity and trying out new things. Plotkin (2008) describes this stage in vivid detail:

There's an urgency to make something of oneself, to plunge into the social world, to fire up new varieties of relationships, to leap into love and heroic adventures, to take on risky and unfamiliar responsibilities, to choose a direction in life, to seek a mate or a lover, to develop a style, a flair, a name, a gig, a special talent, a distinctive personality. (p. 167)

Self-reflection is often thrown to the wayside to make room for new experiences and relationships during this time in life. The stimulation that can come from every direction in the form of technology, people, noise, and movement can distract from seeing who one

really wants to be. With parents seeing their teens making choices they don't feel are appropriate for who they are, it is important for them that their teen is in a place that will help them see this too. In this way, the hope is that their teen will see some of the "dirt" that needs to be swept away for new self-awareness to occur.

## **Community**

The self-reflective space, that leads to personal growth, is also shared during an AT program. Teens become part of a community that includes other teens, wilderness instructors, and clinical counsellors. Gass, Gillis, and Russel (2012) believe "social learning is perhaps the most powerful therapeutic factor at work in a wilderness therapy experience in AT" (p. 78). This belief stems from the social components inherent in AT programs such as support, feedback, shared goals, common objectives, cooperation, shared reflections, and the overall necessity of interpersonal as well as intrapersonal communication (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012). The parents interviewed also believed in the therapeutic value of community as part of their teen being "nurtured in the soil." This is clearly evident through a parent iterating: "I am a full believer in the healing power of community, um, tight community, living in community..." One parent described the counselling aspect of the AT program as being practiced in a "non-sterile" environment, furthering the metaphor of change occurring where there is dirt. The words of this parent can also be interpreted to mean an environment where people get to know one another in more intimate ways through sharing each others experiences and working together through challenges instead of a less formal environment, such as an office. The counsellor in an AT environment may hike a mountain with the youth and celebrate the accomplishment together with them instead of conceptualize the

experience, in a closed room, through a voiced description of the event. One parent describes the different kind of counselling environment AT offers in this way:

Well I think sitting in an office and you know it's the same kind of questions, you know its how are you feeling today and how does that make you feel, compared to sitting around the campfire and just talking and having your feelings come out...like if you're paddling down a river and you ask them a question they wouldn't take it the same as if you were sitting in an office...and I think too because you're all young and you're all, you like to do all those nature things, like you're more, I don't know if the word is cool, is the way, but he can relate better to you than the person in the high heels and the suit.

The active side of having supportive, intuitive and empathic instructors and counsellors is illustrated through this next parent's explanation of how reflective opportunities are fostered:

...reflection and introspection that's guided by professionals who know how to do that right. How to guide people through their feelings and emotions...and that's the difference between, I think, the adventure therapy and just the going out and doing, going out with a group in the wilderness, and the difference is somebody is there to pick on that...And those opportunities are happening all the time in our lives, we are making comments we are saying things, doing things that if someone understood the deeper meaning behind what we were saying and doing and could pick on it and create a reflective opportunity you can learn so much more...

In addition to the positive social aspects of interacting with clinical counsellors and wilderness instructors, who are trained to work with youth, parents communicated their

belief in the benefits of the peer community that AT offers. As one parent describes:

“Here...you guys guide but you also let the kids guide, and you also let them really bond with eachother, strengthen those relationships, that doesn't happen in a therapy session, there isn't a group setting generally...” Another parent discovered components of his son's need for community through the therapeutic effects, that being with peers who had similar issues, had on his son during his time in the AT program:

...with the whole counselling thing, is the whole thing about community right...the fact of meeting regularly as a group and basically talking and letting everyone have their turn, expressing their views to help realize that your not alone and you shouldn't be afraid to say what you want etcetera in a sort of very respectful environment, but we didn't know about that before.

The peer community within an AT program can help cultivate social competence in teenagers. The effectiveness of social behaviours, that are developed within the context of personal relationships, can indicate whether youth are psychologically, socially, and emotionally healthy (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012). Often the social behaviours that have been fostered in teenagers who come to AT are not very effective at addressing presenting personal problems. One parent describes the social process many teenagers go through as they deal with internal struggles:

...and without having to have the whole poser façade that all these kids have and really deep down inside they're all just scared and they're anxious and they don't know what the hell is going on...So they put on these masks of these characters. Oh I

know, I'll be this character, ill dress like this, this is who I am. Or, I'll do that therefore this is who I am. Here they get to take the mask off.

Taking off the “mask” and being their authentic selves is a component of AT programs that youth often find difficult and need to grow into, as they are nurtured. It takes a safe and respectful environment for this to happen as this parent describes: “So it’s the holding the opposites of people feeling safe and very safe in a respectful place and yet because of that you are able to push and challenge so that growth and learning happens.” During the CanAdventure AT program youth participate in an activity designed to foster group safety, authenticity and respect. A positive peer environment for their teenagers was meaningful to parents because they had seen their child integrate with negative peers in the home environment. A desire for positive influences on their teenagers, so that they will make better decisions in the future, is evident among parents. One parent hoped the friendships made during the AT program would continue after it ended:

Over and Over again about them every time I talk to her on the phone and its not a crush. They are like brothers mom, and it is so cool, we are such good friends. That camaraderie, that strength that the three of them will have, I really hope we can maintain that somehow because it will be important.

