



THE MYTH OF
TOUGH
LOVE

“Adolescence strikes fear in the hearts of even the best parents,” writes journalist Maia Szalavitz in her new book *Help at Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids* (Riverhead Books). That fear, she says, drives well-meaning mothers and fathers to send their misbehaving teens to “tough-love” programs, where they’re subjected to abusive treatment in the name of helping them.

Based on her own research, Szalavitz estimates that between ten and twenty thousand American teens are forced into “boot camps,” “emotional-growth centers,” and “behavior-modification programs” each year. The industry is unregulated, and some programs operated by U.S. companies place children in facilities outside the U.S. What tough-love programs all have in common, Szalavitz says, is the belief that teens should be made to conform to the expectations of parents and society, by whatever means necessary. Critics have accused the programs of using beatings, extended isolation and restraint, public humiliation, food deprivation, sleep deprivation, sen-

Next she teamed up with University of Pennsylvania researcher Joseph Volpicelli to write *Recovery Options: The Complete Guide* (Wiley), which outlines the benefits and drawbacks of various drug-treatment options in the United States.

Szalavitz had long wanted to write about the abuse in tough-love treatment programs, but publishers showed little interest. In the end it took her more than three years to write *Help at Any Cost*. She conducted hundreds of interviews, spent many days poring over legal and congressional documents, made repeated Freedom of Information Act requests, and traveled to Utah, Jamaica, and Texas’s death row. The book focuses on four programs: *Straight Incorporated*, *KIDS*, *North Star Expeditions*, and the *World Wide Association of Specialty Programs* (WWASP). All but the last are now defunct, but many former staffers still work in the industry.

I have a personal interest in the subject, having been through a program that was a predecessor of *Straight Incorporated* in the early 1970s. [See “The Seed” on page 14.]

MAIA SZALAVITZ ON THE EPIDEMIC ABUSES OF THE TEEN-HELP INDUSTRY

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sory deprivation, forced exercise to the point of exhaustion, and lengthy maintenance of “stress positions.” Research shows that tough treatment is not effective, Szalavitz says, and can even be harmful.

Szalavitz traces the roots of the tough-love industry back to the *Alcoholics Anonymous* offshoot *Synanon*, a 1960s treatment program for heroin addicts that evolved into a cult and was eventually shut down and discredited. She points out that incessant verbal attacks were a core component of *Synanon* and are now common to tough-love programs. But unlike *Synanon*, the latter are not for adult drug addicts. They’re for troubled teens, some of whom have never used a single illicit drug.

Szalavitz began her reporting career at the age of fourteen, writing and anchoring her own cable-access news show in Monroe, New York, an hour north of New York City. Seventeen magazine ran a story about her in 1980, projecting a successful television career for this precocious high-school student. But Szalavitz developed addictions to cocaine and heroin while at Columbia University and dropped out of college for several years before seeking help. She went on to graduate from Brooklyn College with a degree in psychology and soon began writing for the *Village Voice*. Szalavitz returned to television as a producer for *The Charlie Rose Show* on PBS, then worked with Bill Moyers on his five-part series *Moyers on Addiction: Close to Home*.

Polonsky: What is a “tough-love” treatment program?

Szalavitz: It’s any program that operates on the premise that teens in trouble need to be broken down and rebuilt. The idea is that suffering is good for the soul; therefore, we will inflict suffering on them to “help” them. Sometimes people ask me, “Well, there are teen boot camps, emotional-growth centers, wilderness schools, behavior-modification programs — aren’t they each a little different?” On the surface they are, but what they all boil down to is “Let’s be mean to teens in the woods,” or “Let’s be mean to them military style,” or “Let’s be mean hippie style.”

There are some wilderness programs that claim to take a loving approach, but with so little regulation, it’s impossible for parents to know what they’re going to get. The people selling the program tell consumers what they want to hear. The parents of Aaron Bacon, a teen who died in one of these programs, had been told that *North Star Expeditions* used kind, gentle methods. Then their son came home in a coffin after being starved and denied medical care.

Polonsky: What exactly happened to Aaron Bacon, and why was he put into the program?

Szalavitz: By all accounts Aaron was a compassionate, highly intelligent kid, but at some point he started smoking dope and taking psychedelics, and then his grades started to

sink, and he banged up the family car a couple of times. His parents also suspected that he was involved with gangs, and they were worried. North Star sold itself to them as a wilderness-adventure experience with trained therapists. Aaron's mom thought her son might enjoy it.

