

We can continue to provide young people with safe, exciting and challenging activities and equally importantly we can keep ourselves safe.

Troubled and Troublesome Youth: A growing problem?

by Colin Imrie

Mountain biking for a day in the Lake District with a small group of disaffected teenage boys from a children's home was going reasonably well, until, with very little warning, one of the boys got off his bike and exploded with anger, threw his bike down a bank and attempted to attack the instructor and myself. Time for some quick decisions! Do I have the skills to divert his attack or to talk to the boy? Should I withdraw or confront his behaviour? Could I have done something different? What is best? What is reasonable? What is legal?

Outdoor activity is about learning and development and it certainly has much to offer young people who might be described as troubled and troublesome. Many outdoor providers work with young people who have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, referred by social services, special education units, youth offending projects and the like. This work can be rewarding work but it can also cause problems and anxieties for outdoor providers and instructors. Using outdoor adventure activities for therapeutic reasons has always been successful with these individuals and groups and while experience and common sense has usually been a good enough basis from which to work, increasingly workers now need a greater understanding of child protection and of managing challenging behaviour

So why are the difficulties becoming more apparent? Is it that children are becoming more difficult? Are we being asked to work with more difficult groups, or has something else changed? We would suggest that the growing problem is that expectations and standards are rising and changing fast. Keeping up with changes is requiring more specialised knowledge and skills.

The developing situation

We are currently working actively with a number of organisations who have run into serious problems when well meaning interventions have resulted in complaints, allegations and investigations. The outcomes have ranged from loss of confidence to loss of work and, in some cases, loss of business.

Over recent years standards and expectations for children and young people have risen and have become more exacting. There are perhaps a number of reasons for this. The 2004 Children Act has again raised the profile of child protection procedures and training, Every Child Matters has focussed on positive outcomes and the inspection services are pushing standards higher. Children's rights continue to have a high profile. With changes happening fast, it is no surprise that some organisations and individuals are finding it difficult to know how to keep up and difficult to keep themselves and their staff safe.

Most organisations have basic child protection policies and awareness training in place, but these rarely give guidance about what to do when things start to get difficult or to go wrong. Because things don't go wrong very often we don't get the experience of dealing with issues and they don't become part of our everyday work.

If complaints and allegations are made then having good policies and procedures in place will make all the difference to the outcome. Using any kind of physical intervention with young people who are being dangerous or destructive cannot be left to common sense or to the "reasonable force" rule of thumb. Although physical interventions may be within the law they may well not conform to Local Authority guidance.

Finding solutions

While we do not suggest there is any reason to panic, we do suggest that all those working with young people in the outdoors need to be familiar with these changing expectations and standards and make the necessary changes.

We would suggest that all organisations now need to put more effort into planning and preparation in three areas. They need to develop more robust policies and procedures for dealing with child protection, behaviour management and safety. They need to have more robust and detailed service planning and service agreements with purchasing organisations in place. Also they need to train staff in these areas and ensure a greater understanding of child development and dysfunctional behaviour. Planning and preparation at this level is becoming essential if we are to keep ourselves and our instructors safe.

These changes need not cause great difficulty for organisations, but providers clearly need advice. It may well be that organisations responsible for regulation and for dissemination of information within the outdoor world need to look closely at these issues and think about how best to tackle the difficulties and how best to advise providers.

We can continue to provide young people with safe, exciting and challenging activities and equally importantly we can keep ourselves safe. However, Local Authorities will continue demanding higher standards and expectations from activity providers and so making progress on these issues is not only about keeping safe but also about sustaining business. ■

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Colin Imrie runs Aquila Alternatives, which offers consultancy, development and training to organisations working with children and with young people. We have a substantial background in delivering adventure activities and in training others to work with young people who have emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Photos: from the author.