

Boarding schools in the 21st Century? You cannot be serious!

How about these ideas that come from word association “brainstorming” sessions on boarding – cold showers, reform school, class snobbery, abandonment, loneliness and loss. But there were others, some of them former boarders, in the same sessions who had different ideas – close bonds of friendship, learning to stand on your own two feet, caring friends and staff and learning responsibility.

As promised in the last edition, we are devoting this edition of Educare to the issue of boarding. We realise that this is a subject that arouses strong feelings in many people, even to the point that some families will refuse to consider it for their own children either because of their own decision and/or experiences, or as a result of pressure from supporters who are adamantly opposed to boarding on principle. We acknowledge that one edition of Educare like this will not change a point of view as strongly held as that, our intention is simply to show that there is another side to this debate and to reassure those who may consider boarding their children at some stage in the future. We have included articles by two people from very different parts of the world – one who boarded in Africa and another currently boarding in Korea. The purpose of this is to show that these are normal, well-adjusted people whose experience of boarding has been good – on balance, they don’t hide the problem areas – and that they represent many others whose boarding school life has been a positive experience.

There are different perspectives on boarding according to nationality as well as individual variation. Most Continental Europeans only know boarding schools as reform schools or a few specialist institutions for the very gifted. Some of the same mindset is there for many Asian parents, who also may face strong pressure not to board from the extended family; pressure that may be impossible to resist for some. Many Americans approach this with the strong home education movement teaching in mind; for some it is perceived as not only difficult, but also unnecessary and damaging to the family. British parents think of a relic of past upper class England, something that only the very wealthy and strange few would now still choose. This tradition of the wealthy few sending children to boarding school does not make it “easier” or more familiar for British parents to board their children – I grew up not knowingly meeting anyone who went to boarding school (apart from a couple of reform school “veterans”) until I was in university; I don’t think this was atypical.

There are some situations where boarding is seen as the most realistic option, such as in the remote Western and Northern Isles of Scotland, where only primary schools are viable on some of the islands and seniors need to board weekly, fortnightly or even for a half-term at a time. Similarly, there are weekly boarding arrangements in isolated parts of France. For all of our TCKs who board, it is this isolated context that makes it the most realistic option; no overseas parents would choose to board if the school were easily accessible – but if our families only went to such places, then huge parts of the world would stay untouched. Other children in Asian and African cultures may leave the nuclear family to go to school, but would still be with their family. It is not unusual to find senior students benefiting from high school education in the towns while living with uncles and aunties. In this respect, there are many parallels to living with the “uncles” and “aunties” in a family-ethos boarding school, and this is one reason why many Asian parents insist that the first priority if boarding is to have a school of this type. (Something that we support wholeheartedly) It is also worth noting that since home education is illegal in some countries, there are parents who are opposed to it in our companies. Our request would be for graciousness and understanding from both home educators towards boarding families and vice-versa. There are potential benefits and pitfalls with all educational options; our goal is try to help families make things work for the benefit of the children and the parents.

David Hamilton – now in Northern Ireland, studying at Queen’s University, Belfast

My parents worked in Senegal for 11 years and when we first arrived in Senegal we lived about 6 miles from the local international school at Bourofaye. Although that may not seem far, the state of the roads was such that I had to board at the school for a time. I had my first experience of boarding when I was 7 for around 18 months and then when I was 13 years old I boarded for another two years.

Being 7 at the time, it’s hard to recall exactly what I felt about boarding. However, as with most children of that age I did find it hard leaving my parents knowing I would not be seeing them every day as I was used to. The first couple of days were the hardest, I missed my parents. It was a strange feeling going to bed and not being tucked in by my mum! However because I was living together with other boys I soon made friends, played football and did all the crazy things boys of that age normally do. I loved being with my friends and having fun with them all day and missing my parents only lasted a short time at the start of each term.

My parents kept the letters I wrote to them each week and at the beginning of term you would think from some of the letters that I was sad all the time. However it was only at night time that I remember being homesick – perhaps because I had the time to think about my parents more. A quotation from one of my letters:

“I am not very sad in the daytime but I get sad at night”

But as the term got underway it was fine and I had great fun, I found the homesickness only lasted a short while and the more time I spent boarding the more I got used to it.

