

Exiled: the girls' school boarders

Joy Schaverien examines the less often explored impact on women of being sent away to boarding school at an early age



The picture shown here was drawn in a therapy session and depicts a child in the moment when her parents left her at an all-girls boarding school. Rose (as I call her) was 11 years old, and she was to live at that school until she was 17. Her story is one of the many discussed in my book, *Boarding School Syndrome: the psychological trauma of the 'privileged' child*.¹ This picture could have been drawn by any one of the many girls and boys who were left at prep school at an early age. It conveys the sense of abandonment this little girl suffered. Drawn some 35 years after the event, it typifies the memories etched into the psyche of many adults who are former boarding school pupils. I will return to Rose and her picture later. (I am grateful to Rose who consented for me to use it here, and to Jackie and Sophie (pseudonyms), who also gave permission for their stories to be told.)

Boarding school syndrome

The term 'boarding school syndrome' was first piloted in an article I wrote for the *British Journal of Psychotherapy* in 2011.² There was a need for a term to capture and classify the suffering commonly observed in ex-boarders who presented for psychotherapy. The hypothesis, developed from observations from clinical practice, was that there were, in those who had experienced this early rupture from home, common and identifiable clusters of distresses and patterns of behaviour. To test this hypothesis, I conducted interviews with colleagues and with ex-boarders who were not my patients. Informed by trauma, attachment and Jungian analytic theory, I began to realise that there were certain common factors in the psychological damage I was observing.

Children attend boarding schools at various different ages, but for prep school it is most commonly seven or eight, although some go younger, and public school usually starts at 11 or 13. It became evident that, even in the best of schools, there was an initial wounding. Although not put into words at the time, this was experienced as abandonment. For some, this was compounded by neglect, physical and/or emotional ill treatment and, less often, sexual abuse.

These children are vulnerable, but they soon learn that to show weakness brings censure from the staff or their peers. Accordingly, they learn to hide their true feelings and to appear to be unaffected; a shell is formed to protect the emotional self from harm. Learned at such a formative time, this creates an unconscious emotional armour. This may continue into adult life and distort intimate relationships, impacting on partnerships, marriage and parenting. It may also affect work relationships. The armour is often so effective that, even in psychotherapy, this early trauma is so well hidden that the therapist misses its significance. Therefore, a term was needed to identify this pattern, and 'boarding school syndrome' seemed to fit.

Research into the adverse impact of boarding has been gradually emerging since the 1990s, and it is becoming accepted that early boarding impinges psychologically on the wellbeing of children. My work in this field has developed alongside that of my colleague, Nick Duffell. In 2011 we both published articles in *Therapy Today*.^{3,4} Duffell's pioneering work with what he has termed 'boarding school survivors' has been documented in his books *The Making of Them*⁵ and *Wounded Leaders*.⁶ My book, *The Dying Patient in Psychotherapy*,⁷ is a

full-length case study of work with an ex-boarder. It was followed, in 2004, by an article identifying boarding as a form of trauma.⁸ Duffell's groups for male boarding school survivors have been running since 1990, and in 1998 groups for women were instigated, led by Helena Lovendahl Duffell, Pippa Foster and Nicola Miller. Duffell's latest book, written with Thurstine Basset, gives many examples of this work.⁹

The anatomy of the trauma

Boarding school syndrome is created through a system of rigid care, neglect and ill treatment that teaches children to ignore their own emotional needs. Caring for others at the expense of self creates a leader of men, and this deliberate lesson in armoring is aimed at toughening the child to be a 'man'. It was applied in girls' schools, as well as those for boys, where any values seen as feminine were treated as weak. The education in girls' schools (until relatively recently) was to create wives for, and mothers of, future generations of men. The development of boarding school syndrome in the adult can be traced back to this childhood experience of exile. In order to understand and work with this presentation in the adult, it is useful to understand its constituent parts. I have identified stages of this early trauma as: 1) abandonment, 2) bereavement and 3) captivity.

Each element contributes to the creation of the defensive structures: 'the armoured self' and 'the hidden self'. These defences originally served an important, protective purpose, but, if they persist into later life, they may affect intimate relationships. It is known that men have suffered as a result of the early losses and abandonments of boarding, but it is less well known that girls also

suffered in this way. To redress this, women's experiences feature in several chapters in my book and, in this article, the examples are stories of women in psychotherapy. I turn first to the effects of abandonment and its partner, exile.

Abandonment is a form of exile

The child left in a boarding school, at whatever age and however good the preparation has been, is bereft and feels abandoned. In effect, they are exiled from their home and all that is familiar. They lose all their primary attachments in one day and, from then on, live without love. For a child of seven or eight, this is devastating, but for many older children, those of 11 or 13, it is similarly distressing. Even if children think they understand what it is to board, it is not until the moment when their parents leave them that they realise what it really means.

