

The Trauma of Boarding at School

By Jane Barclay

Therapeutic Counsellor and former boarder

My attempt to address a collective misunderstanding about boarding, grown from the cultural normalisation of this privileged form of education, is based both on my work as therapist and personal experiences of boarding.

Being transported from home to a place utterly strange, and left there, is a traumatic experience - of being rendered unsafe in an instant. The initial startle, unless activated into Fight or Flight (the instinctive physiological response to any situation that threatens safety,) turns into prolonged shock; this position of tension will last as long as it's needed, until deemed safe to release. Children away at school are forced to fend for themselves; whatever the help from peers and encouraging supervision from staff, the very process of adaptation that is so highly-regarded as character-building - having to be independent, reliable, tough, on the outside at least - carries a psychological price that can lead to life-long problems in adulthood, if not sooner.

Since the mid-twentieth century, research has led to a greater appreciation of children's need for secure attachment to their central caretakers, more recently validated by neuro-scientific findings. Children who feel safe will naturally venture forth into the world with curiosity towards healthy independence, as and when they are ready; not, as some fear, remain 'tied to apron strings.' It is the children who are forced to become self-reliant ahead of their natural development who meet the world warily, and form a mistrustful, defended way of being in the world that sets up patterns which later on can severely undermine intimate relationships.

The traumatic moment is the realisation that return home isn't possible. This may happen on the front steps, unpacking the trunk, at the first meal, at bedtime. The protesting energy that surges forth has no outlet and can only collapse into submission. This process (better known in terms of trauma as the Freeze response) is, indeed, the third survival course that animals, human ones included, rely on when trapped. As such, surrender does serve its purpose, bringing relief as the life-protecting energetic arousal that has no outlet lowers, allowing for day-to-day functioning. But, whilst adapting to enforced conditions comes naturally, readapting when it's all over doesn't seem to. Ex-boarders have just as much difficulty rejoining the wider world as combat veterans and released prisoners and prisoners-of-war, conditioned to continue living by the same means that for years served 'getting through.' To continue living as if still there, condemned, once back home, to a sense of strangeness, of not quite belonging – hence instant recognition of and sticking to one's own kind: no wonder the public-school network is so strong.

For the first three weeks at prep school contact with home is firmly discouraged, on the grounds this would upset both children and parents (see *Leaving Home at 8*, ITV Spring '10.) which must be avoided, or the brutality would be exposed and the highly lucrative business cave in. In terms of grooming, this is on a par with any version of 'it's for your own good.' I invite you to imagine, if you haven't experienced this hiatus, or remember if you have: after parting – whether the brisk kind or distraught clinging - the measures the young child must resort to, to bear the vanishing of all s/he knows as safe and familiar, replaced by all that is scary and new. Fear and distress is automatically stifled and, discouraged by all concerned, must remain so. And there's so much to learn, so quickly, without respite; staff promote occupation as the antidote to homesickness. The adults in charge know that three weeks is the length of time it takes to break a young child's hope of rescue. By the first

outing, each one will have learned to put on a brave face, to withhold complaints, to count blessings.

At boarding school, just as in any 'care home' or institution, inmates are not loved by their caretakers. Children are taught, fed, housed but not day-to-day parented, let alone cuddled. No amount of contact by letter, phone and email; of outings, speech-day visits and weekends home; of teddy at bedtime, treacle stodge and tuckbox makes up for the certain knowledge that another goodbye looms. Nor do glossy brochures of well-furnished commonrooms and extra-curricula activities.

Life is a matter of survival, of 'getting by,' dependent upon suppressing longing (too torturing to maintain;) upon living one day at a time, eking out rations of both food and affection; making the most of things; refusing to think about home and then when holidays come blotting out 'the other place.' Some learn to be canny, others to thrive on competition or play the fool. Hungry for attention, the boarder will strive for recognition in terms of achievement, whether in class, at sport, at music; sadly, the child's sense of self and confidence becomes totally dependent upon 'success' or 'failure' in these terms. The true self, in terms of feelings and needs, must be hidden and thus become split off.