Then when the new road was built I no longer boarded but travelled in each day to the school, and I found myself sometimes wishing I didn’t have to go back home when there were special activities happening after school hours. However I then had the fun of being with my African friends and that led to some close friendships too.

When I was 13 the school relocated and I had to board again. This time, being older, my perspectives had changed and leaving my parents wasn’t as difficult. The hard part, as I recall, was watching them leave, but then it was straight into the games and seeing all my friends again. I found it easier at that stage than when I was younger. Perhaps this was due to having boarded before but I think I had gained more independence as I grew older and although I did miss my parents I was able to adapt and settle in more quickly.

To sum it all up I am grateful that I have been able to experience the boarding situation. Although it was difficult at first I believe it has given me more independence and the ability to adapt fairly easily to new situations. Many of my best memories are from the times we had as friends at the boarding school. I had great fun there and the friends I made there are still my friends today. Some of my friends from school I would now consider more as brothers than friends because of all the time we spent together.

As I boarded but then also had the experience of being a day pupil throughout my time at the school, I think I have maybe had the best of both worlds. I cannot say for sure which I would have preferred if I could only have chosen one option. Boarding for me has been a positive experience, yes, hard at the start, but I am convinced the benefits far outweighed the initial pain. I wouldn’t go back and change anything if I had the chance to.

Kim Jinsil – currently studying at Handong International School near Pohang in Korea

My Dorm Life

I started my dorm life when I was in grade 9 and my sister in grade 7. Ever since then, we've been living in a dorm and now have over a year of dorm life experience.

We are getting used to it, and I just want to point out that though it has its ups and down, we have learned to enjoy it immensely and make the best out of it.

Many people leave their families to live in dorms for many different reasons, often the ones obliging them to leave their sweet, beloved homes -- to go to sometimes faraway, strange places. It could be a very stressful and intimidating experience. In my case, because I was a TCK and could no longer profit from a good, suitable education in my parents' place of work, I had no choice but to leave for my country where Handong International School is, a school that teaches and raises students in a positive, disciplined way.

Given the opportunity, I was thankful. However, I knew that this big "move" or this one huge step that I took further on in my life was going to bring a lot of impacts on it. My life was up for a change – a massive one.

I say that living in a dorm is a very enriching experience and I encourage anyone to try it, if one could, in order to come out as a better socialized, others-centred person. A dormitory life is not that much of a big deal. It's just a different way of living. Due to the special circumstances one is in, one gets to live with a "family," not necessarily of blood relations, but of a larger group of people very different from us, under the care of "dorm parents" instead of our "real" parents.

As we interact, talk, eat, sleep, wash...together, we develop a stronger sense of community and team membership, which is great! We get to live with our egoism and individualism laid off for a while and think of win-win mutualism where everyone can live for the benefit of themselves and the whole community. If appreciated fully, it can bring more mental self-discipline, forming people into more mature and responsible adults. I remember my dorm parent saying that dorm life is just like married life. We are lucky that we get to start faster than other people. To care for ourselves in every area of life, even without guidance from authority, and additionally caring for others out of love and devotion, working for the convenience of all to make better lives, are what dormitory life is made up of!

While I've been here the one sure thing that I've learned and fully mastered is packing clothes and belongings at the end of every semester. Moreover, I now almost became an expert cleaner and washer. I'm still learning on the part where I have to live peaceably with all kinds of people, even the ones that I kind of find weird, which is the trickiest, but definitely the most exciting part!

Entrusting them to others – The Boarding School Parent.

David and I knew when we arrived in Guinea-Bissau with 2 little girls that boarding school was an option we would have to consider for our girls' education as there were really no viable alternatives in the country other than home schooling. Being aware of this was so helpful as we had time, as a family, to work through the issue of boarding.

We did not want the girls to feel they had to go away to school because we had a busy job and it would be easier to fulfil it if they were not there. The girls, as well as David and I, needed to be convinced that there was an individual plan for both of them and that boarding school was part of that plan for that particular stage. David and I needed to be sure that they would be happy at school as well as at home. We have so many lovely testimonies of how we were looked after during times of separation.

