



ACTIVE CONNECTIONS

Changing young peoples lives
through adventure

Words: **Catherine Murphy**

While adventure therapy is well established in places like America, it's only beginning to be explored and developed in Ireland. Active Connections is an Irish not-for-profit company that uses adventure therapy to help children and teenagers with behavioural, social or mental health problems.



For anyone who enjoys adventure and outdoor activity, the mental health benefits are clear.

Acquiring new skills brings self-awareness and confidence, while developing resilience and perseverance in challenging conditions rewards you with an ethos to live by.

In late 2011, Dubliner Ray Burke recognised a vital social use for the kind of adventure most of us tap into for entertainment. He set up Active Connections, a not-for-profit company that uses adventure therapy to help children and teenagers with behavioural, social or mental health problems.

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The premise is simple; Ray and his team use traditional counselling methods in an outdoor setting to engage with troubled children, many of whom are in care and have been referred to the programme by an agency or social worker.

Thirty-three-year-old Burke showed an early interest in social work, setting up a drugs education programme in schools around his native Tallaght in

Dublin when he was just 15 years old.

He subsequently worked in residential care services in England and adventure therapy in America before returning to Ireland, and now has a qualification in applied social care from Waterford Institute of Technology, as well as a number of counselling qualifications.

While the main base for Active Connections is in Cork, it also operates in Dublin and there are plans to roll the programme out nationally in the coming years.

Children from the age of six up to 18 years old are enrolled in eight- or 16-week non-residential courses with an eight-week course typically involving 40 to 50 hours of face-to-face counselling.

NATURAL HEALING

"The environment does a lot of the work for us," says Ray. "In the Dublin area we go kayaking on the Dodder, hiking in the Dublin Mountains, climbing in Dalkey quarry, exploring areas which children never knew were there. A big part of the programme is that children are conscious of what they're achieving and how it can be translated into life skills. They're exposed to an ethos that they didn't previously know about."

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Other activities include coasteering, mountain biking, bushcraft and gorge-walking.

"It can be a massively cathartic experience," Ray continues. "Many studies have shown that if you can replace negative adrenalin from say shoplifting or joy-riding with positive adrenalin, it's providing a more healthy way of getting that adrenalin fix."

"Many of the children and teenagers we deal with are strong peer leaders in their community but in a negative way and we try to change that. Often, they've been kicked out of schools and local groups; we're their last support. "The courses are non-residential because we want them to remain connected to their community and we try to keep activities within 15km of where they live. We teach them to change their perspective of themselves within their community and to re-integrate."

Active Connections staff utilise the outdoors to foster therapeutic relationships. "A very simple example is rope use for rock climbing," says Ray. "Using a rope, you have to speak to the other person; it cuts down the emotional barriers that children in care have put up through dealing with professionals all their lives."

"Or you could have a situation where a child is afraid and grabs hold of you

for safety; again, it's breaking down emotional barriers."

The programme is set out in a very clear and structured way, he says. "Firstly, we aim to give them a new experience that they interact and learn from, basically releasing endorphins through being out in the fresh air. We've had girls coming along picture perfect at the start of a day and covered in mud at the end of it."

INTO THE WILD

"On the other hand, you get young teens that run wild in their community all day and all night but are terrified the minute you bring them into a forest. If a child is overwhelmed in a particular outdoor setting, we adapt the programme to suit them, we bring them somewhere different."

"Next, we go into the 'meaning-making' phase, teaching what they can learn about themselves by learning to light a fire for example, reflecting on how they can bring an ethos of resilience and perseverance into their daily lives, how to use what they've learned in the outdoors."

"Then we ask them to take social ownership, to give back to themselves, the environment and the community by fostering empathy."

"We have a 90% engagement rate

and see children taking massive steps forward as a result of the programme – they love the fun and excitement, that whole Bear Grylls element. They're always asking, 'Are you Bear Grylls?!' They also gain a great deal from realising that they're not just one thing in life, that there's more to them as a person." While there may be a presumption that the programme is aimed squarely at 14-18 year olds, Ray and his team are actually seeing that 8-10 year olds are most at risk. "We're getting earlier and earlier referrals in a bid to help children before they end up as teenagers in the criminal justice system," he says.

The average cost of an eight-week course is €1,100 and in most cases that cost is funded by the agency making a referral. In instances where individual families want to refer a child, Active Connections has a small philanthropic fund from local companies seeking to help the community.

The company also plans to establish an expeditionary personal development programme and a leadership module, and offers counselling sessions for parents who may be dealing with a child with ADHD or other behavioural problems.

For more information, visit: www.activeconnections.ie

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