So one morning at six, two men — one a 280-pound former military policeman — came storming into Aaron's bedroom. His parents were there too, assuring Aaron that they loved him, but that he had to go with these men. They brought him to North Star in Utah and put him and a group of other boys under the care of untrained survival guides who wouldn't let them cook their food to make it edible if they couldn't start their own fire. They gave Aaron boots that were too small, a sleeping bag, and a backpack, and they basically starved and froze him to death over the course of a few weeks. Near the end, Aaron was so weak he was falling down and incontinent, and the guides laughed at him and called him a "faker." It's a well-documented case, because Aaron kept a journal, and the other boys were witnesses.

Polonsky: What about the therapists?

Szalavitz: There were no therapists. The guides were nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one years old. Among the three of them, they didn't have a year's experience leading wilderness expeditions. They served at most a few days in jail after Aaron's death, and some of them even violated probation by immediately going back to work in the industry.

Polonsky: There was a boy who died in a facility in Florida earlier this year. Are there any similarities between his case and Aaron Bacon's?

Szalavitz: Not in the particulars, but in the root cause. Fourteen-year-old Martin Lee Anderson was in a boot-camp-style program. He complained of trouble breathing and couldn't complete his drill exercises, but the instructors thought he was faking, so they punched, kicked, and "restrained" him. When he lost consciousness, they tried to revive him using ammonia capsules, and he asphyxiated, either on the fumes or because the capsules were pressed against his mouth and nose and he couldn't breathe.

The boot-camp instructors still maintain that they did nothing wrong because they were legally permitted to use "pain compliance." Although the Supreme Court ruled in 1982 that agencies acting "under color of state law" may not use painful disciplinary tactics, that decision does not apply to private corporations. In addition, Florida made a special legal exception for its youth correctional boot camps, exempting them from a ban on pain compliance, which includes punches, kicks, and pressure to the head. Ironically, if parents treated their own children this way, they'd be charged with child abuse, but it's all right for them to pay "professionals" to do it.

Polonsky: Are all tough-love programs this bad, or are you just focusing on the worst of them?

Szalavitz: Some may not be as bad as these two; I wasn't able to research every one of them. But it's clear the industry



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attitude is that troubled teens are not people in pain, but manipulative liars who deserve rough treatment. Their philosophy inevitably leads to abuse, whether it's as mild as ignoring someone's emotional needs or as severe as ignoring a medical condition.

Polonsky: There are hundreds of similar programs in the United States today. You focus on just four in your book. Why those four?

Szalavitz: I always knew Straight Incorporated had to be in the book, because it was the first heavily publicized tough-love program. It started in Florida, but at its peak it had facilities operating in eight states.

In Straight you spent twelve hours a day sitting on hard chairs and flapping your arm to be called on. If you didn't get called on, you'd

never advance in the program and get to go home. And when you did get called on, you had to have a good confession to make about how terrible you'd been before entering the program, or else you'd be attacked verbally. If you didn't comply, if you didn't pay attention, if you didn't say what they wanted to hear or you mouthed off, they would literally throw you on the floor and restrain you, with somebody sitting on your torso and restricting your breathing, another person sitting on your legs, two more people sitting on your arms, and sometimes somebody holding down your head. This would all be done by your fellow participants, which is not the way restraint is handled in any legitimate psychiatric institution. People had limbs broken.

Polonsky: And this restraint was administered as punishment?

Szalavitz: Yes. Sometimes people were restrained from running out the door, but more often it was done as punishment for violating all manner of rules. Straight also heavily restricted access to the bathroom, so kids would wet and soil themselves. It's all part of the humiliation strategy employed by many of these programs: an exercise of power and demonstration of the teens' helplessness.

Polonsky: And what about the other three programs: KIDS, North Star, and WWASP?

Szalavitz: North Star, of course, was the wilderness program in which Aaron Bacon died. KIDS was founded by Miller Newton, who had been Straight's national clinical director and a charismatic leader within Straight. He falsely claimed to be a psychologist. (He did eventually get a degree from a correspondence school.) KIDS was like Straight, only worse.

The World Wide Association of Specialty Programs is the biggest tough-love organization currently in operation. It's similar to Straight in that you gradually work your way up by confessing and verbally attacking other teens. Their "curriculum" includes confrontational weekend seminars, where they sometimes make young girls dress up as hookers to humiliate them. Newcomers are assigned "buddies" who monitor them and have the power to punish them, even though these buddies are not staff, or even adults.