The two years of home schooling were a positive time, but it became clear that Ruth needed colleagues at school (to have Mum as your 'partner' for each science project became a bit trying). Esther also was fairly clear as to the role of a teacher and a 'Mother' and she did not particularly like them being mixed. It was decided that it would be best for the two girls to start at Bourofaye, the international school in Senegal, together as they were close in age and good friends. The next 7 years were basically very happy years for them both, with the usual ups and downs.

Preparation

I guess one can never fully be ready for changes ahead, but there were certain preparations which we felt would be helpful:

- * **Pre-school visiting** – Bourofaye always strongly encouraged a week's visit, as a family, prior to starting at school
- * **'getting ready'**: we tried to do as much as possible together e.g. : gather, name and pack clothes, find a favourite family photo to take, sew a bedcover with familiar fabrics left from various sewing projects, fill in a book with close family members' addresses (e.g. Grandparents), choose several special toys, books and games to take
- * **checking** that they could cope properly with e.g.: hair washing and bed making
- * **talking** positively and openly about school, **being allowed to express** feelings, doubts and questions
- * **allowing** tears and telling them that we would miss them too
- * **assuring** them that we would be interceding lots for them and **encouraging** them to trust for comfort

Separation

Separation will always be an inevitable part of life and it is something we had to learn to cope with in as positive a way as possible. Leaving a child at boarding school, whatever your background or nationality, is probably always painful, for both parties. Again though, we experienced love and care in many special ways. *Once, while preparing lunch, I felt that there was something wrong with Ruth. Dropping everything I phoned school to learn that she had just been taken to the hospital to be X-rayed for a possible broken wrist.*

Both girls reacted differently, one finding it harder than the other, though I think there were always some tears from both of them. We also would cry with them before term started, but always tried very hard not to show emotion on parting as we felt it wouldn't be helpful.

We were always so grateful to the house parents and staff for their practical care as we left the girls at school - cakes to ice or a table tennis competition. It was never easy to leave them, but I am thankful that we could leave the girls in the hands of folk who shared our life values and loved our precious offspring.

There was one spell when one of the girls was finding it very hard and we had to take stock of the situation and consider what to do. She herself pointed out that 'real' school was easier for her than home schooling; it was just that she wanted to sleep at home.

Communication

This was an area which was extremely important to us when we were apart. We tried to ensure that we wrote an e-mail (or fax) twice a week with news of us, the team, their friends from Guinea-Bissau and a joke and we waited with bated breath each week for the girls e-mails (or faxes).

We are so thankful that the staff allowed the girls to write freely to us, expressing how they were. *At one stage when one of them was really struggling, we received a letter from her asking us to take her home.* It was hard to receive, but we were able to feel that we were really in the picture. *At the same time we were sent a letter from the school telling us that she was not well.* The contact and openness was much appreciated.

Challenges

Overall boarding school was a very positive time of their lives, but there were challenges to face as well as the separation. We used to long for the end of term and always spent wonderfully happy holidays together, but there was the task of adjusting back to using a language they were beginning to lose. The girls were very privileged in receiving an extremely good education at Bourofaye, but found that they were forging ahead of their national friends. We all wanted the holidays to be as special as possible, so perhaps sometimes there could be just a slight falseness about our relationship, with no one wanting to spoil the atmosphere and let the side down.

Certain areas such as *English manners* had to be established again, (*'What manners?' we were asked*). We had to learn to accept that some water had gone under the bridge, which had been shared with close friends and staff at school, and we would either never know about it or be part of it.

We also had to *trust* the staff in all the areas of 'bringing up' which we felt were important: academic, spiritual, behavioural, emotional, physical.

In conclusion

Would we do it again? Yes, certainly! As long as we could talk it through with the girls and they also felt it was right. Bourofaye is an extremely important part of their lives and they do all they can to meet up with ex-Bourofaye folk, both friends and staff. David and I are still learning of various happenings during those school years as they continue to reminisce. We have two girls who we know have been loved, been taught to be independent, learnt to cope with and enjoy international friendships, received an all-round education of a high standard and very importantly, been encouraged to put Father and his values first in their lives.

