Surviving the Privilege of Boarding School

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An article similar to this was published in 2006 in the Journal of the Australian Mental Health Association.

On September 1st 1990 an article appeared in London's *Independent* broadsheet claiming that sending children away to board - a habit long cherished by the most privileged classes in Britain and her former colonies - was a bad idea. While private schools regularly advertised that their pupils would learn responsibility and self-reliance within community life, this article suggested that children thus privileged would pay by cutting short their attachment formation and natural development in their family, and adopting a drastic survival mode.

Harbouring super-private inner lives, they would develop facades designed to please, to succeed, and at all costs avoid the display of emotions, in fact, disowning any kind of vulnerability. Furthermore, they would be silenced by internal shame, because they knew that the privilege that cost them their home, cost their parents lots of money. As adults they would find intimate relationships and parenting extremely difficult, and despite their adopted confident exterior and ability to function, their personalities would be characterised by a brittleness or defensiveness which they would be unlikely to acknowledge. Many would continue the habit of sending away their own children to board and - apart from the occasional 'joke' - would avoid referring to their own childhood losses. They would be unlikely to present themselves for therapy, and, if they did, would find it difficult to stay the course.

In the event, the *Independent* received more letters in response than to any previous piece. The most common comments were on the lines of: "Thank God someone has finally spoken about this in public …", and "… please can someone do something to help my husband – now I have an idea why he may be so hard to live with."

As you may have guessed, I was the author of this piece. As a child, I boarded for ten years. Nothing particularly bad happened to me, but I hated the regime which prevented me having a regular childhood, and I pretty much lost touch with my parents, whom I saw for some three months a year. But I did not know how deeply this had impacted on me until much later, and in my second marriage. After Oxford, I taught for two years in a boarding school for boys, and then spent 15 years trying to get away from all that privilege entailed, until I had a breakdown and went into therapy. Finally, I retrained as a psychotherapist. In 1989 I began group therapy for men who had been boarders as children. It was these workshops that caught the attention of the media.

Sixteen years later, the workshops continue; there have been umpteen newspaper reports and two TV documentaries. In 2000 I published my book, *The Making of Them*, and I still receive weekly letters from readers who thought they were the only sufferers. With other colleagues, an information organisation en route to becoming a charity has been formed, *Boarding Concern*, and we have just begun our first

specialist training for qualified psychotherapists to work with ex-boarders. Last year we met with the Royal College of Nurses to discuss their recent observation that some privileged children are suffering a previously unrecognised neglect. In April 2004 I was invited to be keynote speaker at the Boarding Colloquium of Southern Australia, to try to help teachers find ways to humanise boarding.

Why is it then that this is such a controversial and challenging subject?

• First, it is because the boarding schools are deeply linked with the English class system and a nostalgic sense of tradition. If you send your child to one of these schools it establishes your family on the right side of the tracks - for ever. And it does work; the old school tie and the right accent are still pretty good passports to success.

• Secondly there is the money involved: school fees in the UK alone approach 1.5 billion Pounds. Understandably, this huge industry does not want to know about the psychological costs of boarding. Nor does the British government want to find the money that these schools – most of which masquerade as registered charities – relieve the state system from needing to pay.

• Thirdly, a visit to any boarding school will *not* reveal the presence of unhappy children. This is where a simple problem starts to become psychological. Child boarders at all costs have to avoid their vulnerability and put on a brave face. They are subject to a very insidious double-bind. They have already been sent away from home, so they must please their parents, if not, what further abandonments might they suffer? While it is true that boarders are much more easily subject to bullying and abuse, since they are in large groups for 24 hours and without adults around them who love them, the problems of boarding generally only emerge in adult life.

• Fourthly, for the adults involved, the shame of 'not having made it', of being a failure is immense. Low self-esteem promotes silence. One of our correspondents describes it tangibly. "It is easy to love the nine year old, but it's hard to love the adult Survivor with his inability to touch or be touched." Even the liberal press find it hard to imagine why sympathy should be extended to people who have already had more than their fair share of privilege.

• Finally, the problem is largely unknown. Despite literature being riddled with tales of awful public-school childhoods there has been only one series sociological study – that of Lambert in the 1960's, which discovered many instances of child abuse yet maintained confidentiality of each report – and not a single psychological study, until my own.

When children are sent away from their homes to live in institutions they quickly lose touch with their caretakers and the habit of being cared about. When boarding begins – sometimes from the age of six, but more frequently at 8, the boy (or girl) finds himself in an unfamiliar world where the hierarchy of those who have been there longer serves to enforce that he is at the bottom of the pile. In order to keep out of trouble, for unsupported children in stressful situations can be competitive and cruel, he will disown everything to do with vulnerability, especially tears of homesickness. He may seek to divert attention elsewhere – to scapegoat another child who might be prone to give the game away. He will design a character that keeps the heat off him, in many disguises: a winner is best, but a clown, a pleaser, an isolate, even sometimes a victim will do.