### **Physical Activity**

“I think if you make whatever activities they are doing fun, then its easier to accept the counselling part too, or opening up and talking to other people...” This parent gave meaning to the physical challenge and activity utilized in AT programs. The meaning he gave was that physical activities that are fun will be barrier breakers; that physical challenge

will tear down the walls of insecurity and promote openness among participants. I interpret this to mean parents want their teenagers to be more physically active and healthy so that they can also be more emotionally active and healthy. Part of the getting “dirty” process in AT programs is being outside on muddy trails and sleeping on the ground or sitting and eating on the ground. The physical activity that takes place outside is part of the nurturing process that stimulates emotional health. Part of the emotional health that parents desire for their teenagers is a stronger autonomous motivation and this, according to (Gass, Gillis, and Russell (2012), is facilitated through the psychological need of competence. When a person feels like they know how to do something well, or has succeeded at a task, they will feel better about themselves. In other words, competence breeds confidence. One parent described the adventure side of the AT programs as: “...rewarding activity that is going to give them a sense of accomplishment, maybe overcome fears or doing things that they wouldn’t normally have opportunity to do...” Another parent described how youth often exercise needed physical activity that results in negativity and then contrasted this to how an adventure activity could provide more positive outcomes. She illustrated:

...they get so lost, they don’t know who they are, they don’t know what they want. They are just kind of like, well this looks like fun, I’ll do this and I need exercise for my muscles for adventure so I’m going to do it in a negative way as opposed to, wow, I’m going to climb that mountain, can you believe I climbed that mountain, oh my god, and it’s a sense of accomplishment that they did on a personal level.

Although the research on AT dialogues about physical activity and adventure in relation to competence and confidence primarily, parents had another idea of how physical activity could be therapeutic and helpful. As one parent vocalized:



Our son, in particular, is very kinetic and he needs to see it and smell it and touch it and move with it, his desire to experience that rush, that freedom can come from adventure activities and that hopefully would satisfy him so he could open his mind and his heart so that he could be open to learning and absorbing.

The concept of physical activity creating an open heart is also seen in the voices of these parents: “I think, um, for example physical activity will challenge you but also helps you put your guard down in terms of talking about other things, I think you’re more open, so that’s how I think the physical helps...”, and, “...once he got physical he got some kind of relief, you know, release, so that’s why this appealed to me because its physical, its outdoors and for my son I know that he would talk easier, relax more when he had that physical release at the same time.” Instead of conquering a mountain inducing a sense of accomplishment, as the main focus of how outdoor activities could be therapeutic, parents focused on the connection to nature as the healing or rewarding element. This parent explains her idea of this connection as it relates to youth: “...so for them when they are kayaking having to really attune with nature, with the water, with the boat, with the direction, with everything, it’s rewarding.” Although ten out of eleven parents spoke about the benefits of adventure and physical activity, there was one parent who didn’t believe that the activity aspect of the program would challenge her son. She said:

You see in our situation it’s very different because I understand other parents here their kids grew up in cities and my son has been hunting since he was little. My son has done things that probably these kids have never even heard or known about...So our, it’s a little bit different than people that come with kids who’s never been like

that outdoors and never doing that and not incredibly adventurous or stuff like that, he is...so the adventure part in this, I doubt that that's (pause), yeah its cool for him.

This teen in particular had had amazing outdoor adventures in multiple countries and spent a lot of time in challenging physical situations outdoors. His mother was interested in the emotional benefits of nature and the outdoors, but for her, there would be no physical challenge at the program that would impact her son. Although this mother showed skepticism, within it she also revealed a meaning behind adventure that stayed congruent with the rest of the parents; that physical wellness supports emotional wellness. The sequence may look something like this: physical challenge and adventure will create difficulty, cause challenge, inspire perseverance, build strength, show capability, provide pride in self, induce growth and create a positive decision making milieu where youth can look to the future in a healthier manner.

The nurturing processes that take place during an AT program, according to parents, happens in individual and intimate ways. The focus on each participant is based on what they need internally, not just on surface issues. In addition, parents are concerned that their teenagers have space and time for introspection and self-reflection. This introspection occurs within a safe and respectful community and is also cultivated through physical activity which creates an open heart and emotional growth.

### **The Emerging Sprout (A Different Future)**

The overarching reason for parents to enroll their teen in an AT program, after all of the decision making, separation, and nurturing, is for some kind of small crack, large epiphany, or major life decision to occur; in other words, change. At some level parents want

a different future for their teenager, than the one they envisioned prior to AT; they want their teenager to emerge as a fresh sprout.

### **Hesitation and Hope**

Of interest to this part of the analysis are parental thoughts that display hesitation in believing that there will have been an internal and/or external change in their child. As one parent articulates: "...I really want him to be ok, I mean he thinks he is, I don't know we'll see. I'm a little bit apprehensive." Another parent asks the question: "Thirty-two days in nature, I mean something has to happen to you...right?" When asked about expectations, one parent began with: "There is, that's the lowest level expectation is he went through something and it sounds pretty cool, he probably learned a few things and it does or doesn't help him." Still another parent revealed her inner feelings around outcomes when she said: "I'm very wary of having too many expectations and I get nervous of, like I was hearing a couple people having huge expectations and in my mind I'm like, oh my goodness, they are setting themselves up for frustration and disappointment..." After having so much difficulty with her daughter, another mother thought it was naïve to put her entire hope in one program and offered her philosophy on expectations in life:

...cause she is so, or she was, we'll see, so unhappy and so disturbed...I'm not putting everything on it (the program), don't worry I'm not naïve, but I hoped and prayed that the experience here would really help her...I've come to the conclusion in life that you shouldn't really have too many expectations, that God's gonna lead and you're gonna go and do whatever you can do in your power and everyone else

has the ability to do whatever they can do in their power and you actually have no control over anyone else.

The hesitation disclosed by these parents also exposes the hope they have for their children. One parent spoke of her expectations and then declared: “That was my expectation (pause) no that was my hope.” A different parent indicated after speaking about hesitation:

I’m hoping it’s unlocked him, I hope it will have shaken him free from where he was lodged...I’m hoping that this will be a baby step...So if you’re asking what my hope is, my hope is that he doesn’t see that (what he was doing before) as a choice.

