

## Family Systems In Adventure Programming

by H. L. (Lee) Gillis

**P**eter, blinded by the years of drinking and drugging that nearly destroyed his life, had reached another trap in his mine field of addiction. Once again he was faced with the threat of relapse. To his left lay the drugs which brought him to this place, to his right the trap of "denial" which prevented him from accepting that substance abuse was the source of many of his problems. But this time, unlike before, Peter heard a voice that offered support and direction. This was the same voice that before had denied the reality of Peter's abusive behavior. This time Peter was able to avoid those old traps and, with the support of his mother, was able to stay on his path of recovery.

Peter, with the help of his mother, successfully completed an activity called Mine Field, part of a Project Choices family weekend for chemically dependent youth and their families. Mine Field is used during the family weekend to demonstrate the need for positive family interaction and encouragement in successful recovery. The mine field is laden with "traps" (literally mouse traps) labeled with recovery and relapse concepts (e.g., "denial," "co-dependency," and "dry drunk") and empty beer cans, liquor bottles, extra large "fake" marijuana joints, and bags of "cocaine" (baking soda).

The adolescents first try the maze alone (without guidance) and usually do not get very far. Next they try it with parental guidance and are usually more successful. Finally parents are challenged to only offer encouraging words to their adolescent as he or she attempts to traverse (blindfolded) through the

world of drugs and alcohol. In the debriefing, adolescents and their families have commented on how difficult it is to give and take direction and how they can learn from other families ways to be more successful in communicating with each other. The final step of the challenge (to be encouraging) is often the first time some families have communicated successfully in a long time.

### Project Choices

The Project Choices family approach to treating chemically dependent youth is part of a

rapidly growing field in adventure programming — working with families as whole systems. Several authors have noted what appears to be a natural fit of leading family therapy theories and components of Adventure Based Counseling (ABC). Gradually, Adventure is becoming a part of more traditional therapeutic programs. Through a strategic family approach in ABC, counselors attempt to change the power and hierarchy of the family system — to put parents in charge of their children when often the reverse is true.

Recently, Mike Gass, Scott Bandoroff, Cindi Clapp, Sue Rudolph, Reldan Nadler, Jackie Gerstein and I (Lee) presented the results of a survey on the use of adventure programming with families. The results and discussion of that survey are summarized here and used as a platform for discussing the current use of Adventure in family systems work.

Forty-two programs from around the United States responded to the survey. The major findings of the survey are that:

- Most programs are conducted in in-patient hospital or treatment center settings.
- Most programs identified by the survey had been operating for less than four years.
- The primary family groups included step-families and single-parent families.
- Most programs operated for 1–4 hours in duration with 33% operating for one session total and 33% operating for three to five sessions total.
- Regarding all activities available, the majority of total time (60%) was spent in adventure activities with 24% of that time spent in warm-up activities, 58% of the time spent in low ropes activities and 18% of the time spent in high ropes activities.
- Regarding total program time, 25% was spent in skill training (e.g., teaching communication or problem-solving skills), 45% of the time was spent doing activities, and 30% of the time was spent debriefing.

The top five goals of the family adventure programs are shown in the bar graph. Note that these goals are not unique to family programming. A similar finding was noted with regards to the Adventure activities used — they did not differ from activities used in educational, corporate, or traditional ABC settings. There does not appear to be a unique set of adventure activities for work with families.

From the results of the previous survey, the presenters categorized current family adventure pro-



gramming into three areas: (1) recreational, (2) enrichment, and (3) adjunctive. These program formats are not mutually exclusive. The differences noted in the categories generally relate to the level to which an Adventure activity is tailored to address unique family problems. A brief description of each format is presented below with examples of ways Project Adventure sites are using the format.

### Recreational

This format is the often known as "family day" or "family hour," since its task is completed in a single session. The purpose for this experience is to have families leave with a "good" feeling; the goal is purely recreational. While no specific program is known to work exclusively in this format, Adventure facilitators contacted to provide family activities for a company picnic or for a church group are operating in this format.

Jim Schoel, co-author of *Islands of Healing*, has used this format at a church group family picnic. Families attending the picnic were introduced to a number of fun-oriented Adventures where they were given the chance to experience the joy of playing together. The focus of the activities was clearly recreational and fun. Debriefs were used to encourage the development of some problem-solving skills and to allow for shared "ah-ha's!" But the bottom line was to give families the opportunity to share laughter with each other.

### Enrichment

This format is characterized by structured sessions of one or more days that address common relationship and/or family issues/problems. The goal is to use topic-focused skill building sessions (e.g., communication, trust, and problem solving) augmented by Adventure activities related to the skill being taught. Families attending an enrichment Adventure have chosen this experience to improve their relationships.

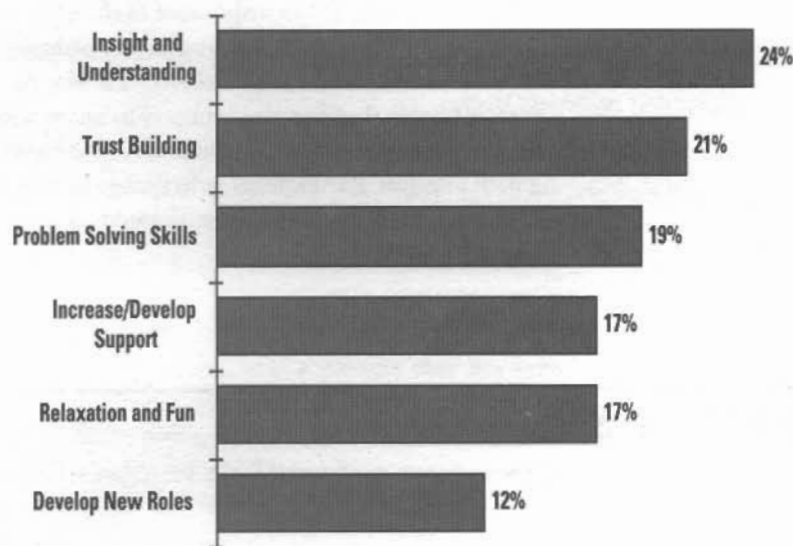
I use this format in my work with couples. A day of Adventure activities is presented to parallel particular couples' relationship issues. For example, the trust fall is used as a way for couples to "let go" of trying to change an irritating behavior of their partner. While standing on the trust fall platform, each person is asked to imagine their partner doing the behavior. Then the fall command sequence is changed to have the faller say "I'm letting go," and the group to respond "Let go."

