

Sent away

Gordon Knott and Thurstine Basset attended boarding schools before embarking on careers in mental health. In the first of a four-part series, they set the scene around surviving boarding school

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Men's *Accounts of Boarding School: sent away*¹ is one of many books published since 2015, when Joy Schaverien wrote *Boarding School Syndrome*² to describe how childhood trauma manifests in the adult world of relationships, work and related responsibilities. In coining the term 'boarding school syndrome', she is referring to the

psychological distress, learned behaviours and emotional states in people who have been sent away to boarding school. A book of women's stories, a forerunner to *Men's Accounts of Boarding School*, was published in 2018, and it is no surprise that it was titled *Finding Our Way Home*,³ the sentiment of which would not have occurred to the authors if these children had been in receipt of their education closer to home. The focus of the girls' experience of boarding is on their endurance of an imposed, patriarchal system of schooling, where femininity is often suppressed.

Many of the practices that were common in boarding schools throughout the 19th and 20th centuries would now be classified as abusive. Indeed,



the journalist George Monbiot, writing in the *Guardian* in 1988, suggested that, 'Britain's most overt form of child abuse is mysteriously ignored'.⁴ The question he posed then, which is just as relevant now, is whether it is ethical to send young children away from home to be educated in institutions and thereby deliberately break the attachment to mothers, fathers, families, communities, homes and pets. This practice goes against all established child and human development theories, and yet it remains an active choice for some families in the UK and, more recently, for wealthy families overseas, particularly in China and Russia, who are seeking the 'benefits' of a British boarding experience.

Trauma and abuse

Those of us involved in counselling, psychotherapy and related professions who work with ex-boarders, find that referrals from ex-boarders have gone up over recent years. The trauma of being abandoned at a young age and the severing of daily attachments is something that all children sent to boarding school must try to survive. This usually requires taking on

a 'survival personality' that helps a child cope at school, but then hinders them when they enter the adult world, looking to express their emotional selves and seeking intimacy in their relationships.⁵ A major component of the survival personality is learning not to cry – the famous 'stiff upper lip' – thus

despising those around us who demonstrate that 'weakness' because it reminds us of our own natural but deeply shameful vulnerability.

The boarding schools themselves exploit nostalgia and point to high-profile success in the jobs market for former pupils. Our current Prime Minister is one of 20 from the same boarding school who have held that post. When you consider that the UK has only had 55 Prime Ministers

in total, it is extraordinarily unhealthy that such a large number come from one privileged public school. Overall, boarding schools have 'produced' at least 60% of all British Prime Ministers. How can this disproportion continue to be held up as a model of equitable democracy? While the more well-known public schools often dominate the spotlight, we know that the preparatory schools, which accommodate primary school-aged children, require our scrutiny too.

We have both experienced boarding school in the 20th century, and know that central heating, duvets, mobile phones and flexible boarding cannot distract from the devastation of the unilateral decision made by adults to remove a child from their home environment. Unless there is evidence of a safeguarding concern, we believe that the reason why very young children are sent away from their family, friends, pets and familiar routines to live in a residential private school signifies a decision that can be based on a bid to buy privilege, entitlement and economic advantage, rather than showing sufficient interest in a child's emotional wellbeing and development.

We, had to salvage ourselves from the shock and indignity of the loss of privacy that occurred from that first day at boarding school. The innate human need for privacy is a recurrent theme for every generation of young people, yet in the contemporary world of boarding, shrewd marketing ensures the institutions are showcased as luxurious hospitality and leisure complexes, where the fortunate residents are kept busy with a focus on fun, performance and attainment, with no space for procrastination or rumination. Alex Renton, who attended the same two boarding schools as our current Prime Minister, has spent years exposing physical, sexual and emotional abuse in such establishments.⁶ His work often leads to the bringing of former staff to court, so that they are finally held accountable for their abusive behaviour.

Feelings get stored in the tuck box at the back of the heart – unlocking them is more painful than putting them away (Gordon Knott)¹

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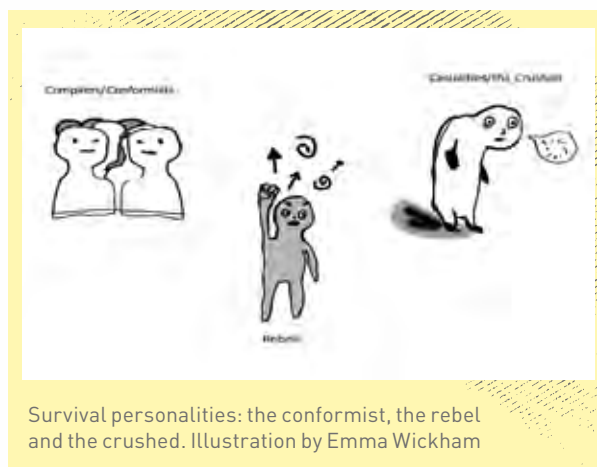