One parent sums up hope simply when she says: “...so I really truly hope that he’ll be ok.” Being “ok” is somewhat different for each parent and yet each parent has that same hope. As parents who believed in the positivity of the program they expressed hope in this way: “Well, everything that she’s got here, let’s hope she holds onto it”, and, “whatever will come of this will come of this and I’m hoping and praying that it’s a very positive outcome, and I think it will be.” After a helpless search for something to ameliorate the families’ struggles and the subsequent decision to enroll her son in the AT program one parent shared: “I don’t think I had too many expectations, I was just really um helpless so anything, I just was hoping that something would happen, you know...” Still another parent shared how the loss of time spent in nature together with her daughter led to a loss of the calming effect nature had for her, and yet she continued with hope. She stated: “...when we did that that was the difference in her, it was the calming, it got rid of the anxieties and somehow I lost that, or she lost it, I don’t know, but I’m hoping, I do have hope, and if you’ve ever been hopeless, you grasp at hope.” The resounding message of hope is seen in the voices of these parents.

This means they did not give up on their children, although circumstances were almost unbearable at times, but believed that growth and transformation was possible. This testifies to the enduring love parents have for their children, even through the heartache.

### **Spiritual Mindfulness**

Spending time in nature will allow a deeper use of the senses, if we acknowledge them. Or as this parent articulated: “And you know there is so much to learn from nature, if you just stop and look.” Time spent in nature allows a different level of sense awareness to surface as they are awakened, developed, and practiced. Central to Buddhist teaching is the practice of awareness (White, 1993). Awareness, according to Buddhism, can lead to the end of suffering as one becomes moral, through being fully aware of thoughts and actions, as well as developing wisdom and compassion for others (White, 1993). Although these same sentiments may be expressed differently in different religious teachings, Buddhism has a focus on mindfulness and awareness, and these were also present in the voices of the parents. Becoming aware of life processes were talked about as a human journey, by one parent, but early awareness of life process was believed to arise from participation in the AT program, as this parent expressed:

There are processes that we all go through as individuals and we go through them at different times in our lives. I think these kids are really fortunate. I think something like this really gives them a heads up in life, like wow. To be able to have that kind of awareness at this age is huge.

The use of the senses, together with awareness, that produces intimacy with nature, was described by this parent:

when they are kayaking or doing something that they're more in alignment, like they have to listen and hear and they have to watch because mother nature is something that we don't control at all and so you have to align yourself more with mother nature which I think is something that is out of their, out of the norm for them.

Awareness is important, in the outdoors, for more than one reason. Aligning with "mother nature" can allow you to keep safe in the outdoors because it can be harsh environment, and as this parent describes:

I can't remember the last time I heard the wind until the workshop facilitator made us sit there and listen. I wouldn't have even noticed it you know, and to awaken our senses...like you hear the loon in the morning and it just brings you back, you know, I've got bills but let's take a minute and look at that...

Using the senses in the outdoors can create mindfulness that allows a "being in the moment". This simple act of being is a process, as this parent describes: "...it's the consistent exposure and then they start to shed away from what they think they are supposed to be feeling and doing to just actually being." Truly seeing what surrounds us in nature, in all its simplicity and beauty, permits the moment to become clear and a kind of present-ness to occur. As this parent describes: "So to me just being outdoors is just like a grounding thing its quiet, its peaceful, it connects you, its life simplified again." The spiritual aspect of nature was directly addressed as this parent spoke about her decision regarding AT: "...when I found out about this there was no question about the type of therapy...I believe in spiritualism, and when I read the wilderness therapy that played a big part in it as well, it was about spiritualism, to me that's what it meant." In my own experience, the most memorable,

meaningful, and spiritual times in my life have been spent in nature. Natural places have been where I have discovered who I am and what I want to be doing with my life, now and in the future. It is difficult, in nature, not to be aware of immediate surroundings and have this inevitably lead to being aware of what is within.

### **Transformation and Healing**

Russell and Gillis (as cited in Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012) identify skill development, strengthening sense of self, insight, motivation, and frame/metaphor as outcomes of adventure experiences. Parents have their own way of describing the change that occurs through AT, however the desired outcome is still transformation and healing. This generally takes the form of stopping previous negative behaviours and moving towards more positive choices. This process is described by a parent who believes in nature's power:

...just being moved to tears by a tree would never happen in normal everyday life just walking around or hurrying around to get where you need to go um, but when you're focus is just being, then one can truly see what's around you and when you see what's around you, you are moved and that in itself I think is healing.

The actual transformation that parents desire for their teenagers is specific to the issues each of them is facing. One parent who's son had a difficult time expressing his emotions said she wanted of her son: "For him to be able to articulate more how he feels, and again, to hear how we feel, you know and just to be able to have those discussions. Yeah. So I'm not looking for miracles, I'm just looking for more discussion." The transformation desired by another parent focused on the internal and external aspects of who her son is: "I wanted him to build his self-esteem, build his confidence, see his potential, see his gifts, I wanted him to

just have fun with other kids here...to be away from pot, to get back to himself..." Still another parents desired her daughter to let go of past hurts and love herself:

Like, I just want her to love herself, I want her to love herself and love where she is and just be content...and this was something big that needed to happen for her to go deep, I kept telling her...go deep, go deep because you've got to let those demons go...

Letting go of past events, which caused pain, was also a yearning of one parent who hope her son would deal with the past during the AT program and then discuss it with her. She expressed:

I think to be able to discuss his feelings, about what's going on, about what's going on with the house, what's going on with him, how he feels about me and his dad's separation...I wanted him to deal with those things, if he can, and then talk to us about it...

