Evaluating WILD: A Bush Adventure Therapy Program 2018
This research would not have been possible without Matt Franks, Senior Youth and Family Wilderness worker at EACH, the WILD team, Joyce Benz for her admin work, the staff at the EACH and NEAMI Youth Residential Residences (YRRs) and of course most importantly, the WILD participants themselves.

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EVALUATING WILD: THE REPORT

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Abstract

THERE IS A STRONG BODY OF EVIDENCE WHICH SUPPORTS THE MULTIPLE POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF BUSH ADVENTURE THERAPY.

The aim of this evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the Bush Adventure Therapy (BAT) Program at EACH, called WILD. Therapeutic workers at EACH recorded that young people on the WILD Program as well as their therapeutic workers, spoke of significant enhancements in psycho-social variables further to participating in this program. Managers of the program wanted not only to capture the outcomes, but to research the mechanisms and context behind the positive mental health and well-being outcomes.

To pinpoint how the process of change occurred, a qualitative approach was taken. The Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique was used to capture and analyse narratives from participants, highlighting what they considered meaningful. The results clearly demonstrated the importance of and inter-connection between the relationships: a) with professional staff, b) with nature as a healing modality, c) with peers and d) with themselves, ultimately resulting in improved mental well-being. The complex interaction of factors which connect these relationships are discussed in this report. The findings are to inform future best practise and training.
Introduction

THE WILD BUSH ADVENTURE THERAPY PROGRAM IS A THERAPEUTIC RECREATION PROGRAM RUN BY EACH, AN AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY HEALTH ORGANISATION.

An array of terms have been used to describe this field of work, including adventure therapy, wilderness therapy and outdoor therapy. According to the Australian Association for Bush Adventure Therapy, over recent years there has been a shift towards a more culturally appropriate term for these practices within the South Pacific region. The new terminology Bush Adventure Therapy (BAT), recognises that ‘wilderness’ may be seen as a colonising term (implying ‘people-free’) that ignores Aboriginal people.

The WILD program is designed specifically for young people with mental illness who are living in community mental health Youth Residential Rehabilitation services (YRRs). Despite considerable progress within BAT research over the last decade, exactly how this treatment modality works is still not clear (Fernee et al. 2017). The goal of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the whole process, the lived experience, not just a change in specific behaviours. This paper reports on the findings of the evaluation of the WILD Program.

The research questions were:

What positive mental health outcomes can the WILD Program facilitate?
How does the program facilitate these positive outcomes?
Can qualitative research unpack the factors contributing to multiple positive outcomes?
The Bush Adventure Therapy (BAT) model emphasises the development of social emotional competencies and coping skills through group-based adventure experiences (Bowen, Neill & Crisp 2016).

EACH’s YRRs are funded by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services. They provide a 12 month residentially based mental health support service for young people aged 16-25 years recovering from significant mental health conditions. The participants work on their individual recovery goals whilst actively engaging in a youth focused therapeutic community environment. Participants collaborate with their individual key worker to customise the program to their needs and select a range of therapeutic opportunities to support their recovery. The WILD Program is one of the courses offered to the residents.

The purpose of the one year stay in the rehabilitation community is to assist the young people to increase their capacity to manage daily living skills, and show that recovery is a reality and how they can have a healthy life, with or without mental health symptoms.

Individuals reside on-site for 12 months while undertaking the counselling and group work. The ultimate goal is for them to live independently in the wider community.

As a treatment intervention, wilderness therapy is growing as a technique to assist adolescents overcome emotional, adjustment, addiction, and psychological problems (Russell, Hendee & Phillips-Miller 2000). The WILD Program provides an opportunity for the participants to find new skills and work through personal and group goals that each person sets at the beginning of the program. Appendix B and C are included at the end of this report. Appendix B is the Management Plan, which gets participants to brainstorm individual goals, how they can prepare themselves to best meet their goals, and what staff can do to support them should they experience any physical or emotional distress in working towards those goals.

Appendix C is a list of the group goals and coping strategies, which one particular WILD Program came up with. Each WILD Program has between 8 to 12 members and runs once a week for 9 to 11 weeks. The WILD Program often culminates (depending on funding) in a 3 day bush camp in the Victorian bush. It is emphasised to the participants that this trip is not a holiday program. This is a time for each person to connect with others in the group and face new challenges.

Entry to the WILD Program is through self-nomination, with the YRR staff providing a clear picture to the residents of what the program entails. All of the residents who indicate an interest in participating in WILD are then assessed for mental and physical suitability.

The WILD staff have an initial information session which will often include all YRR clients and some past WILD participants. This gives those residents considering WILD, an opportunity to hear from staff and young people about exactly what the program entails. It is also an opportunity for WILD and YRR staff to communicate any concerns they may have as to a client’s capacity to participate. A certain level of physical and mental wellness is deemed necessary for the residents to participate.
After the group is formed, participants meet with their key worker to set individual and group goals that they would like to achieve during the program. The young people’s goals are frequently linked to their own individual recovery plans. Participants also complete a safety plan which is a practical plan that advises staff how to best assist the young people if they experience anxiety or distress while on the program. Participants meet for an introductory BBQ and to assist in planning the itinerary. The schedule includes activities such as canoeing, going to the beach, and indoor rock climbing. The activities are selected by the group with guidance from the WILD instructor. The itinerary is tailored to the specific needs of each group of participants. The schedule becomes increasingly challenging requiring the participants to rely on the group. This promotes group problem solving and cooperation, and is designed to show mastery, increase self-confidence and the ability of participants to transfer learned skills to life challenges. See table 1 below:

TABLE 1. Sample schedule of graded activities for February WILD 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK 1</th>
<th>Initial meeting, interviews and goal setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WEEK 2</td>
<td>BBQ and information session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK 3</td>
<td>Canoeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK 4</td>
<td>Surfing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK 5</td>
<td>River sledding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK 6</td>
<td>Camp planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK 7</td>
<td>Indoor rock climbing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK 8</td>
<td>Camp workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK 9</td>
<td>Camp workshop, menu planning, shopping, packing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK 10</td>
<td>Camp, 2 nights, 3 days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK 11</td>
<td>Celebration, reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEEK 12</td>
<td>Individual reviewing of action plans. Next steps.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Activity theme and connection with life

Below is an outline example of how indoor rock climbing as an activity, relates back to the program goals.

INDOOR ROCK CLIMBING

- Theme is TRUST
- Building on theme of good communication
- Personal challenge and achieving goals
- Positive self-talk around meeting goals and how those around you support you to succeed in those goals
- Activity to build level of challenge from last week
- Emphasis on stepping out of comfort zone into stretch/learning zone
- Why and how do we do something new
- Reflection at end of day of who are your positive supports around you
- Relate the safety rope to the connection you have with those supports – not to rely on it but have it there to catch you if you fall
- Introduce mindfulness

There are a minimum of two staff accompanying the young people on every outing. They include the WILD team leader who is a qualified outdoor instructor and a staff member of the YRR. The schedule builds the level of skill leading up to the camp. See Appendix A (page 27), for an outline of a typical days activity and how it relates back to program goals. These skills are then put to use during the camp where the participants experience the most challenging activities including spelunking, rafting and abseiling.

Before the activities commence, an extended time is scheduled for morning tea to give staff an opportunity to ensure the group is grounded, to allow bonding to occur and that the group is mentally ready for the activity ahead. At opportune moments, over lunch and in the bus rides to and from the activities, as described in (Stich 1983), the group leaders initiate conversations about how life is reflected in the activities the group is participating in. These conversations provide an opportunity for group members to express their feelings, hopes and fears and to engage in a non-threatening manner with the other group members. Connections between the challenge undertaken and the implications for coping with life are explored.

Challenge-by-Choice

All participants are encouraged to join in the activities, however the program employs a (Rohnke 2000) ‘challenge by choice’ model. The principle behind the ‘challenge by choice’ model is that participants are invited to participate voluntarily in each of the various activities and challenges of the WILD Program. A young person may choose to sit out an activity and this right is to be respected by others in the group and instructors (Wallia 2008).
Literature review

This literature search was conducted in order to provide a synthesis of the most up to date academic literature and only considers at work published from 2013 onwards. This review includes research which took place both in Australia and internationally. Most research has been done in the United States (Norton et al. 2014), however in examining the international platform of literature this review seeks applicability to the Australian culture. The search was for peer reviewed articles in the English language only.

Keywords

Wilderness therapy, Wilderness adventure therapy, Adventure therapy, Bush therapy.

22 Databases were explored.

Results

Once duplications were deleted the search identified 19 records. The focus of the literature review was to learn how BAT works, from the perspective of the young person and the therapeutic workers only. This led to the exclusion of articles which examined the parent’s perspective (three). The 16 remaining articles were initially categorised according to their study type; qualitative, quantitative and mix methods. The predominant study design in the literature is a quantitative cross-sectional questionnaire or survey design. Eleven of the articles used a quantitative approach, 3 used a qualitative approach, 1 used mixed methods and the remaining article was a literature review.

Literature review findings

It works

The research reviewed revealed a strong body of evidence demonstrating that adventure therapy is effective. Pryor (cited in Norton et al. 2014) highlights that before British colonization in Australia, Indigenous Australians used “bush adventure” practices for prevention and treatment of health needs for well over 40,000 years.

In modern times it is shown to be effective not only as a treatment for young people with behavioural, psychological and psycho-social issues, but also effective in prevention and early intervention (Bettmann et al. 2017; Bowen, Neill & Crisp 2016; Combs et al. 2016; Dolgin 2014; Norton et al. 2014).

In their meta-analysis of BAT outcomes Bowen, Neill and Crisp (2016) included 23 studies, representing 1,222 participants. The overall short-term standardized mean effect size for the entire Australian sample across the age span and for 10- to 17-year-old Australians was positive and moderate (g = .30 and .26, respectively) (cited in Norton et al. 2014)

Outcomes of BAT

BAT can appeal to and be effective in young people who do not relate to traditional psychotherapeutic interventions (Bowen, Neill & Crisp 2016). Common enhancements in psycho-social variables include reduced symptoms of distress related to interpersonal and mental health challenges (Bettmann et al. 2017; Norton et al. 2014), increased feelings of empathy towards others, and improved emotional expression (Dolgin 2014), resilience (Bowen, Neill & Crisp 2016; Hayhurst et al. 2015) and physical outcomes (Roberts et al. 2017). Flom et al. (2011) discusses the psychosocial benefits of nature on student populations, in particular the Forest School movement in the United Kingdom which has demonstrated improved self-esteem and social interaction amongst participating students.
Limitations of existing research

Limitations in the existing research include a lack of models of practice, a focus on program evaluation using predominantly quantitative questionnaires. Many of the research articles in the literature reviewed used the Youth Outcome Questionnaire (YOQ) or the Youth Outcomes Questionnaire Self Report (YOQ-SR). There is a lack of rigorous intervention research, a lack of comparison groups and longitudinal data (Norton et al. 2014, p. 51), and a focus more on the statistical rather than clinical significance of outcomes (Norton et al. 2014; Roberts et al. 2017).

