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## Helping Teens Grow Through Wilderness Program

Even though the chill of autumn is well upon us, it's always a great time to enjoy the outdoors—and it's also important for a youth's development to keep their connection to our natural world.

With teens so immersed in texting and video games and other tech-focused pursuits, they often lose both the connection to each other and to the world around them. That's why North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center designed our Wilderness Respite Program, which provides a unique opportunity for at-risk adolescents to participate in nature activities that foster individual growth, leadership skills, self-esteem and friendships while also promoting environmental stewardship.

Following is a "slice of life" from the program:

During one of the planning meetings for an upcoming hike, a few of the boys tried to take control of the situation by dominating the other group members through physical

One of the more idyllic moments of the wilderness program.



PARENTHOOD PLUS  
**ANDREW MALEKOFF**

posturing and verbal banter. That all changed once the teens drove to the state park and departed from the van. We found ourselves immersed in the forest, with no pavement, stores, traffic lights or any of the usual trappings of the home neighborhood—the kind of



Some of the less forgiving terrain the kids had to traverse.



Kids bonding on the bridge.

natural environment many of the teens had rarely if ever experienced.

To our surprise, the boys did not volunteer to lead the way. Instead, they followed the girls, who became models of leadership. Little by little, all of the teens learned to work together, decoding the trail markers located on trees and rocks. Relying on their growing awareness of themselves and the direction of the staff, the teens gradually learned to hike at a controlled, measured pace, rather than starting out in a sprint and tiring as the day wore on. Although this was emphasized during preparation meetings, it was in the "doing" that this learning was integrated by the hikers, who soon learned how easy it was to get worn out.

The hike was a challenging one, lengthy and with rough terrain. It was an experience most of the teens felt was beyond their capabilities, but once they realized they could overcome these perceived limitations, they felt exhilarated. They also developed a noticeable respect, admiration and affection for each other. Tired and done-in, the group gathered around some rocks, leaning on one another for support, warmth and belonging.

Self-discovery took another turn on a canoeing trip by the same group. The

teens were faced with strong winds and an unfriendly current as they attempted to learn basic canoeing skills on Long Island Sound. All of the teens experienced a great deal of frustration, disappointment and anger as they struggled in teams to control the direction and progress of their canoes. They learned that the elements and obstacles proved too formidable on that day for us to reach our destination, when after three hours of tiresome paddling, we needed to turn around and paddle back to our starting point, rather than continue to our original destination six miles away.

But the trip wasn't by any means a failure, because learning how to handle disappointment is just as valuable as experiencing success. The group learned that when the challenges of the wilderness became tiring and weather conditions on the water became burdensome and oppressive, they had to reach inside themselves to summon up additional strength to overcome frustration, anger and fear. So, even though the trip had more than its share of disappointments, the teens were able to carry over the feeling that they could handle it when things don't go smoothly.

These wilderness outings to excursions on both land and sea were successful because they all serve to prepare the teens for unknown challenges ahead.

For more information about the Wilderness Respite Program, contact Director Bruce Kaufstein at 516-626-1971, ext. 316.

*Andrew Malekoff is the executive director of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center, which provides comprehensive mental health services for children from birth through 24 and their families. To find out more, visit [www.northshorechildguidance.org](http://www.northshorechildguidance.org). The views expressed in this column are not necessarily those of the publisher or Anton Media Group.*

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