Among the parents interviewed, being accountable for actions was also important as part of the transformation process. Accountability is often called for when people are observed as engaging in negative behaviours. The idea that admitting fault, or recognizing the result of one's choices will lead to change, is common. Adults tend to place this responsibility on young people in an effort to have them admit guilt or wrongdoing and thus grow and learn. Although this occurs at the family level, this is also seen at the societal level in our justice system. The social institution of the courts sees admission of guilt as the first step to change or to sealing a fate. Difficulty, and longer trials, arise when the accused sees themselves as innocent or when they don't see their actions as having been wrong. Many youth disagree



with their parents in terms of their actions and don't see the implications of their actions on themselves or the people around them. Elkind (as cited in Arnett, 2010) says this is due to adolescents' egocentrism and the ideas of an imaginary audience and the personal fable. Having an imaginary audience becomes a part of adolescent thought process as they think largely about themselves and thus believe others think largely about them as well. Built on this, the personal fable is a belief that there must be something special about yourself because everyone is looking and caring about what you do (Arnett, 2010). These beliefs can lead to risky behaviour because often actions gain attention, and attention from parents specifically. If youth feel they aren't being observed or watched by their parents, the inherent need for belonging and acceptance arises and risky behaviour, designed to get attention results. In other cases, a lack of parent observation, may transfer to youth as a lack of care and leads to the belief that behaviour doesn't matter. Although youth may present as hoping their parents don't observe their behaviour, human nature doesn't lie. Each youth desires the connection and love that should come from relationship with a parent. Connected to the personal fable is a phenomenon known as the optimistic bias which centers around the idea that the negative results of risky behaviour won't happen to me, they will happen to someone else (Arnett, 2010). The relationship between parent and teenager is discussed as this parent expresses how she feels about her son taking responsibility for his actions:

...it is just devastating and especially when you really do everything for him and if he has, you know he has so much potential and he has parents that can give him amazing opportunities...we don't struggle which means financially we can do a lot for him but I won't, not until I know, because I'm not letting my money go down his

throat or up his whatever, I'm not doing that anymore. So he will have to take responsibility for that. That's basically it.

The give and take relationship between parents and youth can often seem one sided for parents, and yet as their children get older, want more autonomy, and begin to make decisions for self, parents expect more from them. When families have been hurt by a teenagers actions the hope of family transformation centers on that teenager seeing what their actions have initiated. One parent emotionally shared her struggles when she revealed:

I don't know what she's told you about our life, but that girl has her life handed to her in so many amazing beautiful ways...everyone else sees it except her and its really difficult because...I work so hard to support them and love them and nurture them and do the things that are best for them...and when she does these things or says these things or believes these other people when they have proven nothing to her and we have proven everything to her, its just like (noise and action like stabbing in the heart), and it kills and it hurts our relationship and it hurts me deeply...we'll stick with her, but she's gotta want it too...

The struggle parents go through as they watch their teen make hurtful decisions leads to the desire to see transformation occur. This transformation and healing happens at a personal level and parents believe it requires accountability for previous actions. The transformation hoped for by parents is also anticipated to lead to a different future for their teen.

### **A Different Future**

The parent who had returned home with her son prior to the interview, shared what she saw in her son due to his participation in the AT program: "...but I see a child wanting a

future, knowing where he is going, having goals, planning..." This particular youth struggled with suicide, so for her to see his desire for a future was a huge success. Another parent had seen his son struggle with decisions about moving forward in life and desired a more specific outcome:

my expectation is that he take a next step, that within a week of being back he had something he was working towards doing, whether its I'm going to get this job...Or just anything he actually initiates and follows through with that we see not just, you know, I'm going to clean my room. Something that's really of positive stuff...

Other parents didn't necessarily expect action to happen immediately but wanted the thought process about the future to begin. One father spoke of the rut that he and his son were in, as they fought over what was best for him, and in terms of expectations disclosed:

So we are trying to break that vicious cycle, but more importantly to get him to think about what he wanted out of life and how he's going to get there...So almost like reboot the whole relationship and his priorities and to help set him on a path.

Part of what parents want for their teens through their teens' participation in the AT program is autonomous decision making skills for the journey of life. The decision making aspect of life is exactly what this study is about in regards to parents, and it is what the parents also want for their children. One mother shares her love and wishes for her son:

I just want him to make wise decisions, I don't want him to make what I want him to make, but I want him to make smart decisions whatever that is, if it is, and what path he wants to walk, you know, he's a brilliant young man and he has so much to give.

He is such an amazing boy and he's kind and he's compassionate and he's tender and he has all these amazing characteristics...

Another parent discussed how she, "wanted him (her son) to be able to see better choices and see the results of his choices, to have a journey he'd never forget", not only for her sake, but for his own future. For some parents the desire for their teen to make life-long future decisions was evident, but for others they knew that was possibly asking too much. This parent says:

I'm sure he's strong enough to make a choice and the momentum that he will have gained from this will push him through the summer but September I'm not sure, and I'm curious to hear...for us how to support him and help him move forward.

The awareness on this parents' part about continued help is encouraging. When a teenager completes the AT program, they aren't automatically "fixed", like a car coming out of the mechanic shop. They continue to need support, encouragement and life tools. As one parent expressed when asked about her expectations of the program: "...to plant a seed, I was looking for that seed." Although the teens that enter and leave AT have fallen from their communities, been planted as a seed in a new environment, been nurtured in the soil of nature, and emerge as new sprouts, they still need water, sunlight, and nutrients. They still need the love of their parents, the support of society, and positive therapeutic outlets.