Norton Gillis (cited in Norton et al. 2014) stresses how BAT research needs to move beyond a focus on statistical significance and take a deeper look at the processes of change, at program models. Although there is significant evidence-base around what BAT can change, little is known about how. According to Bettmann et al. 2017, the primary factors which facilitate therapeutic change in clients are the natural surroundings for healing, task accomplishment for self-efficacy, the restructure and development of the relationship with the therapeutic worker and therapeutic social group.

In 2017, Fernee et al used a realist synthesis of empirical findings from seven primary qualitative BAT studies, and empirical findings to unpack the ‘black box’ of what actually takes place within the wilderness treatment process. Her conclusion was that it is a complex interaction between structure and agency. The various dimensions of the outdoor experience interact with each other and are impossible to separate. Burns (1998) similarly recognizes that the therapeutic experience of BAT is not a passive process. The young participants act upon their environment and are in turn influenced by it. Fernee et al. (2017) also recommends that future studies should provide more in-depth accounts of within-group stories and first-hand experiences.
Methodology

Rationale – Why was a qualitative research method chosen?

This research set out to understand not only what the program outcomes were, but how they came about. There is a lack of evidence which maps out how the process works to promote change in adolescent behaviours (Russell, Hendee & Phillips-Miller 2000). In order to gain insight into the human experience this study takes a qualitative, realist approach. It is for this reason that The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique was used. The MSC approach involves generating personal accounts of change and deciding which of these accounts is the most significant – and why. Interview questions in this study were taken from The Most Significant Change: A Guide to its Use (Davies & Dart 2005) and from suggestions provided by the WILD Team Leader.

In her systematic review of BAT programs, Van Hoven (2014) advises that there is a need for more program outcome data in the form of qualitative research to better articulate why BAT is such a success and the personal difference it has made to participants lives. “Qualitative research should be used to gather more in-depth understanding of BAT approaches and outcomes produced” (Van Hoven, 2014). Literature around BAT is replete with articles that are focused on indicators that show that change has occurred but do not provide “a rich picture of what is happening and organizational, social and economic developments are reduced to a single number” (Davies & Dart 2005). Patton (2007) also notes that the purpose of all evaluative inquiry should be to understand what has happened and why. Hall (2014), recommends that evaluation needs to focus on a wide range of perspectives, with a focus on lay rather than professional expertise.

This study is an attempt to do just that. It is an attempt to give the young participants a voice in the research on this topic and gather their unique perception in regards to why or why not they think BAT is successful. Cook (2008) warns that it is important to be aware that the BAT experience in its multi-faceted and complex nature can be difficult for many adolescents to put into words. This is further reason for the decision to use the Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique. It is also an appropriate tool for those interested in the effect of the intervention on people’s lives and those keen to include the words of non-professionals (Davies & Dart 2005). The MSC technique is also very flexible and can be adjusted to suit the program at hand.

How was it done?

The participants for this study were recruited from three separate WILD programs offered in mid and late 2016 and early 2017. Participants were made up of WILD and YRR staff, past and present residents of the EACH and NEAMI agencies. There were a total of 40 participants and 9 staff members in the 3 programs studied. Out of these three programs 19 residents were actually interviewed (8 males and 11 females). Ten staff and one volunteer were interviewed. A total of 30 interviews.

The WILD team leader explained the research program to the young people participating in WILD and the YRR staff and provided an opportunity to ask questions. All participants were then invited to participate in the one-on-one interviews. It was emphasised that participation was completely voluntary and there would be no negative consequences for those who declined to be involved.

Formal ethics approval was obtained from the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee. All participants were required to sign plain language statements. Two researchers from the EACH Health Promotion team conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants in a private room at their respective YRRs around 10 days after the final WILD session. All interviews except one were recorded and transcribed. It should be noted that although the two researchers work for the same organisation that runs the WILD Program, the researchers work at a different site and have no contact with the residents of the YRR or the staff apart from communication with the WILD leader to organise the evaluation.
Data Collection

One-on-one interviews were conducted in July and September 2016 and March 2017 at the three YRR services where the young people live. Two were run by EACH and one by NEAMI.

The interviews were conducted by two Senior Health Promotion Officers from the EACH Health Promotion Team. With the permission of the participants, all interviews were recorded, except one who withheld permission, so notes were taken. All of the participants had the research explained to them and signed a plain language statement. Interviews lasted from 5 minutes to 45 minutes. Below are the interview questions used to speak with WILD participants:

1. It’s my understanding that you can choose from a range of programs to become involved in at the YRR. Can you tell me a bit about what made you choose this program?
2. From your point of view what was the most significant change for you since starting the WILD Program a few months ago?
3. How do you think that the WILD Program contributed to that change?
4. How is this significant for you?
5. Looking back over the WILD Program, what would you say was the most significant change to other participants lives?
6. What difference do you think this experience will make to your future?
7. From your point of view, how might WILD be improved?