In psychotherapy, asking the person to recall their first day at school frequently opens up painful memories for which there were previously no words. For some, even as adults, this day is etched into their psyche and recalled in accurate detail. Others are unable to recall that day, possibly because the pain was so great that dissociation may have protected them from remembering. Jackie experienced amnesia connected with the trauma of being sent away from home at the age of six.

Jackie was 47 when she came for psychotherapy. The previous week she and her husband had taken their only child to university in another country, leaving her there to study. On the return journey, Jackie had become overwhelmed by distress; all the way home, in the car, at the airport, and for the whole of the following week, she cried uncontrollably. Jackie knew

that it was appropriate to be sad that her daughter was going away, but she also realised that her reaction was more extreme than this warranted. Then, coincidentally, that week she read an article in The Sunday Times Magazine about children being sent away to school at eight.¹⁰ This triggered her memory, and suddenly she connected her extreme sense of loss with her experience of being taken to boarding school at six. She understood that the weeping was commensurate with the devastating loss experienced by the six-year-old child that she had once been, taken from her home and left in a prep school many hundreds of miles from her parents.

It is common for the memory of traumatic events to be split off and lost to consciousness. This splitting is, at the time, helpful, because it permits the person to engage in life without remembrance of the distress. At its most extreme, this is a form of dissociation. Babette Rothschild reminds us that the body has a way of remembering what the mind cannot recall.¹¹ This is what had happened to Jackie. Without consciously remembering, Jackie's body suddenly and violently reacted to the emotions from the long-forgotten childhood trauma; the protective shield, of which Kalsched writes,¹² that had been in place since childhood, was breached. The previously repressed distress had returned, unbidden, devastating her adult self.

Previous psychotherapy, lasting three years, had uncovered Jackie's sense of loss, but not the extent of the emotional impact of this wound. It had remained concealed from consciousness until the loss of her daughter brought it back to her awareness. There is relief in tracing the meaning of such an emotional event. Although it is painful, it is meaningful;

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it makes sense of the emotions. As a small child, there had been no one to mediate her distress; she had been too young to cope with the separation, and so she had to repress the pain. When the mother is lost at such an early age, a part of the self is also lost. The child has to manage the bad feelings alone. In order to preserve the good image of the mother in her absence, the pain is experienced as a hated part of the self. This establishes a self-punishing, psychological splitting mechanism, which may continue into adulthood.

Homesickness as bereavement

It is accepted that children in boarding schools go through a period of ‘homesickness’. The phrase ‘You’ll soon get over it’ is offered as consolation. Staff members often attempt to keep the children busy by offering sporting or other such activities to distract them from their distress. The term ‘homesickness’ is, in my view, inadequate for the extent of this suffering, and it disguises what is actually a major bereavement: children go through a period of grief and mourning appropriate to the major losses they have incurred on entry to the school. They lose their parents, siblings, pets, toys and all that is familiar, all in one go. Moreover, they have to learn to live without love and intimate care. This is bereavement, and a period of mourning is appropriate.

Arriving at a boarding school peopled by strangers, children are alienated and it is natural to cry. They may anticipate the familiar caring reaction from adults, which has until now been the response to tears, but they soon learn that crying is useless; it does not bring the parents back; it may even evoke censure from other children or staff. Tears bring no comfort, so children hide their distress,

often secretly crying under the bedclothes at night. There is no acceptance of the mourning for the people and places so profoundly missed. Thus, the grief is repressed and eventually lost to conscious awareness. In her 20s Sophie was still suffering from bereavement, as she had been at the age of 12.

Sophie was 29 when she sat in the chair in my room in floods of tears. The wastepaper basket beside her was already full of wet tissues. She was a professional woman, but in this moment she was also a small girl, crying profusely as she recounted her experience in a boarding school to which she was taken by her parents when she was 12. Her father was in the army and posted around the world, mostly in European countries, so, in order that she should have a good education and continuity in a friendship group, it was decided that she should stay in the UK, at school. This had not worked out and, unable to make friends, she had felt socially isolated in the boarding school.

Later, at university, she felt ill-equipped emotionally for being alone in the adult world. She had been devastated by the loss of her mother when she was 12, and she still missed her now, although she was 29. She felt like a very young child, vulnerable and thin-skinned. She found it difficult to cope in her very responsible job and she spent most of her evenings alone, considering suicide.

Sophie had moved with her parents every two years until she was 12, during which time she had never stayed in schools long enough to make lasting friendships or to feel a sense of belonging. As a result, she was socially isolated, and her home became a person: her mother. When she was boarding, during half-term breaks and the shorter

school holidays, she would stay either at school or with relatives. In the longer holidays, she would join her parents, travelling to where they were living at the time. A consequence of their transient life was that, in their absence, Sophie could not picture her parents in a place called ‘home’. She had no mental image of where in the world her mother was, and this meant that she was, in effect, homeless. Her parents were still abroad when she came to see me, and the pattern continued where she would long for their visits and miss them terribly when they left.