## CHAPTER FIVE: WITHIN THE GARDEN

### **Implications for Family, Society, and Adventure Programming**

#### **Family**

Once teenagers arrive back home from the Adventure Therapy (AT) program they once again enter the garden of life. This usually means they return to the family home environment which may or may not have changed while they were gone. As was seen throughout this study some parents feel the need to work on their own, or their families', issues while their teenager is away. Other parents feel the struggle resides more within the teen themselves who needs to see the value in their family as a whole. As this parent exclaimed:

My expectations is that he was going to have these great epiphanies of figuring things out and kind of coming to the realization of how stinkin' wonderful his life is and how lucky he is and you know just really embrace the blessings and all of the advantages that he has which are so abundant compared to most families.

Parents are considered and used appropriately as a safety net by children and adolescents. The family is meant to be the safest place where children and teens can be. In today's society the family unit looks increasingly diverse and it is questionable how this is affecting the safety net role. Gass, Gillis, and Russell (2012) explain their perspective:

Institutions that provide the foundations of community are falling apart, leaving the community safety net in tatters. Parents, exhausted by long hours required to make ends meet or demoralized by their inability to cope with hardships of juggling careers

and family, are distancing themselves from children. Kids are left on their own in essentially adultless communities. (p. 101)

If children are primarily raising themselves or being raised by screens, the family is on a precipitous edge. One of the beautiful aspects of family is the concept of mentorship.

Throughout life, lessons are learned and these lessons can be passed down to subsequent generations. The important lessons are often taught from parent to child during meaningful times spent together and takes awareness of the present moment, understanding of the person, and the ability to communicate emotions and knowledge. As was discussed in the study, parents and teens can get into behaviour and interaction habits which make it difficult for mentorship to occur. Interestingly, Arnett (2010) suggests parent/adolescent conflict is common in North American culture but quite rare in traditional cultures. It could be that there is something in Canadian society, such as lack of time spent together, that is causing a disconnect between family members. One of the goals of AT programs is to address this family disconnect and help reconstruct family relationships. The CanAdventure Education AT program provides activities for families to do at home while their teen is in the program and keeps in contact with families throughout the month. As was mentioned previously, parents are also invited to attend a three day workshop at the end of the program in which they learn about AT and have the opportunity to reconnect to nature, themselves and their teen, in a new way. Once the families reunite work is facilitated focusing on the parent/teen relationship issues and sessions can be arranged with a clinical counsellor. In many First Nations cultures there is a belief that all of nature are our “relations”. Many lessons can be learned from the mentoring that happens through our relations in nature, and

through other special people in our lives, but nothing replaces the connection of human family.

## **Society**

According to Palmer (2009), the seven major social institutions are family, community, religion, academia, business, media, and government. The family has been touched on in the previous section so the other aspects of society will be briefly discussed in relation to youth and AT programs. The youth of society are the next generation of change-makers. Whether in regards to the environment, technology, education, social assistance, government, religion or any other aspect of society, it is the youth of today who will be making the decisions of tomorrow. In an increasingly diverse society understanding institutions may not be as important as understanding people and relationships. One parent touched on this when he said, of the AT program:

...yeah, and it can only enrich him, you know cause I think the more exposure you can get to people of different ways of thinking, different backgrounds etc. the more you learn about the world, the more you are going to accept other people.

Regardless of what part of society is being engaged with, personal relationship skills are vital. The focus on inter and intra-personal skills during AT programs can thus help the community of society immensely by showing its young citizens a healthy way of being. Community may also be enhanced through graduates of AT programs who make different choices regarding substance use, aggression, or illegal behaviours. In addition, youth who begin once more to engage in community will potentially share their gifts with those around them and benefit society as they enter into who they are meant to be.

It is often the academic environment where teenagers are involved, or pressured to be involved, in society the most. It is debatable whether forcing children into mainstream education or helping teens perform better at school will actually be beneficial for them, their families, or society. Some AT programs have an education focus, although the parents involved in this study didn't want this application for their teens. Most Canadians see formal education as the prerequisite for a predictable life path of employment and financial success (Ungerleider, 2003). School attendance is one of the standards for measuring delinquency in young people, personally if not legally, and success in school can label children and teens as "normal" citizens. Ungerleider (2003) believes as autonomy increases in society so does the focus on the individual as well as the satisfaction of individual needs and wants over the collective well-being. A focus on individual talents, abilities and efforts which, if excelled at, can transcend social and economic limitations leads the individual to be placed in a competitive market with other individuals (Ungerleider, 2003). There is a famous saying, attributed to Albert Einstein, which reads, "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." Children and teens that do not learn via the methods knowledge is presented to them will generally not be motivated to continue in the school environment. This may also lead to a belief that their talents, abilities, and efforts are not good enough for societal success. When teens compare themselves to the societal standard and find themselves falling short they may not know where to turn and may be halted in their understanding of who they are meant to become. As parents see their youth struggle in the school environment they may feel helpless as to what to do. One parent interviewed shared the difficulty of this kind of situation:



...you know every single day he'd try and go to school and I said to my husband, you know he can only handle feeling like crap every day for so long and he's gonna do something drastic, because...I could hardly stand seeing him feel like a failure every time he couldn't get up and go to school and he would feel so bad...in the beginning you would get angry, it is a teen issue so you get angry or we'd have consequences or we'd try bribing and in the end you realize...it's not about any of that and everything shifted and it was just about loving our son.

Letting go of traditional school attendance and success, as measurements of social and emotional health, is difficult, and is not the direction that Canadian society is heading. Within the last fifty years high school education has become the norm and post-secondary attendance continues to rise (Ungerleider, 2003). As parents begin to believe in a different way, such as the mother quoted above, society may also begin to see the benefit in nurturing children and youth based on who they are and not towards a predetermined outcome. AT programs are designed to foster the uniqueness of individuals in a way that exposes the gifts that people can bring to community. The way of nature is a way that any learner can discover from and feel completely adequate within its "walls". Encouraging outdoor programming within school curriculum is another way that students may have improved and enhanced learning that would be beneficial for life, not just economic success. Outdoor learning environments can teach within the cognitive and factual domains but also attend to the emotional and spiritual aspects of a person (Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin, & Ewert, 2006). This is witnessed during AT programs, and thus this kind of program could be a positive model for educational institutions to learn from.

