

# Boarding School, the Happiest Days of Your Life?

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## **SYNOPSIS**

**This article raises awareness of shock and trauma in connection with boarding school. It focuses on disconnection from the body and the breakdown of relationships brought about by separation and loss of being sent away. It considers themes of deprivation of love, and the impact of this on the ability to relate. It describes the shutting down of aliveness, and identifies some of the cultural practices, both explicit and implicit, that take place within institutions.**

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There was a Sunday morning ritual of letter writing to our parents, which took place in the large hall where we would eat sitting at three refectory tables which were placed together to make a 'U' shape. This took place after breakfast, and lasted for what seemed like an interminable amount of time. We sat in silence on hard benches in the austere hall, with its absence of warmth and strange smells left over from the morning breakfast, for the task of writing home.

As I settle down to write about boarding school I am aware of a kind of blankness inside that stops me from

thinking and feeling, as I am transported back to being young, sitting at a large refectory table on a typical Sunday morning where the purpose was to write letters home. Whenever I am faced with writing anything, I have an automatic response to freeze, as my body plunges into the shock response it had to being sent away and being cut off from family.

My writing is laborious, as I carefully think sentence by sentence of what to write so that I am giving the impression of feeling all right, but inside I am screaming out for help, and numb at the same time. So my letters are focused on what I am and have been doing, but stay well away from what I am feeling. My feelings have been shut off and pushed down as I have learnt that showing feelings is BAD. Showing my sadness and hurt through tears as I feel the sorrow at being away from home and familiarity is just not done. Instead, it is 'chin up' and 'get on with it'. I am quickly learning that it is unacceptable to let others know my truth – this is unwanted and denied. Over time, again and again I find my experience of reality is being denied, so I learn that to say how I feel is in some way forbidden. No-one is listening. The process I am describing is shock and dissociation.

So I am stopping and starting, both in my letter writing and in the process of leaving home to go to school and leaving school to return home. I don't have any memories of the build-up to going away, apart from the trunk and packing. The trunk just seemed like a large solid object which held all the things that would be vital to sustain me on a practical level. I never liked my trunk. It was made of leather, and was different to most others. I had seen my siblings go away and return, so trunks were a part of family life. And I have no memory of the expectations I had about going away and being separated.

As I read the above sentences I feel my own disconnection and sadness at remembering my confusion about why this was happening to me, and abandonment at being left to live in what felt like a pack where survival of the fittest ruled.

Stopping and starting, saying goodbye, facing another ending which was connected with another beginning. Stepping away from the protection that family provides into an institution devoid of emotional warmth and affection. Being deprived of love, warmth and affection is frightening and shocking. Being placed in an institution with its culture of structure and discipline, and of managing large bodies of people with few adults, results in there being many rules, some of which are explicit and some implicit. Finding my way around these is difficult, as I struggle to make sense of what is allowable and what isn't. Living in a pack where children take on the persona of the

state, taking control, overpowering, bullying.

My first term and experience of sleeping in a dormitory with six other girls included getting used to the rules of living in an unwanted shared space. When the lights were turned off there was a rule of strictly no talking. But of course there was talking, and the matron would come in demanding to know who had been talking. The culture was that by 'owning up', you somehow invited a lesser punishment, but the threat was that by not being truthful and 'owning up', a worse punishment awaited. This was bullying and set up by the school, and then continued within the dorm, where others would say to me, 'You have to go and own up' even though I hadn't participated in talking. As I was the new girl in the dorm, this was a way of showing who had the power and who was in control. It never occurred to me to refuse: my obedience and compliance were already established at home by my parents, who had themselves gone to boarding school.

Stopping and starting the flow and holding back of my feelings. The stopping and starting of continuity of care from my family where my need was ignored each time I faced another separation. I gradually learnt that it is not safe to rely on others; my others, my family, had given me up to an institution. The separation of being apart takes me inside myself to a place where I am invisible.

Being at school I am out of the sight of my parents, and out of sight means also out of mind. Feeling invisible means I do not matter, that I might not exist. Allowing myself to feel the depth of loneliness and despair that comes from being separated and disconnected from the familiarity of home life. This is a kind of annihilation, from which there is no end.

Stopping and starting where my experience of reality is denied. My dread at returning to school and deepening unhappiness and my struggle to make my needs known, to be heard by the other who was my mother who could not understand or empathize with my suffering as her own experiences of boarding school had been so different from mine. She could not hear what I was saying, and I found my experience being denied, which increased my sense of loneliness. My mother told me she loved boarding school; however, given that she lost her mother when she was aged 2 and her father when she was aged 8, I realize now how disconnected she was from her feelings. She suffered deeply from these losses, but they were locked away inside her, never to be spoken about. It is no wonder that she could not hear my voice, when no-one had listened to hers.

As I write, I am describing the process of shock and dissociation that accompanies trauma. When faced with a threat, our bodies respond with fight, flight or freeze.

Physiological processes are occurring in our bodies to protect our survival. We can either run away (flight), stand and fight, or become still and freeze to make ourselves invisible until the threat has passed. Going away to boarding school has the impact of cutting us off from our bodies and feelings, so that our only way to survive is to adapt to a hostile environment and build defences to protect ourselves.

These defences can become a life-long pattern, stopping us from getting close to others or feeling that we can depend on others. We learn that in order to stay safe we have to adapt by putting on a mask to be able to fit in and get through our experience. We often become chameleons, changing who we are to blend in with those around us. We learn from that first separation that there is no going back to how it was before, there is no home to return to. Instead, it is as if we are visiting a stranger where home has a kind of familiarity, but the longer we are distanced from the people and things we love, the more difficult it is to connect and re-connect. What once had been close is now shrouded and obscured by a veil.

This thing called independence that seems so highly prized by those who send their children away is a kind of rejection and abdication from being a parent. Where is the care to put your child in an institution? Why would you want your lovely child to be learning to become independent at such a young age? Why are you in denial, hiding behind your own unhappy experience with the pretence of 'it never did me any harm?'

Feelings are stifled, rage is stifled. Keeping up appearances is seen to be good, following rules, being obedient – all these ways of being compliant kill our basic aliveness and vitality. Instead, we learn that success and achievement are the things that matter – work hard, try harder become the mantras we learn to live our lives by.

But what is lost in the process? Our sense of connection, our ability to relate, to express our feelings and needs. The language of emotion, together with its richness for self-expression and negotiation. ☹



**Susanna Hoare** is a Core Process Psychotherapist in private practice who works in Bitton, close to Bristol and Bath. She is an ex-boarder who spent five years in boarding school. She has had a long interest in trauma connected with boarding school, and also with addiction. The processes of cutting off from our bodies took her on a personal and professional journey which included personal therapy, and eventually lead to re-training from an addictions counsellor to a psychotherapist.