Data analysis

Qualitative data was transcribed verbatim and coded by two researchers, first separately and then together, to determine intercoder agreement. The coding process was completed with the evaluation objectives used as a framework for organising the data. Quotes were initially grouped under evaluation indicators and then thematic analysis was conducted for each indicator.
Despite the eclectic nature of multiple interviews and observations, immersion in the data gave rise to four areas of personal development and therapeutic outcomes.

They are improvements in:

- A. Achievement
- B. Confidence
- C. Self-esteem
- D. Transition from risk taking behaviours to protective behaviours.

From the transcripts it was obvious that there were numerous benefits stemming from the WILD Program experience that reinforced the work done during the time the young people spent in the YRR.

**Achievement**

Participants shared that the WILD Program provides a holistic approach to self growth, which often translated into building a sense of achievement. Regardless of their personal circumstances, all of the participants on the program are working on their chosen goals from the outset of the program. The goals relate to participation in WILD activities. Below is a quote from a participant who took on the challenge of caving:

“The caving was probably one of the most challenging days of my life, I keep saying that it was the worst day ever, but it was good but when we did it. There was a certain amount of time before we could get out so that was really challenging and really emotional, I was crying and everything. It was really hard, but then really good in another way that I pushed myself.”

WILD PARTICIPANT

In addition, the social environment created by the other participants and staff provide encouragement and support.

“They were helping me, when I was trying to get up some rocks and stuff like that, trying to get through stuff”.

WILD PARTICIPANT
A significant number of the WILD participants come from families experiencing dysfunction, with limited opportunity for outdoor adventure and achievement.

“Participants will often say they haven’t enjoyed something like this for so long, that they haven’t had that sense of achievement in a long while”. 

YRR STAFF

Many participants reported that, completing an outdoor task and being cheered on by their peers was a new and highly satisfying experience for them. It highlighted to them that they can overcome obstacles, be a valued part of a group and successfully try new activities.

Achieving physical challenges bolstered the self-confidence of many of the participants.

“You are learning practical skills like rock climbing but it’s really the internal work that helps. Yes, you are probably not going to use rock climbing every day but its other things that you are learning as well. Self-confidence, resilience all that kind of stuff you can’t see but is obviously hugely important”.

WILD PARTICIPANT

Feeling more self-confident was a common theme expressed during the interviews.

Many of the YRR residents lack confidence in social situations, in trying new things or stepping out of their comfort zones. During the interviews, a number reported that getting out of bed and on the bus to the WILD Program was a major achievement in itself. Tough circumstances in relationships, school and life in general has left these young people feeling disempowered and reluctant to attempt anything. The adventure component of WILD allows young people to develop appropriate risk assessing behaviours, which are key developmental features of this age group (Schell, Cotton & Luxmoore 2012).

“I don’t know, I feel like I can tackle things more because I can go back and say I’ve done that, so when things come up I can go oh yeah I’ll give it a go – I can do it”.

WILD PARTICIPANT

Many of the young people reported they were unaware of what they can achieve and were reticent to try. They achieved in areas where they previously felt out of their depth.

“I think a lot of it is about confidence. Participants become a little bit nervous at the start and then the activity and the relationship with each other and the workers builds up their self-esteem”.

YRR STAFF

When asked how WILD might be improved upon, some participants said they felt confident enough to go away camping for a few nights.

“I would have liked a camp. I have never been camping. It’s around funding. I was grateful for the activities we did do”.

WILD PARTICIPANT
Self-esteem

Staff attending WILD Programs commented that at the start of the program, the participants struggle to be themselves, and that as the program continues, participants show an increased willingness to open up and discuss their feelings. The staff witnessed opportunities for the participants to express themselves in a non-judgmental environment with supportive peers and workers.

“"You don’t have to be coolest kid, you don’t have to be the best looking, but they have that anxiety about themselves, but you’re accepted into the group and it’s that kind of culture".

- YRR STAFF

“"Yes and its good for your self-esteem and you think oh I did that pretty well and then you are getting praise all day for it. It makes you feel a lot better about yourself".

- WILD PARTICIPANT

Transition from risk taking behaviours to protective behaviours.

Several participants saw the activities they engaged in for WILD as legitimate avenues to obtain the adrenaline rush they had previously sought through dangerous activities. One participant described how she had previously spent time exploring under-road drains.

“I actually do stupid things. I go into storm drains. You lift it up and in you go. I noticed that pot holing was pretty much the same feel, except it was more natural and less boring and repetitive”.

- WILD PARTICIPANT

Staff members also noted that participants saw adventure sports, hiking, rafting etc. as a pastime they could engage in regularly.

“"Participants are already planning to do similar activities. I believe one of them is already doing rock climbing indoors just after experiencing that rock climbing, and another is going to take their partner to Sugarloaf Mountain. I am going to make it a regular activity because it’s really made me feel great”.

- YRR STAFF

For many of the participants, this was the first time they had engaged in outdoor adventure activities. They have never before participated in any physical challenge in a coordinated and safe manner.

“I had never been camping before last week and I had never rock scrambled, so there is a lot of stuff that I haven’t done, so it’s great. I always wanted to do paddling”.