Adventure Therapy programming also has implications for religion, media, business, and government. The spiritual side of human beings is reflected in nature, as was discussed previously, and could initiate a desire for religious affiliation, spark new ways of connecting to larger forces outside ourselves, or introduce more peaceful people to society. The purpose of AT is not to benefit religious institutions, but naturally draws out the spiritual aspects of being. Media, as a source of information and communication, spreads knowledge and has the ability to influence people, and thus society. The AT influence on people is what will eventually make its way to the media, especially social media, and possibly offer a positive message to others. The business implications from AT programs could be direct or indirect. As businesses themselves, some AT programs, add to the economic value of society. Indirectly, AT programs can help the youth of society begin to see where they fit in the economic sector and engage with businesses in a way that benefits themselves, the business, and the environment in a holistic way. One parent interviewed tied the symbolism of AT programs into the working life process this way:

Definitely one big component here is...the symbolic connection or the actual physical thing you're doing is connected to something that ties it together so when you move forward in life and you learn how to be a cook at McDonalds and then you learn how to do something else in a job, um, you might learn a bunch of things and go through a certain passage through life and eventually get to a point where you could reflect back and say, that crappy job I had at McDonalds it actually taught me a lot of things about whatever, but while you're there there's nothing that's helping you tie that together into what it means to you...so what I see about the adventure therapy program here is that you're learning a connectedness between things...and chances

are you're going to start applying those same kinds of thoughts to things in your life when you go back to the city...and having to deal with technology and the world around him and processes and all the complexities we've built up...it could be this is actually...leading to a purpose and its connecting purpose to things you're doing and hopefully being able to hold onto that when you have tough times...because everybody does right...

This parent valued the symbolism of connectedness that the AT program had which could demonstrate to a young person how events in life relate to one another and nurture growth. One important point this parent also brought up is the value that connectedness in life has on resiliency. The ability to see how life events connect and play a role in growth can provide the strength that is needed to face difficulties that arise with courage and positivity. A society with more resilient citizens who rely on internal fortitude and community will benefit business, among other things, and will place less reliance on larger institutions such as government.

Government is often where society turns when help is needed. This results in social programs which try to offer the required aid and often fall short. This was realized in parent voices earlier in the study, and is seen through the view of this parent:

...we always fix things after, but we got to deal with our justice system, we have a problem with this kid now, well where were you when they were wandering the streets because they didn't have a home to go to...?

One aspect of social programs is housing and living support, another aspect is mental health treatment. "Access to mental health treatment should be a basic and fundamental human

right” says Gass, Gillis, and Russell (2012). In addition, mental health treatment standards should ideally attend to the individual and be holistic in nature. The youth mental health statistics discussed earlier shows a failure in the government appointed system which could partially be addressed through AT programs. The ability of AT programs to address some of the issues that arise in society, due to youth and family concerns, eases the pressure placed on mental health systems and can showcase an alternative model. According to Ungerleider (2003), the majority of political parties believe “training youth for the work world” (p. 29) is the most important task to be attained by young people, through schooling, with “creating good citizens” (p. 29) and “creating inquiring minds” (p. 29) as less important. If schools are left as the main societal institution to support youth and families, but work training is the primary goal, then this solidifies how the Canadian government is also failing Canadian young people and their families. If relying on the government for support is not the answer then something else, such as community and alternative AT programming, may be part of the solution.

### **Adventure Programming**

The implications of this study for adventure programming are consistent with the effects on family and society. Burg (2001) says programs are tailored to fit the needs of specific families, so it is important to know what those needs are in order to develop the program and have consistency of results. This study has shown what some of the specific needs of families are, such as availability of alternatives to traditional therapy; opportunity for immersion in nature; separation of family members for growth and healing; introduction to other cultures and new ways of thinking; accessibility of places that youth will accept; instruction for youth around personal issues; and an holistic focus on youth well-being. One

parent summed up the need for AT programs for youth when she stated: “The problem with society, in this day and age, is there aren’t a lot of positive outlets for them.” Currently, AT is a positive outlet with a focus on providing holistic growth for mainly young individuals apart from their families. Another aspect of the present study is the inquiry into whether families would participate in an AT program altogether and/or whether adults feel it could be beneficial for them personally.

Including family work in the design of an AT program seems like a crucial addition which fits with a systems approach and provides maximum benefit to an individual or family as a whole. The families interviewed believed AT programs would benefit families altogether as well as saw the challenges inherent in conducting family therapy in this type of setting. There was recognition among parents that all people can benefit from nature and outdoor activity, whether that is children, teens, parents, or individual adults, and that the benefits happen even if a person isn’t particularly struggling or in need of treatment. As one parent expressed in regards to offering AT for families and adult demographics:

...absolutely, are you kidding? It would be the most wonderful, I think you should have week ones for parents. Or ten days or something, some little crash thing where we could come, and...I was thinking these kids get to experience it because they are sick but like you know, to experience it just to grow in life...

Another parent brought up the issue that there is little out there for adults in terms of AT and that all people could benefit from a program with that focus which would inevitably benefit families:

I can't imagine a group it wouldn't be helpful for or an individual, even...but definitely something for couples for individuals for adults, I would love it, I would absolutely love it. I mean we had it today, it didn't take more than a couple of minutes before everybody was weeping, you know we have so much garbage locked up inside of us that we are dying to get rid of and there is so little place, and yeah that's unfortunate, and I think if you could have these sorts of programs for adults um, then the families going to benefit right.

