

Study first to prove bush-ed gives teenagers huge advantage

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A new Australian study shows teenagers exposed to outdoor education programs develop real life skills that give them a huge advantage over others as they transition into adult life.

The study, commissioned by Cranbrook School in Sydney, is the first to follow a group of students who attend four Outward Bound courses as part of their mandatory high school curriculum from Year 7 to 10.

It shows young people taken from the comfort of their homes learn to be self reliant fast in wilderness conditions. They also learn to take responsibility, work in teams, and accept the consequences of their own actions.

Their life skills grow with every year, and by their final camp they are significantly more confident, capable and stable than others kept at home in 'cotton wool'. They are also far better prepared to initiate, motivate, and lead in later life.

"There are some things that are impossible to teach in the confines of the classroom or the home", says Cranbrook Headmaster, Jeremy Madin.

"This study shows that young people only start to become aware of their limitations and their vast potential when they're taken away from their familiar surroundings and encouraged to develop self-sufficiency.

"Confronted with a new set of daily challenges in bush surroundings they quickly sharpen their senses and learn to rely on their own resources. It is the self-confidence, knowledge of personal limitations and ability to develop self-support when challenged that becomes invaluable to them in later life."

Cranbrook partners with Outward Bound Australia for the delivery of its outdoor experiential learning programs. The school sends students from Year 7 to 10 on an Outward Bound course every year. More than 500 boys participate starting at a relatively young age in Year 7 and continuing through courses that increase in challenge and seriousness to Year 10.

The study – the first to follow outcomes over a four year period – shows the boys develop slowly in Year 7, then gather speed through Year 8 and 9 before emerging with life skills that are literally off the scale of academic measurement at the conclusion of their Year 10 course.

The question many will now ask is: Should outdoor education be made mandatory to help young people develop essential life skills in their high school years?

Outward Bound, which first offered outdoor education programs to schools, now provides courses for more than 50 high schools in Australia. An independent, not for profit group the organisation utilises any money earned from the delivery of paid programs to help fund others for disadvantaged young people and youth from remote regional and indigenous communities.

CEO Darren Black says: "Outward Bound aims to develop the most positive elements of the human character consistent with our core values of integrity, responsibility, resilience, compassion, service and human potential.

"Our aim is to help people of all ages discover, develop and achieve their full potential."

Cranbrook has worked with Outward Bound Australia for 38 years in which the benefit of outdoor education has always been apparent through anecdotal evidence.

But as sending 500 students on courses each year requires significant investments in time and resources, the School thought it prudent to instigate an independent longitudinal study.

Cranbrook commissioned industry expert Dr James Neill from the Centre of Applied Psychology in the Faculty of Health at the University of Canberra to design the study which began in 2006 with the Year 7 group.

The results, based on Life Effectiveness Questionnaires completed by the students at the beginning and end of every course show the anecdotal evidence is correct and, for many young people Outward Bound can be a life-changing experience.

Experts agree than any outdoor education is better than none.

Similar research techniques have been used to measure the effect of short courses – some less than a week - provided by others in the industry – all of which show students developing positive life skills.

Outward Bound believes that 9-day courses are the minimum required to obtain more lasting outcomes, and studies prove that Outward Bound courses are twice as effective as the shorter programs delivered by others.

The Cranbrook program, which sends students on four Outward Bound courses in four years has proved even more effective – with results four times better than short courses, and twice as good as those achieved on a single Outward Bound course.

Cranbrook's Year 10 students notched scores well above those anticipated by the scale of measurement, achieving results in the 150% range for improvements in most life skill areas.

This makes them more confident, capable, stable and self reliant than other young people who lack the same experience. It improves their mental flexibility and motivation to achieve and leaves them better prepared to initiate, motivate and lead in later life.

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