THE IDEOLOGY OF THESE PROGRAMS HAS INCREASINGLY BECOME THE IDEOLOGY OF OUR WHOLE COUNTRY: LENIENCY IS BAD, AND KINDNESS ONLY ENCOURAGES WEAKNESS AND MISCONDUCT.

After being released from these programs, many teens immediately return to dangerous behavior, and some are so traumatized that they are unable to function in a college environment. Others can't afford to go to college because their parents have spent their entire college fund on WWASP. The overseas programs cost about three thousand dollars a month, and the ones in the United States cost four to five thousand a month. And there are additional charges on top of that, such as for bringing the kid to the program in handcuffs.

Polonsky: What kind of teen gets sent to a place like WWASP?

Szalavitz: Anyone who has annoyed the hell out of his or her parents, who is mouthy and disappointing and maybe isn't doing well in school or is using drugs. Many teens with depression or serious mental disorders end up there. WWASP seems to take anyone. There are no restrictions. Even a child who has never smoked pot and gets straight As will be accepted as long as the parents believe the child's behavior requires drastic action. A WWASP official told the press that 70 to 80 percent of their students are not hard-core drug users or criminals; they just have trouble communicating with their parents. Paul Richards, a WWASP graduate I interviewed for my book, had never even smoked cigarettes. But most of the boys and girls are somewhere in the middle. Maybe they were smoking pot every weekend, or they took acid.

Polonsky: How do parents find out about these programs?

Szalavitz: In the eighties and nineties many parents were referred to them by ToughLove, a nationwide network of support groups for parents of troubled teens. The couple who founded ToughLove had written a book in which they told how they'd refused to bail their daughter out of jail, and they claimed that this was what had saved her. To its credit, the ToughLove network eventually denounced Straight Incorporated, but only after recommending it to parents for years.

Nowadays parents might get referrals from so-called educational consultants, who are not required to have licenses and who often get kickbacks from programs for giving referrals. An "educational consultant" could easily be another WWASP parent who will get a thousand dollars or a free month in the program for their own child in return for a referral. Then you have school guidance counselors and psychologists and other professionals with whom the tough-love programs cultivate relationships. And of course, if you search for "troubled teens" on the Internet, multiple WWASP-sponsored websites come up.

Polonsky: Do parents have any idea what's really going on in these programs?

Szalavitz: Phil Elberg, an attorney who successfully sued Miller Newton and the KIDS program, liked to say that it was the parents who really belonged to the KIDS cult, not the children. In most of these programs, the parents proselytize to other parents and meet in groups and encourage each other to stay strong and be tough. If the parents weren't convinced that tough love works, these places couldn't operate.

There's enormous pressure for parents to take the tough-

love approach. After an article I wrote about the troubled-teen industry appeared in the *Washington Post*, I got dozens of e-mails from parents who didn't want to send their children to these programs, but everybody was telling them it was the only way and that they were hurting their son or daughter by not doing it.

Polonsky: Don't the teens inform their parents of what's going on?

Szalavitz: They try to, but the parents are told to expect complaints and treat them as lies or attempts at manipulation. And almost all communication is monitored, with discipline for kids who complain. Also the programs teach the kids that it's all their fault, so most of them come out saying that. Unfortunately, that's exactly what many parents want to hear. It's hard for parents to accept how much harm they have done to their children by placing them in these programs. I have talked to parents who were horrified when they discovered how bad it really was. They spend years trying to make up for it. Some, however, prefer to stay in denial.

I would say the vast majority of parents who send their children to these programs are devoted mothers and fathers who would honestly prefer to have their child at home. Most would likely have chosen family therapy were it more widely available and had they known that research supported it over these programs. A large percentage of these parents are in the middle of a divorce. Their children are acting out, unhappy, and vulnerable. That's why family therapy makes the most sense. But the parents don't want to think the divorce is what's causing their son or daughter to rebel or take drugs.

Many parents are simply fooled. Unless you've been told otherwise, you'd think these programs are run by experts who have some knowledge you don't. Aaron Bacon's parents are smart, well-intentioned, and kind. They were in no way negligent; they asked all the right questions, consulted all the right authorities. But they were lied to. It could happen to anybody.

(end of excerpt)