Defence of the boarding system is cast-iron amongst protagonists, livelihoods depend upon its survival, and not only in financial terms. 'Everyone's doing their best... you'll be grateful one day for the opportunities... you'll build life-long friendships' are among the many mantras locked in place to protect all concerned from the bleak reality of painful, and totally unnecessary, traumatic separation. The old-boy/girl network does indeed endure, serving to preserve collective denial of little-boy/girl misery.

What lies beneath such denial? Need for safety is universal and tends to be found in familiar territory. To step outside the centuries-old beliefs that to have less leads to needing less, and that to not-need is a 'good thing,' can appear dangerously, terrifyingly unfamiliar. Hence the sneering at need for affection ('soft') and scorn for need of others ('dependent.')

But need for contact is primitive and instinctive, uncrushable by scorn or by will-power; unsatisfied, it will continue to present in varying guises for as long as it remains ignored rather than recognised as such: no wonder boarders, deprived of goodnight kisses, turn to sweets and certificates and crushes as substitutes, and later become workaholics, alcoholics, and mistake sex for intimacy.

The boy or girl, grown adult, may be struggling in a relationship or with an addiction or dark depression (the 'cry for help' can present in numerous ways,) want help but be loathe to seek it, mistrustful and self-critical of being needy: the idea of therapy is deeply shameful. I work with the clients who have both listened to this cry and found the courage to reach out; together, we join back up the pieces that years earlier had to be split-off, protest disallowed, Fight/Flight energy suppressed. As both therapist and ex-boarder, I recognise missed appointments, criticism, self-criticism, superiority and all judgement and prejudice as defences against connecting more fully; what I hear is a small child saying 'managing on my own is what I had to do to survive.' As much as this child, tucked within the adult, longs for contact and craves affection, safety still relies on going solo. The pack is the enemy, authority and peers alike; best to stick to the edge, easier to scuttle away. (No wonder that my own therapist's holidays - parting with the words, 'See you in three weeks' - was a time to endure by ticking off calendars and scribbling him notes. Over time, goodbyes gradually became less painful; the final ending, however, turned into years of work made of longing, raging, longing again, as I re-felt - and healed through a process of grieving - my young experiences.)

The work for the ex-boarder, with sensitive and respectful support, understanding and encouragement from the therapist, is to escape the trauma 'Freeze' position held in place by behaviour patterns that are only an illusion of reactivated Fight/Flight energy (eg control over eating, power-seeking at work/at home) whilst still driven by long-forgotten helpless rage and distress. This work is made of three stages: identifying (cognitively) these patterns, recognising and honouring both how they served and the price they exacted; accepting (emotionally) what really happened – the stage that evokes much fighting resistance to feeling so much loss; and reconnection both internally and hence with the wider world that is a step-by-step process of regrowing trust. In practice, stages overlap, each releasing emotions that have been closely guarded, sometimes for decades; so the process cannot be rushed: the risk of overwhelm, even retraumatising, is ever-present.

I conclude with emphasis on what defines this particular form of trauma that renders the child within the adult so reluctant to speak out: recognition of the core pain of abandonment still has to be fought for, on the outside as well as within. Sexual abuse, rape, torture, imprisonment, corporal punishment – all these and more are by now widely recognised, readily evoking shock, anger and a collective desire to protect.

Boarding school continues to be promoted in our predominantly each-man-for-himself culture.

[About Jane Barclay](#)

Jane Barclay qualified as a Therapeutic Counsellor in 2000, aged 45. Since then, she has developed a private practice in Exeter.

In 2002-03, training with Babette Rothschild (author of *The Body Remembers*) in Somatic Trauma Therapy escalated work on unresolved trauma and, most recently, specifically the trauma of boarding at school – including her own experiences of boarding from the age of nine.

She also works with addicted gamblers on behalf of Gamcare, and with combat veterans to support the organisation The Long Boat Home.

Writing has increasingly become part of her work, in particular articles for *Self & Society*, the journal for the Association for Humanistic Psychology in Britain.

Does Therapy Work? was published in January 2011 by Troutbeck Press – a full-length book in which she aims to demystify the practice of therapy, drawing on her experiences as both therapist and as client. For further details, see below.

[More About Jane Barclay](#)

Find further information about Jane and her work at <http://www.jbcounselling.co.uk>