One parent even spoke about the preventative measures that AT could provide for families:

AT for families would provide that grounded, that foundation, that cohesiveness to work from and then having other professionals, like working with your family then I think it would be a preventative measure more because there would be things...that were exposed as a result of it...like communication issues or emotional issues that would have or could have been a problem down the road had they not ever been exposed.

An actual framework of a parent program was discussed by this parent but included cost as a limitation:

...well I could see coming into a program like this where there is some point along and then you go kayaking together, like your involved with the activities together for a period, maybe not all of it, I think there could be ways, it depends, of course then the other component is the cost because the more people involved it's a higher cost for all of you...

The same framework was mentioned by this parent with the time factor as a hindrance:

... I was saying there should be a parent program so you know have two places and the kids go there and the parents go there and you know everybody's on the adventure...and eventually they come together and share their experience. Except most parents can't take 32 days and go off in the wilderness but yea I think it would be beneficial.

This same framework again was discussed by a parent who eventually came to the conclusion that having AT as a family together was just too difficult logistically and because individual issues need to be addressed first:

...its very idealistic that would require logistical, quite a lot of organization and really what it's going to be in the end would be individual therapy...it's not just oh yeah yeah right it's the whole family, it can't work like that because...you're literally saying it's actually 5 individuals that needs to be counselled individually to become back as a cohesive group.

Another parent spoke at length about his interest in AT programs dedicated to families and suggested it was akin to a family vacation where learning and growth occur as new ideas and experiences take place. The family vacation idea was introduced because of time and work commitments most parents have and the potential inability to get parental leave for something so little understood as AT. In addition, most parents continued to mention and believe that some separation of family members was beneficial. So the current equation to figure out, by AT practitioners who want to include family AT in a program, is how to work on family issues while at the same time giving family members space to work on individual

issues. This also needs to happen within a time frame that functions for working parents, that is cost effective, and is desirable for all family members.

The inclusion, within this study, of parental expectations of AT programs adds to the current research in AT, as discussed in the literature, and offers insight into development of adventure programs. Parents want to trust that a program will provide what it claims and believe that their hope is not in vain. Through application of this program fidelity is enhanced. The results of this study indicate that parental expectations revolve around stopping negative behaviour, attaining personal growth, and making more positive future choices. Although previously researched evidence based program outcomes such as enhanced self-concept, improved social skills, and decreased substance abuse may fall within those parameters, they were not the focus of parent expectations. Indeed, even the parents of youth with these issues, had chosen a program without these specific foci and had expectations that went beyond surface behaviours or self-concept. Instead parents wanted an individually focused program that would attend to their teens' unique needs. Although the program framework was accepted as constant, parents expected that program staff would get to know their teen and his/her issues and work together with them to begin resolution and healing. Thus individual treatment plans and activities tailored to specific needs are important to parents and to positive outcomes of treatment. Gass (as cited in Gass, Gillis, and Russell, 2012) explain how an individual focus during activities could work: "The goal is to provide a parallel kinesthetic structure where successful resolution of the intervening experience mirrors and provides guidance and meaning to successful resolution of the clients' issue." For example if a program participant feels frustrated and helpless within a parent relationship and has those same emotions during a difficult hike, but completes the



hike through determination, this can provide the knowledge that these difficult emotions can be overcome through internal means. The individual focus makes researching outcomes difficult among AT programs. Although evidence based practice is important, these parents did not choose a program based on the evidence of previously researched outcomes.

## CHAPTER SIX: FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

### **Future Research**

It is important within many helping professions to be seen as evidence based practices. It is for this reason that much of the research on AT has focused on the beneficial outcomes of programs for participants. Continued research could support AT as a viable mental health strategy, on par with other therapeutic modalities, through multiple sources of knowledge collaborating to find which evidence best supports the AT format. In their comprehensive review, Gass, Gillis, and Russell (2012) suggest that much of the literature around AT, in peer reviewed journals and other publications, focuses on single programs and contexts without utilizing stringent controls, experimental designs, or random assignments. This said, Harper (2010) believes evidence based practice could be a “false idol” where contrived outcomes are facilitated among program participants instead of emergent outcomes. Overall this study confirms Harper’s (2009) research that respite from the family dynamic was a positive aspect of choosing AT. Only a portion of parents interviewed confirmed Harper’s (2009) finding that removing the teen removed stress in the home, allowed regaining of control, and was a time for parents to reflect on family circumstances. The emotions of guilt and shame surrounding their teens’ behaviour and subsequent removal from the home, felt by parents in the Harper (2009) study, were not directly addressed in this study however they were witnessed in a portion of parents. As this parent shared: “I know I’ve done some bad things...but then I put the best I knew how, and I’m not going to beat myself up about it because it’s not going to get me anywhere, I’m just going to go ahead and see this as the beginning with some new tools.” Overriding parent guilt and shame were parent hopes for the future, around a more positive relationship with their teenager.

