

GETTING STRAIGHT Drug program stirs controversy with its strong dose of discipline

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Mark shuffles from behind a curtain to meet his parents for the first time in a week. He is 17, well over 6 feet tall, and has large, sleepy eyes. A smaller boy holds him by his belt loop.

For the last 87 days, Mark has had someone gripping his belt loop. He is freed only to go to the bathroom, take a shower or sleep. But even then, he is watched.

Mark and his parents have just five minutes together. They talk about the past: the time Mark broke the plate, and when dad lost his temper. All the while, the other boy clings tight.

Misunderstandings and silence quickly eat up the time. Then Mark shuffles away, the smaller boy following, like a caboose.

The hand on the belt loop, the absence of privacy and the near-isolation from family are just some of the techniques used by Straight Inc., a drug-treatment program for adolescents and young adults with nine facilities in seven states.

Some say Straight's often-confrontational methods are degrading and destructive. Some say they are the only way to save a troubled youngster, such as Mark.

The program has been endorsed by a national accrediting organization and praised by two presidents. But Straight is also haunted by allegations of cult-like tactics, excessive fund-raising demands and physical and mental abuse.

Last month, the State of Massachusetts cited Straight's facility in Stoughton for a slew of "significant violations," including findings that a worker punched a boy in the face, that a girl spent two months in the program even though Straight knew she had no drug problem, and that children routinely restrain other children, sometimes violently.

The findings helped to persuade Rhode Island officials to stop paying for children to be treated there - even as Straight was opening a recruiting center in Providence.

Straight disputes most of the violations cited by the Massachusetts Office for Children, in some cases denying that the incidents happened, and in others defending its methods as legitimate treatment techniques.

Its officials say "peer-group dynamics" and rigid discipline are "sometimes the only way to break addiction. They say they offer a last chance to desperate families - and do so with care and understanding.

"We're very different, and a lot of people aren't open to that," says Anne-Marie Gauntlett, an assistant administrator at the Stoughton facility. "I'm not doing anything off the wall, but a lot of people think we are."

Like Tim and Peggy Donovan, who pulled their teenage daughter from the program because they felt she was being abused. The Donovans, of Bridgewater, Mass., were also troubled by Straight's fund-raising and recruiting tactics.

"These people are crazy; they're sick people," says Peggy Donovan.

But other parents swear by the program, and they say they are willing to subjugate rights and matters of respect for the greater good of the family. What their children experience at Straight, they say, can be no worse than the harm they were doing to themselves with drugs.

"The way I look at it, if it works, stick with it," says Fran ██████ of Woonsocket, whose 14-year-old son, Jason, is in the program. "I can't speak highly enough about it because my kid wouldn't be here without it."

Problems at the age of 12

██████ problems with Jason began when he was 12. He was getting thrown out of class, swearing at his teachers and leaving school without permission. His teachers described him as "spaced out."

When his mother took Jason for counseling, she says, he lied. Occasionally, he ran out of the counseling session.

Jason was using drugs, ██████ was told. Much later, she would learn how much: cocaine, hashish, marijuana, alcohol, LSD and

inhalants.

The intensive treatment he needed was not available in Rhode Island. Following the advice of a therapist she was seeing to handle her recent divorce, ██████ turned to Straight.

As with many parents before them, ██████ and her former husband, Vincent, were not entirely honest in telling Jason where they were taking him one day last April. "I told him it was a counseling session, but I didn't tell him that he'd be staying," she recalls.

Sometimes children try to run once they have figured out they are not going home with their parents. But Straight prepares for this: Other clients and parents, summoned for the occasion, stand by the door to block any attempt to escape.

The newly admitted youngster is required to take off all his or her clothes and squat in the corner in front of several other teenagers, who search the clothing for drugs or drug paraphernalia.

Jason did not try to escape. But he was angry, his mother recalls. When she tried to say goodbye, Jason replied, "I don't want to --- talk to you."

"It was the worst," ██████ recalls. "Believe me, I cried for a long time."

Defenses torn away

Confrontational techniques were widely employed in the early 1970s; and when Straight opened its first facility, in St. Petersburg, Fla., in 1976, it adopted an approach popular at the time.

Typical elements of the approach, intended to tear away defenses, included forbidding clients to speak for weeks and forcing them to clean floors with a toothbrush. The Rhode Island-based Marathon House used to punish uncooperative adult clients by shaving their heads and making them wear signs around their necks.

