How to Choose the Right Program for Your Teen by Nvid Lada

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One of the most difficult decisions a parent will ever make is to place acting out child in a residential school or program. This decision becomes necessary when a parent realizes that local resources are not working, that the child has become his/her own worst enemy by a consistent series of poor decisions, and that intensive 24 hour a day intervention is the last hope to get their child back on track. The parents usually must find the appropriate placement in the middle of a crisis created by the child's behavior, and while racked with guilt that they somehow failed as a parent.

This is a time when parents are very vulnerable and very confused. More than any other time, they most need someone who will really listen to them, and understand what they and their child have been going through. All too often what they get is pre-packaged solutions. If they ask for advice from several places, they are confused by conflicting advice, each of which tends to reflect the professional's orientation. In the middle of a crisis, the parents might be advised to put the child on medication, put him/her in a Resource Room at school, seek more counseling, try an Outward Bound course, place him/her in a hospital for observation and evaluation, and/or it's the parent's fault. No wonder parents are frequently confused and don't know what to do.

When a parent has to make a placement decision in a hurry, there are several things to keep in mind which can maximize the chances of best meeting the child's needs.

First: TAKE CHARGE. In most cases, no one knows the child and his/her needs better than the parents, even when they have made serious parenting mistakes. Professionals have valuable knowledge, experience and insights, but they can only give advice, based on their particular orientation and limited knowledge of the child. The parent, on the other hand, is an expert on their child's strengths, weaknesses and needs based on years of living with, nurturing and sharing with that child. Professionals should be seen as valuable resources, but their advice must be evaluated and acted on by the parent based on what makes sense for the child.

In the same vein, the parent can make a valid decision on what their child needs based upon the parents years of life experience and knowledge of what is needed to function successfully in the world. The acting out child has already proved he/she is his/her own worst enemy and is unable to make good decisions which will prepare him/her for adult life. Thus, the parent must make the decision for the child. There are two cautions. The parent should not allow the child to manipulate their placement decision, and the parent should make the decision based on love, understanding and knowledge of the child's needs, not fear, guilt or anger.

Second: CHOICE. The best decisions are made after comparing between at least two or three appropriate possibilities. Not only will this better educate the parents as to the range of approaches that exist to choose from, but will give the parent more confidence to stand firm if (when) their child tries to convince the parents it's a horrible place and totally wrong.

Third: TRUST. If a parent has plenty of research time, it would be a good idea to talk to the various appropriate state licensing Departments, check adolescent program directories in the library, get copies of the safety rules of each program the parent is looking at, call parents who have sent their child to those programs, and numerous other details to thoroughly check the possibilities out. However, many parents have to make a decision quickly and don't have the time to thoroughly check out even one program. In this situation, the answer is to find and work with professionals the parents feel they can trust.

This is both an intellectual and emotional thing. If a parent feels a professional seems to really understand the individual problems of their child, it's a good sign he/she will make individually tailored advice. Also, be sure the professional is making advice in the area he/she has knowledge of. For example, while a counselor might be very good at working with a child, that doesn't mean the counselor knows of a wide range of placement alternatives. On the same line, while an educational consultant might be very familiar with a lot of schools and programs, it doesn't mean he/she has good insight into the problems the child is having. What that means is the parent needs to determine the area of expertise of each professional, and learn from each what is necessary for the parent to make the best possible decision for the child.

In this process there are two things to watch out for. First, if the person you talk to sounds like he/she is selling something, take what they say with a grain of salt. Second, if the person has a financial tie to one or more schools or programs, be aware that some very appropriate schools might be overlooked if it is not in the financial interest of the professional to refer to them. The most likely person to put the best interests of the parent and child first is the independent professional who is paid by the parent for the recommendations.

When a parent has to make a quick decision on placing a child, a good way to make the best possible choice is a four step process. First, pick a professional (therapist, counselor, school official etc.) whose judgment and insights you feel good about, and an educational consultant who quickly picks up on the problems the child is having. Second, get the two of them to talk and compare notes. Third, call the places they recommend. One way that can help the parent make the final decision is for the parent to imagine their child at that place while talking to the school or program. Usually, one of the places will seem more right than the others. Fourth, make it happen in a way that is firm and still respecting the dignity of the child.

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