One of the major difficulties when conducting outcome research on AT is the fact that no two programs are the same (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012). Although Gass, Gillis and Russell refer to American programming, Canadian AT programs are also varied in their structure and program elements, which make an analysis across programs difficult. Studies based on one program alone often include little randomization and inadequate sample sizes to make distinct conclusions around the research topic (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012). This also makes it difficult to understand what direction research should take in terms of outcomes and evidence. Evidence of program benefits tend to be understood only when they are visual in nature, however as this study has shown, AT program outcomes are often subjective and internal. This makes outcomes difficult to see and measure. Attempting to measure subjective levels of change or growth within participants is an area that research could attend to, not only in the short term but also with a long term focus. Subjective growth research would have to be conducted in relation to a specific program model in order to apply a specific theoretical model to the change process. That said the theoretical models or frameworks applied to different programs could focus on different aspects of change. Research across programs on different theoretical models could also give more credibility to the practice of AT. Comparing clinical counselor approaches within various AT programs may also give insight into how AT fits into therapeutic treatment approaches as a whole. As the use of nature is a large part of AT programs, more research into how exposure to nature can influence mental health, satisfy our psyche, and make us happier people is warranted, although there are current studies in these areas. More research on the therapeutic outcomes of adult participation in outdoor activities could also be beneficial. Most research has focused on youth in the outdoors due to programs targeting that demographic, however

adults are interested and believe in the value of the outdoors. Research on how adults are therapeutically affected by adventure activities could also be timely in the potential development of adult programming.

### **Conclusion**

A mother that was interviewed for this study wisely stated: "...we sometimes assume that if you need professional help that that help needs to come from someone else but we have so much just within ourselves, and if someone could help you unlock it..." Adventure Therapy programs seek to help unlock the hidden gifts and resources within each individual. Many parents seek out AT for the potential benefits these programs can provide. Various theoretical frameworks are employed within AT programs to help youth in the areas of self-concept, social skills, substance use, physicality, and emotional well-being; promote better family relationships; and create healthier communities in society. Mindful Inquiry assisted me to look at the lived experiences of parents, the meaning experiences had for them, interpretation of these meanings, how parent experiences fit into social constructs, and how awareness grew from the process. Thematic analysis allowed me to search the data and create themes which told the nature story of the parent journey. The journey that parents took to make the decision to place their teen into an AT program often began before they even heard about the program itself. Strained family relationships led parents to look for support within their communities such as traditional therapy or school support. When none of the attempted options appeared to work, parents became helpless and frustrated, some reaching the "end of their rope". An internet search or personal contact led parents to the AT program which they investigated and chose thus departing their youth from the community and themselves. Parents understood AT to be a new environment which included nurture,

spending time outdoors, doing physical activity, fostering personal growth, and spending time in a caring community. From this place of nurture parents hesitantly expected and hoped that previous negative behaviours would stop; mindfulness would occur through introspection; transformation and healing would take place; and a different future would be realized. The implications of these findings for families, society and adventure programming are possible reconnection in relationships, healthier communities, and tailored programs for clients. More research is needed in the field of AT, in general, to continue its integrity as a therapeutic approach and as an option for families and individuals.

Finally, by adding in what may have been weak in the research process, a written report may help strengthen qualitative strategies for the future (Dupuis, 1999). One weakness inherent in this study is that these research findings cannot be generalized to other parents who have chosen the same or different AT programs. In addition, the nature of the AT program chosen by the interviewed parents may have influenced their understanding of AT as a whole. The subjective nature of this qualitative study makes the exact findings unrepeatable. The small sample size for this study allows for the voices of individuals to be heard in a phenomenological way, however a larger sample may have allowed for more generalizable findings overall. Another potential weakness is that thematic analysis is often not seen as an adequate method of analysis in its own right (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although the paper by Braun and Clarke (2006) provides clarity and argument for the validity of thematic analysis in its method and theory, there could still be an argument against its flexibility and poor demarcation. My hope is that this study would offer understanding into the parent decision of AT for their teenager as well as help to gain a perspective on the adult view of AT and provide a rationale for family and adult programs.

This study may be of interest to those who want to develop adult or family AT programs and for AT practitioners who want insight into the parent decision making journey. This may help practitioners and therapists with understanding of the family process, as they are involved in programs, and may also help in the marketing of programs to struggling families. To finish, may you interact and connect with nature in a holistic way, through adventure activities or otherwise, and fulfill a desire for health and happiness.

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## Appendix

Candidates may be exhibiting the following behaviours in their home environment:

- ~Major changes in image and personality
- ~Gravitation to a negative peer group
- ~Defiance and opposition to authority
- ~Low self-esteem
- ~Rebelliousness
- ~Displays of anger/rage/frustration
- ~Unreasonableness
- ~Failing in school
- ~Lack of motivation/confidence
- ~Engaging in minor illegal activities
- ~Extreme selfishness
- ~Lying
- ~Experimentation with drugs or alcohol
- ~Promiscuity
- ~Body image issues
- ~Sudden decline in grades, attendance, or attitude

In addition, some struggling teen candidates appropriate for CanAdventure Education programming may have been diagnosed with disorders such as:

- ~Oppositional Defiant Disorder
- ~Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- ~Depression
- ~Bipolar Disorder (if managed by medication)
- ~Mild eating disorder
- ~Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- ~Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (mild or managed by medication)

Family issues may include:

- ~Adoption
- ~Divorce
- ~Death
- ~Abuse (physical, verbal, sexual)
- ~Extreme sibling rivalry

Academic histories vary, but may include:

- ~Sudden decline in grades, attendance, or attitude
- ~Learning disabilities (mild to moderate with some compensatory skills)
- ~History of disruptive behaviour in the classroom
- ~Poor organizational/study skills
- ~Lack of motivation

Exclusions:

Due to safety considerations, the following exclusions must apply:

- ~Severe chronic depression
- ~Suicide risk
- ~Severe eating disorders
- ~Psychosis
- ~Antisocial Personality Disorder
- ~Extensive history of physical aggression
- ~Intermittent Explosive Disorder
- ~Multiple Personality Disorder
- ~Dissociative Disorder
- ~Severe self-mutilation
- ~Pyromania
- ~Physical drug dependency (require advance de-tox)
- ~Severe obesity
- ~Pregnancy

Due to the program's highly physical nature, students with substantial physical limitations or challenges would not be well served by CanAdventure Education programs.