Drug-treatment professionals agree that adolescents present an especially difficult challenge. Generally, they don't want to be helped and often have flunked out of other treatment programs. Many deny their addiction.

Some assault their parents, or they try to kill themselves. Many get in trouble with the law, stealing or committing violent crimes to get drugs.

Compounding the challenge is the need to treat the family as well as the child. Sometimes the parents are alcoholics or drug abusers themselves, or some other problem makes the family dysfunctional.

Proponents of the type of extreme measures used by Straight acknowledge that they may seem bizarre outside the context of drug treatment. But, they insist, the techniques work.

Nevertheless, the emphasis in treatment has shifted in the last decade from negative, punitive methods to a combination of discipline and assurances of the client's self-worth.

While Marathon House no longer shaves heads - "That was a long time ago, and that wasn't nice," says its director, David J. Mactas - it still has a reputation for demanding compliance with rules.

Straight, too, has shed some of the methods it once employed, says Thomas E. Stafford, the Stoughton facility's clinical administrator.

But he acknowledges that Straight's treatment program is still very different from most others.

1,500 admitted in '89

Jason ██████ was one of about 1,500 young people admitted to Straight programs nationwide last year and one of 150 treated at the Stoughton facility, a warehouse in a small industrial park surrounded by woods.

Their painful, emotionally charged course to recovery costs at least \$12,000 and could take more than a year - if they're among the 60 percent who "graduate."

Their families share the journey: Straight demands intense participation from parents and siblings, who are expected not only to embrace Straight's philosophy but also to obey many of the same rigid rules imposed on the child.

A "newcomer" is held by the belt to remind him that he has lost control of his life.

There is no television, no reading, no school. He spends at least 12 hours a day concentrating on his "druggie" past and the damage it has caused him and his family.

He must profess his love to everyone who speaks. He must sit upright in his chair and pay attention. He must ask permission to eat his food.

During the first of the program's five phases, he spends nights and weekends in "host homes" - the houses of parents with children in the program. There are alarms all over the house to prevent escape, and the child must surrender his shoes and socks.

He sees his parents every Friday night, but only for five minutes. And he can't talk about Straight, only about the past.

After several months, as he "earns respect," the client moves to the second phase and is allowed to stay in his own home, which then becomes a host home for other newcomers.

Throughout the program, he is forbidden to make eye contact with executive staff members and may not speak to them unless addressed.

"If I said 'hi' to every kid who was here, do you think this would work?" Gauntlett says. "Someone has to have control, and I don't think it should be a 14-year-old."

Agency is critical

But some critics say that children in the Straight program have too much control over each other. Among them is the Massachusetts Office for Children.

"Straight has failed on numerous occasions to act in the best interests of the children served by the program," the agency found after examining records and interviewing parents, children and staff.

In its 30-page report, the state listed numerous violations and conditions that Straight must correct before its license for host homes will be renewed. Many of the findings involve children using force on each other:

* A boy was inappropriately restrained, "resulting in bruises and rug burns and had his hair cut against his will."

* A girl "was thrown on the floor in a manner that resulted in bruising and was subjected to emotional maltreatment, including being told by staff that her mother did not love her."

* A boy had been tackled by an "oldcomer," denied sufficient sleep and was grabbed in the shower by other boys who placed Nair and VapoRub in his eyes and on his head.

* A boy was punched in the face by a staff member and on several occasions was restrained by other teenagers who covered his mouth until he couldn't breathe.

A 17-year-old youth whose parents pulled him out of the program after nine months told the Journal-Bulletin that he had frequently participated in restraints, which he compared to a free-for-all.

"Just a mob of kids would jump on him," he says. "A lot of people liked doing it because they wouldn't have to rap or sit in their chair."

The youth says he has "a lot of resentment toward the program, but a lot of gratitude. I don't think I could be where I am now, on my own."

David M. Como, assistant administrator for contract compliance for the Rhode Island Division of Substance Abuse, cites the restraining procedures among several aspects of the Massachusetts investigation that persuaded the department to end its relationship with Straight.

"The basic concept of children restraining other children is not a good one to practice," Como says. "Adolescence is a very aggressive time in our lives. Kids can get carried away and hurt somebody."

"I wouldn't say it never happens; I would say it's not permitted," Stafford, the Stoughton clinical administrator, says of excessive restraint.