General neglect

While recent writing and research have shown the psychological shortcomings of a boarding school education, the schools themselves seem reluctant to put their practices to the test of independent research. Their charitable status helps fund marketing budgets that continue to sell the product as a 'Harry Potter' theme park experience, which they claim builds character and resilience. However, in therapy, we find that this character often has a brittle, desensitised exterior. Olya Khaleelee, in her work with senior managers and business executives, has found that ex-boarders actually tend to have less emotional wellbeing and resilience than their non-boarder equivalents.⁷

A growing trend for research projects has yielded some interesting findings. A recent study of the impact of boarding school reported that participants '...experienced different degrees of distress as a result of attending boarding school with significant pressure to fit in with peers'. The general description is that of a clearly defined external persona, which knows the rules of the game, but contrasts with a much less well-defined, internal self-concept. In the words of one participant, 'It was the making of me, that was who I was, regardless of how I felt about it and I live the rest of my life trying to come to terms with it'.⁸

It is reasonable to suggest that being sent to boarding school at a young age is traumatic for all children, and some suffer specific abuse in addition



to the general neglect that is endemic to life in an institutional educational setting. More research is needed, and we are encouraged by an increasing number of research initiatives in the clinical psychology field. In particular, it would be helpful to build on the work of Gottlieb with gay ex-boarders⁹ and the voice of Matovu on the experience of black boarders.¹⁰

Psychological help

Psychotherapist and ex-boarder Nick Duffell was amazed by the lack of interest from his chosen profession in the topic of boarding. He set about putting this right in his book, *The Making of Them*.¹¹ There was, however, noticeable resistance to the message that boarding school might have a damaging effect on people's emotional development, possibly because a large number of journalists, psychologists and psychotherapists had themselves been to boarding schools. Over the years, Duffell has developed a way of working with who he terms 'survivors' of boarding school. Some of the work involves individual therapy, some couple therapy and a significant part is group therapy, delivered through boarding school survivors' workshops, for both men and women.

The model for the work is recognition, acceptance and change (RAC).⁵ This involves recognising that a survival personality has been taken on at school, accepting that it was a necessary thing to do to be able to survive, and now in adult life, feeling



safe enough to make changes. These processes, which often overlap, may take many years. The work involves being able to recognise the survival personality and how, years later, it has outlived its purpose.

Acceptance involves thanking the survival personality for its help in the past and being able to envisage, experience and fully accept the small child who has remained 'frozen in time' and can now begin to thaw out and live more fully as an adult.

Three types of survival personality are outlined – the conformist, the rebel and the crushed.⁵ Sometimes, ex-boarders will display elements of all these types, and those who were crushed often live with lifelong psychological damage.

Early intervention

Most ex-boarders do not seek help until they are into their 40s and 50s. However, there are signs that this is beginning to change and so there is more scope for earlier intervention. Boarding school syndrome² has

become increasingly accepted, as the concern about the consequences of the trauma of separation for children is more universally understood, not only by psychotherapists and counsellors but by ex-boarders themselves. This concern is not exclusive to boarding schools and clearly connects with looked-after children, adopted children, young refugees and asylum seekers and young people in the criminal justice system, where the prospects and life chances have not significantly improved for decades.

We know that early intervention and prevention remain key priorities and, as colleagues currently working as therapists, counsellors and pastoral carers within boarding schools will testify, this work is more valued than ever. As ex-boarders ourselves, we are committed to the gathering of boarding school experiences, to the seeking of appropriate justice, to the importance of further research and as therapeutic professionals, properly getting alongside individuals who continue to approach us for support.

And so, aged eight, I made the decision that it was time to grow up (Thurstine Basset)¹

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Thurstine Basset worked as a social worker before entering the world of mental health training and education in the 1980s. He has written and produced a variety of training packages, articles, book chapters and books in the mental health field. In the early noughties, he attended a boarding school survivors' workshop. Thurstine is co-author with Nick Duffell of *Trauma, Abandonment and Privilege: a guide to therapeutic work with boarding school survivors* (Routledge, 2016).
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Gordon Knott qualified as a counsellor in 1996 and worked in private practice and the community and voluntary sector with individuals and couples and as a clinical supervisor. He is an adoptive parent, works with Action for Children as Vice Chair of the

London and Wessex fostering panels, co-wrote a chapter with his father and brother for *Men's Accounts of Boarding School* (Routledge, 2021) and is currently the Director of Croydon Drop In, a youth information, advocacy and counselling service (YIACS).

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