

Teenage kicks

It's tough being a teenager – but building heart-felt relationships in the wilderness may help young people navigate a safer and more positive way through their adolescence says **Marina Robb**.

growing up has never been easy. But our current world wide web generation is having a really hard time. Technology may offer opportunities but it presents tough challenges as well – from the commercialisation of childhood, to the darker side of internet and mobile phone use. The introduction of mandatory personal, social and health education within secondary schools goes some way to addressing young people's emotional and social experiences but it is the emotional literacy of the teachers on which so much of this work depends! Who should take responsibility for the well being of our children?

The creation of the Respect Agenda last year touched on something that many of us who work with young people have been noting with increasing concern for some time. It's become clear that there are many gaps in our provision for teenagers. I believe that many of them boil down to the fact that we've forgotten how to supervise and create the right environments in which our young people can explore their boundaries safely without damaging each other or property.

In the past, communities developed ways of addressing this need to explore boundaries that both stretched adolescents and prepared them to take on a responsible adult role in their society. These were all based on the simple principle that the young people needed to explore who they were, and in a sense 'create' their identity, now that they had left the home. This needed to be undertaken as part of a challenging yet supervised programme, carried out not by parents but by 'elders', representatives of the wider community. As Steve Biddulph says in *Raising Boys*: "The spirit

of a boy is too great for a family to contain and his horizons are wider than a family can provide for." Traditional training provided, in a sense, the ultimate holistic education. Young people were challenged and learnt with their whole being; mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Through acquiring life skills and knowledge they earned the right to take their place as adults in their society and they learned how to be human beings.

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Here in Britain we have lost contact with these traditions, but they still exist elsewhere. Malidoma Some, in *Of Water and the Spirit*, has written of one such tradition that he experienced in Burkina Fasso in West Africa. Martin Prechtel has written of another practised in Guatemala in his book *Honey in the Heart*. This kind of learning is greatly needed for modern young people from all cultural backgrounds. There are few spaces for young people to play and develop a sense of community that goes beyond their school or family life. In our current society, when do we make time to enjoy each other's company? The elders with the young, the mothers with the maidens, time to, as a participant on one of our camps this year put it; "Talk to women of different generations without feeling they disapprove." I have found that young people are often surprised and relieved to discover that the



Finally the fire bursts into life



"building the bones of the earth", constructing the frame of a sweatlodge.

older generation have great humour and can be just as wild spirited!

More recently, American Indians have found that a revival of their old ways is the most effective method for getting an extremely demoralised youth back on the rails. Some of their methods have been incorporated in programmes run by Circle of Life Rediscovery. Rediscovery philosophy uses an experiential, hands-on approach to learning based upon traditional cultural teachings. With elders, adults, and youth forming their staff teams, Rediscovery camps re-create the experience of an extended family.

Participants learn bush-craft and wilderness skills, play games, have physical challenges, receive teachings and personal support, and get to experience a sense of community and connection to the earth that can empower them for years to come, and receive the nationally recognized John Muir Award. The camp experience is a magical, fun, and healing experience, "I've learnt that people aren't always

judgmental, its OK to be yourself, that you don't need TV if you have a fire, and that silence is enjoyable!"

Circle of Life

I founded Circle of Life Rediscovery and developed camps for young people following my training in Canada with Ghost River Rediscovery and the Rediscovery Foundation. This built on my experience in the field of environmental education and I felt ready to start producing on-the-land experiences for young people in Britain. I work with psychotherapist and group facilitator Annie Spencer who has been researching and developing rites of passage programmes for young people for some years.

The name 'Circle of Life Rediscovery', underlies our philosophy that we are all part of the Circle: people, rocks, plants, creatures, and the cycles of life that connect them.

Unlike Channel Four's recent "Brat Camp" our programmes aren't boot camps. But they do share some underlying principles. For the young people to progress through "Brat Camp's" Aspen programme in Utah, they had to learn and demonstrate a clear collection of skills. They were sent to sit alone on the land away from everyone, most of all their parents (and teachers), and consider their current situation. They had to spend time thinking about who they were and how they acted in order to learn self-discipline and self-respect. Only then could they move on to develop skills of co-operation, teamwork and respect for others.

Circle of Life Rediscovery draws on the natural world to help teenagers focus, reflect and grow. And we have found that growth can be fast. Although we can't take our young people into the wilderness (by Canadian standards!), by taking away familiar props like showers, hairdryers, warm houses and especially mobile phones we are challenging them. Substituting not privation, just difference – the light of the moon and the smell of wet plants, the pleasures of sleeping next to the earth, of lighting a fire with just a few sticks and old leaves, of making patterns on the ground with some old fir cones, of sitting round a warm fire, wrapped in the dark, listening to a tale of long ago. In such a situation, realities change very fast. So after a few days, a young girl can remark with surprise; "when my mum arrived she seemed to be coming from a different world."

This kind of experience can provide young people with their first chance for quiet, their first feeling of community, and the opportunity to try something different. In this new and 'other' place, change comes quickly. Here old patterns fall away and each situation is more easily met afresh. The camps provide what modern society struggles with – moments of introspection,



Wilderness animal games dispense with inhibitions

teamwork and acceptance, healthy play and rediscovering the world within themselves; the cultural differences between people; and the natural world around them.

The positive impact on participants is clear:

"I feel a lot more confident about being me. Everybody has different talents and are special in their own way," a youngster told us.

"I have learnt to remember I am not the only one that has to live in certain situations or with them, and its OK to be unique," said another.

Others told us: "I've learnt that there's so much life to live and that it's full of wonderful journeys that teach us and make us a little wiser;" "I have learned to value the things that matter," and "I can go into the wild and feel safe and content with people that I am not familiar with. It's encouraging."

Hearing the voices of elders enlivens the presence of the past and helps orient young people, as well as the staff who work with them. For young people with low self-esteem, to succeed in making a fire with three matches or follow tracks on a complex circuit increases self-confidence and is a lot of fun. To manage and look after yourself in a camp environment is an achievement. For bullied youngsters, it is important to be accepted in a group and be able to talk freely about their experience and receive support. For children with learning difficulties, they find they have practical skills that they are able to achieve like everyone else. And all of us meet new people, have a good time and try many new things.

For a young person on the verge of adulthood, this experience builds personal resources that are transferable to day-to-day life in any environment, urban or otherwise.

So what does the future hold?

Circle of Life Rediscovery intends to expand these camps to cover more of the U.K. We want to build partnerships with like-minded organisations, and continue to offer places to young people from all walks of life. We rely on funding, which this year has come from Local Network Fund and Awards for All. We want to build this experience into the curriculum, so schools can send their pupils on this cultural, outdoor experience as part of their personal, social and health education. We want to offer cultural exchange programmes where key participants get the chance to travel and meet other young people from different cultures, and reciprocate. At the heart of Rediscovery is respecting our relationship with the Earth and building a sustainable world.

Further information:

www.circleofliferediscovery.com



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