I call this process of self-protection constructing a *Strategic Survival Personality* (SSP). Designed from a child's idea of what is demanded of him, and how he imagines he may best stay safe, this character is rapidly built, but can be extraordinarily difficult to put away in late life. Some adults confess later that they have always felt as if 'on the run', as if someone were out to get them, to find them out, to unmask them. Surviving strategically means that they are ever-ready to perceive a threat where there may be none. Many advances towards them in intimate settings may then be misinterpreted as danger, ending in aggression or withdrawal. Colin Luke's remarkable 1994 documentary reveals the process of constructing an SSP live, as he follows several young children through their first weeks of boarding. At one point you see a 10-year-old boy go through the rigours of presenting himself as a self-sufficient little adult, and then slipping back into his natural spontaneous child self by accident. It is heart-breaking to watch. He has begun to abandon himself and he will never trust his mother again, perhaps no other woman either.

It is tempting to think that children who are sent away later fare better, but even if boarding begins at 13 there may be losses. There are many problems with being institutionalised from puberty. We tend to think that adolescent children do not need their parents much; but this is a fallacy. They need loving homes to come back to at the end of a day where they can be safe, regress if they need to, talk things through or remain silent, as they wish. When they begin theirs forays into the exciting but difficult world of courtship, children get support by living in a home with parents, who after all made them through an act of love. In single gender institutions they do not learn about the opposite sex, and they leave with unrealistic expectations. The hot-house atmosphere of sexual excitement – the prime condition of puberty, which is generally neither understood nor properly supported by their school staff - can cause terrible stress for those who are on the receiving end of others' fantasies. So co-ed boarding is no solution. The point is obvious: though such conditions do arise in day-schools, children come home every evening for respite to a home, which has people of different ages, toys, pets, etc. Boarders do not.

At puberty, a child deprived of loving touch may sometimes become a magnet for those who are also lonely, or for paedophiles who may win their trust with a friendly word, with catastrophic outcomes. Or, he may be humiliated or bullied for being 'different'. Again, one clumsy mistake at the beginning of five-year school career can become a life-sentence of bullying. For there is little protection. Anyone who has tried parenting knows how difficult it is: imagine one housemaster and a matron trying to take care of a house with 40 boarders. Even with recent social advances, such as Britain's Children Act, no level of vigilance is going to work with such numbers, and no child can really thrive without love, which is exactly what cannot be given. Journalist George Monbiot has suggested that most private barding schools utterly fail the children in terms of the UN Charter on Children's Rights.

Other problems within the 'normal' range can also cut deep. In boarding school every moment is organised, regimented and marked on a timetable. Whether it be work, games, or routines to do with the body, the progamme is set, very linear. No time for hanging around, riding around on bikes, moping around, loafing around, messing around - vital for teenagers! In consequence, one symptom frequently reported by ex-boarders and their spouses is over-work, over-investment in the *doing* side of life, at the expense of *being,* down

time, relationships. We call this effect *Timetabling*. It is very hard for those used to this to get out of the habit, but sufferers become skilled at stealing time for themselves, at living a secret life. Relationship appears like the thing that is going to catch them and unmask them, rather than the supportive backdrop to life, perhaps a reminder of the family they were removed from.

As a professional, once you begin to see *Boarding School Survivors*, as I provocatively call them, it is if the scales have fallen away. You see how endemic this syndrome is in the Anglo-Saxon world, its contribution to national character, the stiff upper-lip, the inability to say directly what one wants, and the tendency towards hostility couched in innocence.

I see BSSs as falling into three broad types.

First, the *Compliers*, who toed the line and live in denial. If they experience a collapse of the SSP - which can happen through a work or relationship crisis - they are in deep trouble. From brittle functioning they teeter into helplessness, only to pull themselves sharply back when the crisis is survived.

Then there are the *Rebels*, who have taken an anti-authoritarian stance, perhaps refusing to marry or to live their potential. They are engaging but infuriating, because they refuse to grow up, and you must challenge their value system and sublimated anger if you suggest they stop *surviving* and start *living*.

Finally, there are the *Casualties*, those who have barely survived, who were already damaged at home; remember the kind of world that supports these schools fosters fairly cold families. These were unable to mount a successful SSP and have not escaped being at the bottom of the pile. With such people you feel the full tragedy of this flawed enterprise and feel glad you have your own children safely at home.

Working therapeutically with Boarding School Survivors is challenging for all mental-health professionals. Prevention is much simpler.

References

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