



19 Beyond Peer Groups: Kids in Cults

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After attending this presentation, attendees should be able to understand the various definitions of cults, characteristics of cult leaders, methods used by cults to indoctrinate adolescents into the cult, and potential timing and avenues of treatment for adolescents in cults.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by examining the issue of cults and how adolescents are indoctrinated into the cult culture is important so that better decisions about when to intervene and how to intervene successfully to prevent harm to the adolescent can be made. In addition, it is important for clinicians to be able to identify youth that may be at risk for cult involvement or identify adolescents that may already be involved in cult activities. While there have been numerous cults that have attracted national attention, the vast majority of cults do not do so. It has been estimated that the upper number of cults in the United States approaches five thousand. These organizations will tend to actively recruit people in their teenage and early adult years as this is the time in which recruitment is most successful. It is also estimated that up to fifty percent of high school aged children have been approached to join a cult. It is important for clinicians to understand the high prevalence of cult activity in order to be effective in detecting cult activity. In addition, understanding the social environment of children that have grown up in cults also can be useful in providing effective treatment that can allow for reintegration into society.

Leaders of cults have certain characteristics which allow them to exercise certain command over their subjects. Pseudologia fantastica has been used to describe a set of criteria that may help identify the cult leader and provide an understanding of factors that may allow any person to become ensnared by a cult.

In the course of this presentation, a model for cult progression is reviewed to help the clinician understand the different levels of cult participation. In addition, entry points for intervention, likelihood of success for intervention, and possible intervention techniques are discussed. These points are correlated with the progression of cult involvement. Characteristics and the knowledge base needed for the treating provider are also discussed.

Cults are a pervasive but not always recognizable element of society. While some cults gain national notoriety, most cults operate below recognition. Understanding what constitutes a cult, the personalities of the leaders, the traits of those attracted to cults, progression of cult involvement, and potential avenues for treatment are important topics for the clinical forensic practitioner to understand and to be able to recognize.

Cult, Adolescent, Intervention