For Sophie, as for Jackie and for so many ex-boarders, this initial loss was compounded by its repetition. As the pattern of term-time at school and holidays at home becomes established, children are unable to settle in either place. Even as an adult, Sophie was living in a state of psychological exile. She was bereaved, and her reaction was appropriate to the losses she suffered. She had been in mourning for the loss of her home, her mother and father, and all that had been familiar in her childhood, and she still was. The task of psychotherapy was to name the grief and identify its source so it was experienced as appropriate, rather than as an indication that there was something seriously wrong with her.

There are many ways in which early boarding causes trauma. In some cases, the initial rupture with home is apparently recovered from reasonably quickly as the child adapts. There are some older children who genuinely seem to adjust to the new situation and engage in peer group activities with relish. However, many children are damaged by the separation, and a minority do not recover, becoming

References

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severely mentally ill. Of those children who apparently cope well, a proportion later, as adults, also realise that they are suffering, without understanding the cause. These are often the people who seek psychotherapy, for generalised depression, marriage difficulties, separation anxiety or a sense of emotional numbness, which may manifest as not feeling as if they are genuinely living their own lives. This was the case with Rose, with whose picture this article began.

Captivity – a form of imprisonment

As well as feeling abandoned, exiled from home and bereaved, children in boarding school live in captivity; they are held against their will. They cannot leave the school unless released by the adults. Then they are on parole for the exeat or school holidays, but, like prisoners, they are expected to return. In schools, children lack autonomy; they cannot choose their clothes, cannot sleep when they want to and, certainly in earlier times, their food is presented and they must eat it, without choice – thus the joking comparison made by some ex-boarders between boarding school and prison is actually very real. Rose became very aware that she was captive.

Rose was in her early 40s when she came to see me. She felt that she was living in a bubble; it was a sense of not living her own life. Married with two children, she was emotionally still locked in the boarding school where she had lived from age 11 to 17. She was still constrained by the emotional armour that had protected her vulnerable child self since the day she was left in the school. Rose never got angry; she merely felt sad and distant. It seemed that her spontaneity had been gradually squashed so her true self became unknown even to

her. This is a symptom of boarding school syndrome as it becomes manifest in adults – the 'hidden self'.

Rose was captive and she learned this when she tried to escape from the school. In her first year, she and a friend walked out of the school together; they did not know the way, but they were going home. After a while, a police car picked them up and took them to the police station. There they were shown a prison cell and warned that, if they tried to run away again, that is where they would end up. The headmistress was contacted, and she drove them back to the school. From then on, Rose knew that she was a prisoner, and she never again tried to escape. As far as she knows, her parents were not informed. The other girls refused to talk to them on their return, and they were ostracised for several days. She never knew whether this was just censure from the girls or if it was instigated by the staff.

Rose's picture is symbolic of this experience. When we look at pictures in therapy, we regard the picture as a whole, and then focus in on the relationships of colours, line and figuration. There are no words that can substitute a picture. Like a dream, all the elements may be considered to be parts of the psyche of the artist. In this light we might see Rose's picture as unconsciously depicting all the elements of the boarding school trauma. As she described it, I came to understand it, as I will explain.

A girl looks directly out of the picture; she is drawn with wide-open eyes and a slightly quizzical expression, perhaps even bewilderment. This reveals the girl, Rose, in that first moment, abandoned and lost for words. The girl lacks context; there is no building or other person, and so she appears unattached, suspended in space. Accompanied only by a sad-

looking teddy bear and two little mice appliquéd on her pyjama case, she stares out of the picture in her new school uniform.

The uniform is a representation of the institution, an exterior version of the armour that later becomes internalised. The teddy bear may symbolise the vulnerable self (which becomes secret, hidden). The two mice on the enfolding circle of the pyjama case, at the top left of the picture, might also be a self-image; these two little mice were her bedtime buddies and may have been an unconscious substitute – a yearning for the companionship of the little sister she left behind.

The picture shows the child alone; having lost her parents and her sister as well as her home, she was bereaved. Individually, each of the elements builds to a whole picture and illustrates the trauma that may result in the lasting effects of boarding school syndrome.

Conclusion

It is claimed that the schools today are different, and it is true that there are school counsellors and the staff are usually more psychologically aware than in the 20th century. Even so, children are still left by their parents, and no amount of school counsellors or friendly adults can make up for the huge losses that they sustain. The loss of love and family, even when that family is far from ideal, is a major factor in the trauma that lies behind the symptoms of boarding school syndrome. ■

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