- WILD PARTICIPANT

Other authors have also noted that the overall outcome of BAT has been described as a pivotal step in the right direction away from a destructive path (Fernee et al. 2017; Russell 2005).
WILD results - How did changes come about?

THE AIM OF THIS RESEARCH WAS TO DISCOVER HOW BUSH ADVENTURE THERAPY IMPACTS OUTCOMES FOR THE PARTICIPANTS, AND WHAT IS IT IN THE PROGRAM THAT MAKES IT BENEFICIAL.

Hearing from the young people themselves, we wanted to understand from their perspective, the essential components that are needed for positive self-growth to occur in the participants.

The data analysis gave rise to the main themes, which ultimately led to the identification of a four stage model framework (Diagram below). This model has four primary stages, the quality of each informing the other. Specifically they all relate to relationships: 1) to professional staff, 2) to peers, 3) to nature 4) to the self/ use of metaphor.

The challenge by choice model is at the centre of each stage. The following section deconstructs each of these themes accordingly.

The diagram below is a visual synthesis of the findings on how the changes came about. They are a summary of the insights regarding the causal factors contributing to the numerous positive most likely outcomes. One by one they are broken down in further detail to follow.

THE FOUR PHASE MODEL OF HOW CHANGE CAME ABOUT

1. Relationships with staff
   - Safe and accepting environment
   - Preparation, selection/briefing/cooling down

2. Relationships with peers
   - Gaining physical and emotional trust
   - Encouragement and praise

3. Healing Properties of Nature
   - Being active
   - Being in the moment
   - Physical challenge

4. Personal growth
   - Move from risk taking behaviours
   - Confidence
   - Self-esteem
   - Resilience
   - Achievement

WILD: Challenge by Choice

Sense of belonging
**Relationships with staff**

When interviewed participants shared that the attitudes and kindness of the staff made a huge difference to them. Staff reported they put the relationship with the young person at the forefront of their focus and energy. Russell, Hendee and Phillips-Miller (2000) identified a strong relationship with the wilderness therapists is a key change agent in the treatment process. Participants reported that the BAT therapists came across as more accepting compared with other conventional therapists.

"I guess the group, everyone has been so kind to me, so accepting, and that’s really made all the difference".

**WILD PARTICIPANT**

The bush environment with its challenging activities provides a unique opportunity for the young people to depend on each other and the staff members.

"At the start, yes, we had need of quite a bit of help from the workers and then eventually throughout the weeks it started becoming beneficial that the students and all of us started becoming a team".

**WILD PARTICIPANT**

The data collected highlighted that staff are very intentional about creating an environment which is supportive, compassionate and invites the young people to open up, share their thoughts and be part of a community. They are deliberate in always being fully present, interested and authentic. The data collected demonstrated that the YRRs and WILD staff model pro-social behaviours and encourage the participants to emulate this and practice a new way of interacting with each other.

"We try to be fully present with any of the groups we work with, to build a supportive and trusting space".

**SENIOR STAFF, WILD PROGRAM**

"At night, we build a fire, I think the space of a camp with the fire and everyone sits around it – it’s quite powerful and it can achieve a lot".

**SENIOR WILD LEADER**

Participants are made to feel very welcome and are even encouraged to be part of WILD in the future, when they no longer live at the YRR.

"When you move out you can still do the program – I would love to, if it’s possible, depending on where I’m living and all that type of thing, but I would really like to if I can".

**WILD PARTICIPANT**

"I thought honestly I wouldn’t physically be able to do caving, but I did it with the support of everyone. The WILD leader was amazing and said at the end of everything that I should pat myself on the back as I had done an amazing job. I cried both caving times? Even the quiet kid in the background who never said anything said ”good on you”. So you could see it was really helping everyone’s confidence. It was amazing." 

**WILD PARTICIPANT**
WILD results - How did changes come about? continued...

Relationships with peers

For a number of the participants, the social aspect of the WILD Program was the area they feared the most. However the bush setting with its small group and the encouragement for the participants to rely on their peers challenged many of the clients’ relational patterns and behaviours. Many were surprised at how well they bonded.

“We did white water rafting and yes it was a lot of fun. Immediately there’s a sense of community and support and all that kind of thing, which was great when you are first meeting new people.”

WILD PARTICIPANT

The data from this study that the 3 day camping experience provided the participants with opportunities for genuine self-expression. This, along with the emphasis on cooperative activities and social support, facilitates trust, acceptance of others, and closer relationships.

“We really bonded as a group I feel. We had this one activity where we all shared songs that really touched us and I felt like I really got to know the other a lot more through just sitting and listening to the songs that were really close to their heart. Everyone was just so supportive”.

WILD PARTICIPANT

“I think probably it’s really helped me to get to know some of the others. The friends that I have formed at the YRR, have all been pretty much people who have gone on WILD. WILD is not set up to be social, it’s not like this is just a social event, but the activities we do, walking in nature and stuff, helps me connect with other people quite naturally, because it’s not the sole purpose. To have something else to focus on and I just find myself really getting to know the others and I guess you are all working as a team and you are working towards a similar goal, so you naturally become closer to that. I just find it so much easier to socialise at WILD”.

WILD PARTICIPANT

There is a strong body of evidence in the literature that those who engaged in BAT were more likely to have and maintain close relationships (Pommier & Witt 1995).

“If there was a most significant change with the young people that I observed, I would say that the idea of building community, social interaction”.

