

## Choose a Christian Boarding School or a Boot Camp?

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When parents have no choice but to place their troubled teen in a program away from home, they need to consider the difference between a Christian boarding school, a Christian boarding school with a therapeutic focus or a boot camp. So what are the differences?  
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Do any of these ring true with the situation with a teenager in your home?

"Our family cannot live like this any longer."

"Everyone runs for cover when he comes home."

"I can't sit by and watch him destroy himself."

"We've got to do something to help him before he becomes an adult."

{bot\_wrgoogle}When teens exhibit unhealthy behavioral patterns far beyond those of normal adolescence, such as persistent lying, selfishness, deceitfulness, manipulation, entitlement, depression, lack of motivation, cutting, suicidal thoughts, illegal behavior, or running away, it could be the result of drug use or the after affects of childhood abuse, a split in the home, death of a loved one, or just a chemical imbalance. That's why it is important to determine the root causes before choosing the solution.

Regardless of the causes, if parents don't act to change the downward spiral, their teen's life could be in jeopardy.

Two of several options for parents of Christian families are boot camps or Christian boarding schools. So, what are the differences between these programs?

Boot Camps started as an alternative to jail for juvenile adolescents. In some case these facilities can be a starting place for getting your teen help, when defiance and lack of respect for authority are the main characteristic of the child's behavior. In both the state and private environment the camp's goal is to "scare kids straight."

Parents often seek out boot camps with the assumption that a "wake up call" is all that is needed for their troubled teen. However, many times the issues are much deeper than the parent understands, including hidden childhood abuse a chemical imbalance, which obviously cannot be "scared straight."

Boot Camps are usually short-term and are usually military-style, including military exercises and intense physical training and "in your face" supervision, focusing on reality, respect and responsibility. Many teens lack these qualities, yet they desperately need them in order to successfully transition into adulthood. This experience can help some defiant teens replace destructive attitudes and behaviors with new perspectives and direction in their lives. The

concept is that a "quick reality check" will turn a child around who has been acting out. These boot camp style programs are usually ineffective for teens that have developed bad habits over a long period of time and are in need of long term change.

Most teen boot camps include uniforms, marching in formation as well as a "yes sir" and "no sir" mentality. They are a very structured environment that includes the drill instructors getting right in the face of the cadet, similar to a military boot camp. Barracks are similar to the military as well, including bunk beds, foot lockers and a very strict, no holes barred system of inspections that must be completed without error if the teen is to survive the ordeal, even for a short period of time.

Whether a teen is able to handle this type of environment is actually a question that must be considered before a parent puts a struggling teen in the midst of these intense drill instructors and within the environment that does not permit any outside contact for a prescribed period of time. Parents should consider more than just if the cadet can survive. They should consider whether juvenile boot camps are the right choice for a troubled teen. It is clear that teens with behavioral problems that are simply a side-effect of other deeper issues should not be considered for teen boot camps.

While many male adults of my generation attribute their time in the military with turning them into a "man," there are a few things to consider. First, teens recruited into the military are usually a few years older, and that can make all the difference (even a few months can make a difference for a teen). Secondly, teens in the military either elected to be there or were drafted, not forced to go there by their parents. Think about that difference in the mindset of a scared and confused teen. And thirdly, recruits in the military get to the other side of boot camp with a sense of accomplishment and pride with their peer recruits, ready to take on the world as a member of a big powerful institution. Teens in boot camps often return home defeated, disenfranchised and without purpose.

On the other hand, a parent can place a child in a normal Christian boarding school and hope for the best. This isn't what I would recommend either, since most Christian boarding schools are not equipped to handle disruptive teens any more than your home is and the troubled teen will soon be kicked out or simply run away.

So what is the right answer? That depends on your situation, and I recommend that you seek counsel from a qualified teen counselor and a psychologist (both) before deciding anything.

The option I usually recommend is a specialized Christian boarding school set up to deal with troubled teens. Such therapeutic programs are few, but they are developed to focus on the child's mental and behavioral state while at the same time continuing their education. Unlike boot camps, these programs are relational and loving. They also show the teen that rules are important and are unbending in that regard. If the rules are not followed, then there are consequences, real but not physical. For instance, they may lose a privilege, they may not advance to the next level as soon (which has more privileges or prestige), or they may be required to do some work.

The better Christian boarding schools that are also therapeutic have a high ratio of staff to students, sometimes as many as one staff member for each student on campus. Each student is assigned a specialized counselor, a focus group and activities are designed to target behavioral issues.

A therapeutic program coupled with a Christian boarding school is a good choice for many teen behavioral issues other than criminal acts, entrenched drug use, or a mental or psychological handicap. In Christian boarding schools of this nature, teens will learn to determine what their weaknesses are and how it affects their behavior, and how to grow the opposing virtue which will help eliminate their destructive behaviors.

When situations of divorce, death, abuse, social difficulties, academic struggles, adoption issues, or victimization and unhealthy patterns of dealing with those issues a therapeutic Christian boarding school can offer a safe and life-changing alternative to boot camps, military academies, and wilderness programs.

I recommend that you seek out a Christian boarding school with a Biblical counseling approach. Each child should be involved in activities that support the individual and group counseling and also help them see that the security and significance they seek can be found in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, who desires to fill those empty chasms of life and give meaning, purpose, and direction to their life.

For more information:

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