(David and Margie Whitehorn are now the deputy directors of an NGO charity in the UK. Margie also doubles up as the UK education adviser to the same organisation)

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Making Boarding Work

There are some basic principles that can be applied to help make boarding work. They are not a guarantee, because every family and child within that family is unique and there is no chance of one formula that ensures success every time. However, success is more likely if the right approach is taken!

- Make sure that your child or children are ready to board. Much of the past damage has been caused by children going off to boarding school before they were prepared or old enough. There is no age that can be laid down as a rule; some children will be ready before others, the presence of older siblings already at the boarding school can make a significant difference, the level of adjustment to the home school or local school option being used will vary – home schooling may not be working well for some reason, forcing parents to consider boarding earlier.
- The boarding home must be run by others who share our life values. We would never recommend the use of secular boarding establishments, whatever their record in academic excellence, for the simple reason that the school can't provide for the spiritual nurture of the children. A secular boarding school is not equipped to do this. In this respect, boarding is very different to the orthodox day student model in a secular school, in that parents provide the spiritual nurture daily and can help the children process anything that comes into conflict.
- Make sure that the boarding home has a family ethos rather than an institutional one.
- You need to have confidence in the ability of the house parents to fulfil their role.
- Organisations running the schools and boarding homes need to fully prepare staff for this critical role and do whatever they can to ensure continuity by keeping the right people in place for as long as possible.
- Wherever possible, avoid very prolonged periods of separation. If the school has breaks during the terms and you can make it there for them, then do so. In some situations, prolonged separation of a few months at a time is inevitable; if this is the case, then delay sending the children to school for longer than if the school is easily accessible.
- Carefully consider the decision and involve the children; you make the decision as parents, but they need to know that you will not override any and all fears that they may have.
- Don't be afraid of open emotion, including tears as the time to go, or go back to, school arrives. Long term problems can result from repression caused by a "big boys (or girls) don't cry" attitude. In doing so though, don't put your own fears and possible feelings of guilt into the children.
- Make the boarding home room a "home from home" by taking well-loved favourite items
- Do keep regularly in touch through phone calls, e-mails and letters. Some parents are naturally poor correspondents, but this is one absolute "must", even if other communications are missed.
- NEVER use loaded terms like "We will never send you away". Avoid saying this even to young children; they may well remember it years later. If you have been led as a family to this decision, then go for it with confidence.
- Do prepare with a visit and a trial period of boarding. If this trial doesn't work out, then have a reserve plan until the child is ready.

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References

Third Culture Kids' Manual by Jean Barnicoat; weighs up the pros and cons of boarding, plus parents' stories, available on request from us at GBP2.50 plus postage at SteveGill@mkea.freeseve.co.uk

Raising Resilient MKs – ed. Joyce Bowers; articles on preparing children for boarding. Available on mail order from ACSI www.acsi.org

Fitted Pieces – ed. Blomberg & Brooks; articles weighing up the pros and cons of boarding. Available on mail order from SHARE sharenet@share-ed-services.org

Resources

1. For those who are more intuitive and lovers of poetry.

An anthology of poetry based on third culture life experiences. The poems reflect one young man's spiritual journey through life in Senegal and TCK school there, through to re-entry back to the West. The 24-page book is available for GBP2 plus postage via us at SteveGill@mkea.freeseve.co.uk

2. The two manuals to prepare children for cross-cultural experience and for re-entry are available from us on one CD for cost price (GBP1) plus postage. Excellent value with a lot of work put in to produce them, they are being sold on a not for profit basis as a service to the NGO charity community. All back editions of Educare are on the same CD. Contact us to request one on the usual e-mail address SteveGill@mkea.freeseve.co.uk

We would value your comments on this issue. Whether you agree with what has been written, couldn't disagree more, whether you want to write to us about your own experiences or those of friends that you know, whether you are parents, children, or extended family who experienced boarding, whoever you are, please send your contributions in. Let us know if you are happy for it to be published in the next Educare or not, if you would like to be quoted anonymously or put your name to it. No comment or article will be included without your permission. If you want to contact us individually for advice or with private comments, as others have done following past Educare editions, we would also welcome that.

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