Another example of a program that utilizes the enrichment format is Rich Maizell's (PA Certified Trainer) parenting classes that are part of Project

Quest. Parents participate in a six-week class where they learn specific skills to help them communicate with and encourage their son or daughter. Rich notes that Project Quest appears to be most successful with an adolescent whose family is involved in the parenting classes. His observation supports the family systems idea that problems are not located within an individual but are a function of an unhealthy family environment. He also reports that the parenting classes and Project Quest are able to prepare families for pursuing more traditional forms of family therapy. This "readiness" for therapy (if needed) function is

### The Top Goals of Family Adventure Programs

(percentage of facilitators who use activities to meet these goals)



another positive aspect of the families' involvement in Project Quest.

Parents of adolescents in Project Quest also participate in warm-up Adventure activities to help de-inhibitize them and facilitate forming a working group. Parents in some of the Quest programs also participate in the ropes course as a way of allowing them to experience some of the challenges their son or daughter has encountered. Involving parents because their son or daughter is participating in a program and using activities to help parents understand Adventure Based Counseling are also aspects of the adjunctive format.

### Adjunctive

This format blends one- to four-day Adventure experiences with a more traditional treatment ap-

THE HANDS-ON,  
CONCRETE  
LEARNING THAT IS  
SO MUCH A PART  
OF ADVENTURE  
BASED THERAPY  
AND COUNSELING  
PROVIDES MANY  
UNIQUE  
OPPORTUNITIES  
FOR FAMILIES.

proach. Traditional treatment includes in-patient treatment, out-patient therapy with a family therapist as well as family Adventure programming. Most of the programs in the survey placed themselves in the treatment area when given a choice between preventive, enriching, or therapeutic. This format specifically tailors activities to the issues of families involved.

The family weekend that is a part of Project Choice's program is sequenced so that the counselors have the opportunity to identify the family issues that are important. There are clearly some common themes for families with children in treatment, and the issues that Peter and his mother dealt with in the Mine Field are fairly standard ones. What makes Peter's experience with his mother unique is the opportunity to develop and practice new skills in an experiential/concrete way.

Project Adventure has responded to the growing use of family Adventure programming by offering a workshop for professionals entitled "Family As a Team." The goal of the workshop is to share with counselors ABC concepts that are useful when working with families. Participants help design introductions and debriefings which are tailored to family systems concepts.

## Conclusion

The hands-on, concrete learning that is so much a part of Adventure Based therapy and counseling provides many unique opportunities for families. The families at Jim Schoel's church picnic gain a renewed sense of enjoyment in each other. Parents attending Project Quest's courses learn specific skills to better relate to their children. And families attending Project Choices' family weekend explore and develop strategies for creating healthier relationships. Families are benefiting from Adventure.

This rapidly expanding field of Adventure counseling applied to marriage and family systems is exciting. As our study has shown, Adventure practitioners are involved in working with families in a variety of settings although in-patient settings dominate. As this area of Adventure grows, the opportunities for all of us to learn are immense.

Lee Gillis has been involved with PA since 1978, and holds a Ph.D. in counseling psychology from the University of Georgia. He is a licensed psychologist and consultant. Lee has been consulting with Project Choices since 1990.

## Full Value School

by Jim Schoel

During Project Adventure's 20th anniversary celebration Karin Taylor, a Physical Education teacher in Mattapan (Boston, MA), asked me how her place of work, the Lewenberg Middle School, could become a "full value school." They had implemented Adventure into their physical education classes, and the success of this endeavor was, according to principal Tom O'Neill, "so immense, and its saliency to our goals so apparent, that we expanded the project into a school-wide program with integrated classes. Again, the model's success was dramatic. We had found the curricular component to make integrated, cooperative learning work."

I had been vaguely thinking about the Full Value School designation, the seeds planted first by an automobile plant calling itself a "Full Value Company," then by the Cedarwood and

Devonshire Project Adventure Elementary schools (in Columbus, Ohio), having the Full Value Contract infused into the entire curriculum. In fact, Project Adventure, Inc., can be called a Full Value Company because of the team concepts that we practice.

How do we apply the Full Value Contract commitments to our schools? First, we need to view our schools as workplaces which absorb a great deal of our essential life energy and are, therefore, hotbeds of some of our deepest interactions. Then, we need to buy off on the idea that a healthy workplace is much more effective and productive than an unhealthy one. According to Bonnie Benard, "...schools cannot become caring and participatory places unless the social relationships among administrative staff, teachers, and students are systemically changed to encourage the

EITHER WE LEARN  
HOW TO WORK  
MORE EFFECTIVELY  
TOGETHER, OR WE  
WILL BECOME  
INCONSEQUENTIAL,  
DATED AND, MORE  
DIRECTLY, OUT OF  
WORK.