SENIOR WILD LEADER
Metaphor for life

During the WILD outdoor activities metaphors are used to transfer learnings from the participant’s days in the outdoors into everyday life. Staff utilise these outdoor experiences to model behaviours and discuss ideas which can be practised with staff and peers.

“If there’s a rapid coming up, the instructor talks us through it and sometimes it is tied in with a bit of a metaphor. So there’s times in life where we hit rough spots and we don’t know how to approach it. On WILD for example we actually physically go through a rapid, we come out of it and then we’re like oh, we did it. We use the activities as a life lesson and that’s the best thing about it.”

YRR STAFF

“Trying to control it and get (the canoe) to go to the left or just let it go with the current and I ended up just giving up control and letting it go with the current and it naturally took us around the obstacle and so it was like a real lesson for me...letting go, kind of letting things take their natural course slowly, surrender and stuff...the irony being in control when we let go of control, letting some kind of spiritual lessons come up through the WILD Program.”

WILD PARTICIPANT

To be truly helpful for young people struggling with life controlling issues, an outdoor experience needs to be isomorphic. It needs to be seen as a metaphor for life so that influential lessons can be learned in the wilderness and transferred back to the participant’s current life situation (Brand 2001).
Being active and in nature

The staff working with the residents of the YRR report that many of the residents are captive to rumination. Rumination has been defined as “the focused attention on the symptoms of one’s distress, and on its possible causes and consequences, as opposed to its solutions”. Rumination has been implicated in a number of disorders including depression and general symptoms of distress (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco & Lyubomirsky 2008).

The WILD participants reported that their experiences in the program took them ‘out of themselves’. As many of the activities are physically challenging, their thoughts and concentration were centred on the task at hand, rather than on their internal thoughts.

“I just like it better than being trapped in a room. It’s physical but also mentally a challenge so achieving that challenge outdoors, you get fresh air. I don’t know. I would rather achieve something outdoors than inside”.

“I have seen these guys going through the caves supporting each other, I suppose it’s like a little catalyst on building social bonds, because they can end up just saying, I’m going to help you through, there is no stigma or anything, it doesn’t matter about putting your hand out and holding someone’s hand, pushing someone up through a hole or whatever it might be; this is what we do, we have to get through it and so they do help each other”.

“Mindfulness is stuff I really enjoy but with WILD it’s kind of like you are actually physically doing things, whereas it’s not just sitting there and mentally doing it, you are physically going through challenges as well and then achieving those. Plus you are doing things that you wouldn’t usually do, like I have never canoed down Warrandyte River”.

WILD SENIOR LEADER

By contrast several participants spoke of the opposite and how the indoors can make them feel trapped.

“WILD has given me a new lease on life. It makes me literally want to go and do something active every weekend. Especially in winter.”

Participants reported that the natural setting itself had a therapeutic effect and this is supported by literature (Becker 2010).

“Nature is good for you, instead of being trapped indoors, get outdoors and do something, it makes you feel better, just even being outside in the middle of a forest or something it’s very nice and it makes you feel better, you forget all your problems”.

WILD PARTICIPANT
Challenge by choice

An important feature of the WILD Program is the philosophy of ‘challenge by choice’.

The WILD Program invites participants to co-create the curriculum. One worker described the bottom up approach and how it has the capacity to empower participants and emphasise inclusion, right from the start.

“We have a big circle around and we say what do we want to do, where do we want to go, how long, what do you want to eat, all of those things…”

Participants are encouraged to engage with all of the activities however their ‘right to pass’ is also accepted. Staff work with the participants to encourage and support them, however their right to pass is always considered to be a valid choice. For participants who fear stepping into anything new, this ‘right to pass’ is an important part of the success of the WILD Program.

“You don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to”.

Participants are encouraged to choose their level of engagement and challenge throughout their time on the program. Staff are constantly present with participants and work to provide them with opportunities to find their levels of competence. The shared experience of challenge, success and learnings are shared afterwards.

“It is challenge by choice and it’s just to give them that little push – like come on, give it a go, even if it’s just them coming, sometimes that’s a big deal and then the next time they can get out on the water, but they don’t have to paddle, so I think the staff group encouragement and support, that role models as well”.

“You don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to”.

“It was challenge by choice – If they don’t want to come you encourage them to come along, give them all different options, they can meet us half way and when we get to the camp site we can join along then”.

Adolescence is a time when young people start to develop a sense of their self-efficacy and agency in the world (Carlson & Cook 2007). Many of the participants in the WILD Program have had little control over their own lives. The challenges and choices of the adventure experience highlights for the participants that not all outcomes are externally determined. For every circumstance that cannot be controlled, there are many more that can be. Challenge by choice gives the young participants the opportunity to make choices for themselves and be respected for it. The experience of making good choices and taking acceptable risks in a challenging situation has transferability to situations outside of WILD.
The small group adventure experience provides a safe space for the participants to take on physical and mental challenges. The achievable activities encourage connection, conversation, trust, confidence, self-esteem, acceptance of others, closer relationships and nurturing of trust. The results of the evaluation demonstrate that WILD is a setting that encourages healing and personal growth.

The close relationships formed during the program were identified as the foundation of the participant’s experience. Peer dynamics and relationships with staff were frequently referred to in the participant interviews and are also mentioned by a number of authors as key change factors in BAT (Bettmann et al. 2017; Cook 2008; Dolgin 2014; Fernee et al. 2017).