He and Gauntlett say children using force on other children is sanctioned only in emergencies, such as when a client tries to harm himself. Even then, they say, care is taken to subdue the child safely.

But Stafford acknowledges that "people sometimes get a little overzealous in what they think is proper procedure."

Asked to respond to specific findings of the Massachusetts investigation, Stafford denies that any child's hair is cut against his will, although "we can utilize peer pressure and confrontation" to persuade the client to do it himself.

He dismissed the shower incident as "a lighthearted joke," insisted no staff member would tell a child her mother didn't love her, and refused comment on the charge that a worker had punched a child.

Clinical evaluations

The Massachusetts investigation also found that Straight "admits children who are not chemically dependent."

Gauntlett says Straight conducts clinical evaluations of each potential client, sometimes after admission, to ensure that they have a drug problem. She says Straight has a psychiatrist and psychologist on call, and eight caseworkers, some with master's degrees.

In the "very rare" event a child does not belong, she says, he is released.

"You don't want to admit a kid when you don't think he has a problem and put him in this kind of environment," she says. "It's not going to help him at all."

But the Office for Children cites a 12-year-old girl who was kept in the program last year even though Straight determined in assessments at two, three and seven weeks that she did not belong there.

According to the investigators' report, staff members acknowledged that the girl didn't use drugs but said she did have family problems, and they were reluctant to send her home.

Stafford acknowledges that the girl was not a drug user but maintains that "the child was not inappropriately admitted."

If drug dependency is not a problem but the family relationship is, he says, the staff may not discharge the child immediately. Instead, they try to develop a referral plan so a child will not be released into a "potentially dangerous situation."

But according to the Massachusetts investigators, Straight did nothing to help resolve the family problems.

Allegiance demanded

Straight considers the families in its program to be as damaged as the drug-addicted client, and it demands intense allegiance and full-time commitment from parents and siblings.

In addition to mandatory group-counseling sessions, a common requirement in adolescent drug treatment, Straight parents are expected to orchestrate fund-raisers from bake sales to circuses, recruit new clients and follow the rules.

Parents unable to attend a regular meeting - say, because of an out-of-town business trip - must ask to be excused. They are forbidden to chew gum or smoke on Straight property, address senior staff members by their first names or walk in an aisle reserved for Straight employees.

And they are expected to police each other. For example, if a parent sees others speaking in the parking lot - which is against the rules - he is expected to confront the violators.

Perhaps the most taxing experience is running the "host homes." Those parents must feed and house other people's children. They have to install alarms in their homes, hide or get rid of anything that might be used as a weapon, enforce all Straight rules, and make sure the clients have rides to and from Straight every day but Sunday.

Stafford says the strict rules are elements of an "independent program for recovery" for parents.

Asked why adults must address him as "Mr. Stafford," he replies, "That's really hard to answer, other than it's a simple matter of respect and protocol, given the program and the way it runs."

For the most part, parents follow the rules, even if they privately question the need for some of them.

"You want to believe when you get these rules," says Nancy Parzale of Woburn, Mass., the mother of a former client. "You're so scared for your kids."

But it can be humiliating and divisive.

Parzale says she saw a mother burst into tears after being yelled at in the parents group for chewing gum. And a Massachusetts woman who asked not to be named attributes the breakup of her marriage to Straight: She and her daughter left the program, but her husband stayed on.

Straight does not routinely provide one-on-one counseling for family members, described by six drug-treatment professionals, in separate interviews, as an integral part of family counseling.

Fund-raising 'therapy'

But Straight does consider fund-raising part of a parent's therapy.

"Clinically, it's highly relevant," Stafford says. "It's a physical, measurable way to see how committed someone is to recovery."

Parzale, whose daughter threatened to leave the program on her own if her mother didn't get her out, didn't find the emphasis on fund-raising to be therapeutic.

"If you're not selling candy bars, you're selling wrapping paper," she says. "And you're getting very little therapy."

Gauntlett is unsympathetic to this complaint. Straight is a relatively inexpensive program, she says, and fund-raising represents 30 percent of a parent's financial commitment.

"They know they have to raise between \$10,000 and \$15,000 a month," Gauntlett says of the parents group.

"A lot of people think that's Anne-Marie's problem," she says, referring to herself. "Anne-Marie doesn't have a kid in this program. It's their responsibility."

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