For most of the participants interactions with authority figures have at times been negative, being criticised etc. In contrast, the WILD leaders work to provide authentic support and opportunities for genuine self-expression such as the experience described around the camp fire. Many of the young people commented that talking with the staff as they participated in the activities or sat around the fire at night, to be less intimidating than other treatment settings.

Lastly, participants described the very act of being out in nature, away from the stressors of everyday life, as being healing. The research showed that the participants relationship with nature facilitated the outcomes that counselling and therapeutic relationships seek. Participants mentioned the beauty of the bush, the isolation and the restorative power of nature. As well as being therapeutic, many saw the activities that they had participated in as something to pursue in the future and as an alternative to current illegal or unsafe activities. Two of the participants were interested in gaining qualifications in outdoor activities and saw this as a way forward in regards to employment.
The use of story, metaphor, and shared experience commonly utilized by the wilderness staff assists in reducing opposition of young people to counselling. The staff use metaphor to translate everyday life events to help deepen the participants understanding of self-knowledge, and raise self-esteem. The rapids the participants encountered during the white water rafting and the difficulties of pot holing are all utilised by the staff as life lessons in overcoming obstacles. Van Hoven (2014) in her systematic literature review on BAT comments that the use of metaphors was identified in five of the ten articles reviewed.

Can it all be positive?

This study has found the positive outcomes of the WILD Program to be significant, even transformative. It is frequently argued that BAT research only focuses on positive outcomes, pointing to the suggestion that outliers or negative cases are overlooked.

It is worth noting that for the present study’s cohort, the sum of negative life experiences and dysfunction cannot be underestimated, and so any kind of freedom from such history becomes empowering, as noted in the data. This does not negate the strength of the program’s outcomes. Again, literature corroborates the success of BAT, but in the essence of transparency and thinking critically about the results, many of this study’s participants had never experienced outdoor activities before in their lives. For a significant number of participants, WILD provided an avenue for them to experience activities they had previously been shut out of, but dreamed of taking part in. Hence why the results of WILD are fairly life changing.

When asked how WILD might be improved upon, participants either said it wasn’t possible or that they wished there had been a camp. This is because not all programs have a camp, due to funding restrictions.

The findings of this study indicate that the Challenge by Choice approach (Davies & Dart, 2005) is one of the key factors in producing strong and consistently positive outcomes. The importance of each participant being supported in each component of the WILD Program was revealed. Not all individuals take part in every activity and the Challenge by Choice Model (Davies & Dart, 2005) gives individuals freedom in their decision-making.

The strength of the participant voice in unravelling the process of change.

Despite the number of studies evaluating wilderness therapy, participant views are not often the main focus when looking to unravel the process of change. Research often overlooks adolescents’ perceptions of why specific interventions have or do not have an impact on the participants (Cook 2008). This study actively sought to seek participant’s perceptions and examined them for potential causal factors that could explain the positive outcomes.

It can be difficult for young people to put a finger on exactly what it is about BAT that has had such a profound effect on them (Cook, 2008). Although some interviews confirmed that it is difficult to pinpoint the recipe to the success of BAT, participant enthusiasm was strong and The Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique (Davies & Dart, 2005) significantly facilitated the process of identifying the most meaning and purpose upfront. Participants were free to tell their story, indeed happy to tell their story and as a result produced context rich data.
Conclusion

LITERATURE ATTESTS TO THE SUCCESS OF WILDERNESS THERAPY. THERE IS OVERWHELMING EVIDENCE IN REGARDS TO THE VALUE OF WILDERNESS PROGRAMS AND THEIR TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECT


This study set out to listen to the WILD participant voice, to identify what positive mental wellbeing outcomes the WILD Program could bring about and how it facilitated these outcomes. The research indicates there were four areas of personal development and growth: achievement, confidence, self-esteem and transition from risk taking behaviours to protective behaviours.

This research strongly points to the fact that the success of the WILD Program depends on a complex interplay of relationships. This research demonstrates that the success of the experience starts with the relationship with staff and then flows onto the relationship with peers, with nature and finally with oneself. The clever use of the metaphors for life and the process of being challenged, not forced to try new activities, are essential tools that the leaders draw upon. The compounding effects of the natural environment were found to be the catalyst in forming face to face conversation, in-person interaction and thereafter close relationships. The research gave rise to the creation of a four stage model, which accounts for the most significant changes perceived by participants and staff alike.

Finding out how these positive outcomes came about was facilitated by the dynamic dialogue produced by using The Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique. This research would indicate that qualitative research and in particular story telling, is the most effective way to unpack the factors contributing to WILD’s multiple positive outcomes. Participants appeared to enjoy the interview process and brought to it a high level of enthusiasm. The hope is that the findings will assist in promoting BAT as an alternative therapeutic approach, as well as help to refine and further develop BAT theory and research.
References


Davies, R & Dart, J 2005, ‘The most significant change(MSC) technique’, A guide to its use.


Patton, MQ 2007, Qualitative research and evaluation methods, 2nd edn edn, Thousand Oaks, California.


YMCA, V 2013, Journey to Strength, Department of Planning and Community Development, Sport and Recreation.
EACH YOUTH AND FAMILY’S WILD PROGRAM IS A CHANCE FOR YOU TO EXPERIENCE THE OUTDOORS IN ALL ITS GLORY!

We run Wilderness activities from canoeing to abseiling and everything in between to give you the chance to challenge yourself, push your boundaries, have fun and share amazing experiences with friends.

We run day activities and group sessions with the aim of organising and going on a camp once a term. These sessions and camps are designed to be challenging but all within a safe, supportive environment: Challenge By Choice is a principle we always follow. Wilderness activities normally run all day Friday, with most planning sessions running for half the day. Camps last from 2-5 days and run on weekdays.

Activity 1:
Flat Water Paddle – Yarra River

This introduces us to The Yarra River and the water activities we’ll be doing over the next 7 weeks. It’s an easy flatwater paddle along a beautiful part of The Yarra, just a couple of kms from the city!

WHY:
This is our introduction day. Getting to know you and each other. It’s a chilled day with a chance to find out what skills WILD is about, ask questions and enjoy a great day out!

Activity 2:
Paddle – Yarra River – Warrandyte

This activity takes us away from the ITCs and onto the river. We are going to Warrandyte to have a paddle day on the Yarra River using sports rafts as our means of transport. It’s a step up from the flat water, where we’ll have one or two rapids to master!

WHY:
This is a great chance to use our skills we’ve developed on the flatwater and also challenge yourself on the Grade 1 rapids! The great thing is it’s still Challenge by Choice, with opportunities to step out of your comfort zone and get a buzz from navigating the rapids!

Activity 3:
River Sled – Warburton

This activity takes us away from Melbourne and into the bush. We are going to Warburton to have a wet and WILD day on the Yarra River using river sleds as our means of transport.

WHY:
This is a great chance to have fun and also challenge yourself on some rapids whilst steering down the river without getting snagged. It’s also brilliant for helping your friends through the river

Activity 4:
Introduction to Caving

We’re heading back towards Warburton to Britannia Creek caves. This cave provides the perfect introduction to what caving is about, with a network of tunnels and rooms and a stream running throughout it. We might even have the chance to head up the stream through beautiful forest, maybe climbing up a waterfall or two… We may get muddy and wet!!

WHY:
This is that next stage of challenge and adventure, but still sticking to our philosophy of ‘Challenge by Choice’. We have the chance to challenge our beliefs of what we are able to do and rational/irrational thoughts. We’ll also be a supportive group, which we’ve been amazing at since the start.
Activity 5:
Climbing Gym – Nunawading

We’re heading to the dizzy heights of the climbing gym at Nunawading for the opportunity to physically and mentally test yourself with indoor rock climbing! It’s a great activity for those who are climbing and also for those who want to hold the ropes and belay for your buddies.

WHY:
We’re giving you different ways to step out of your comfort zone, have the opportunity to try new things and enjoy getting an adrenalin rush!

Activity 6:
Rafting – Wonga Park – Yarra River

This activity takes back onto the river. We are going to Wonga Park to have a wet and WILD day on the Yarra River using sports rafts again. It’s a step up from the last river session, where we’ll have a few more and bigger rapids to master!

WHY:
This is a great chance to use our skills we’ve developed on the slower water and also challenge yourself on the Grade 2 rapids! The great thing is it’s still Challenge by Choice, with opportunities to push yourself as much as you feel comfortable.

Celebration activity:
Rock Scrambling – Sugarloaf Saddle

We are going to tackle the Sugarloaf Saddle. This is a half day adventure walk ranging in difficulty from an easy walk to some challenging rock scrambling and the reward being some amazing views.

WHY:
It’s a great way of celebrating our achievements over the term, getting to the top of a mountain, with stunning views and a challenging scramble both up and down!
## Management Plan

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact number:</td>
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<td>Site:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key Worker:</td>
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What do you hope to get out of this program?

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In what ways does this program relate to your recovery within the EACH ITC program?

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If you are not feeling well in the morning, what can staff do to support you with still attending the WILD Program?

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What can I do myself to ensure I am prepared for each Friday activity?

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If you experience anxiety or any distress on the program, what can staff do to best support you through this?

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Goals

• Build self-confidence **
• Build self esteem
• Try new things **
• Interaction with others
• How to deal with anxiety and depression
• Be positive in my thinking
• Positive building skills
• Social skills
• Exercise **
• Improving skills in activities
• Have fun
• Get out of my comfort zone
• Live in the moment
• Find new ways to deal with stress
• Work better as a team
• Reduce stress being in the outdoors
• Improve physical health / learn new skills
• Get out and about in nature
• Feel more comfortable in a larger group
• New knowledge of the outdoors
• To experience what I like in other people who enjoy the same hobbies
• Gain work experience
• Socialisation – making friends

Coping strategies (personal and group)

• Just do it! Don’t overthink things
• Having my own space when I need it
• Talk issue through
• Think positive – feel positive – behave positively!
• Have time to calm myself
• Be calm and supportive to me
• Deep breathing **
• Push through
• Encourage and support
• Calming talk to me
• Distraction
• Physical exertion
• Take a break
• Talk to staff / give me space and time
Check out the WILD video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0NpfCG4Ofg

FEEDBACK & QUESTIONS & REFERENCES

We welcome your feedback, questions and requests for references.

For questions about this research you can contact Zoe Francis on zoe.francis@each.com.au

For questions or inquiries about the WILD Program you can contact Matt Franks at wild@each.com.au

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