



“What are their parents thinking?”

by Julia Noakes

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I am a psychologist of some experience. One of my jobs is to coach City high achievers, helping them to improve their performance by focusing on emotional intelligence, leadership and team development. The very fact that their companies send them to be coached means that they are viewed as potential high performers. At least a fifth of the 500 or so clients I have seen attended boarding school, sometimes from as young as 5. Some left home to live in institutions on the other side of the world, forced suddenly to master and speak a different language.

In the 13 years since I ventured into the City, I have lost track of the number of times I have encountered a deep denial of the psychological isolation, loneliness, bullying and abuse that many clients suffered at these boarding schools. Versions of, “It wasn’t so bad; the older boys only stripped and beat me for the first year”, or, “No, it was fine, I just prefer my own company to that of others” fill my consulting room. While the experience may also have included important friendships, access to all sorts of sports and elements of useful education, none of that seems to have compensated for what the child had to give up.

For men, the experience of being sent away at a young age often breeds a distrust of women and a fragile, insecure sense of sexual orientation. This is hardly surprising. After all, the first woman in the child’s life dropped him off at a school full of mostly same-sex strangers. Not only did this rupture his important early attachment with his mother, but almost certainly meant leaving behind beloved brothers, sisters and friends. The next woman he meets is the matron, ordering him to perform as someone other than himself. She is likely to be in charge of a whole brood of other children all with competing needs. She can never be a substitute for the special person the child has left behind. No longer there to protect, the mother seems to the child to have abandoned him instead. Is it any wonder that regaining trust in women will be hard to do? Meanwhile, the older boys spot this child’s vulnerability, making him the target of bullying and abuse, not infrequently of a sexual kind.

The real paradox for such children is that they have been told by parents that this is good for them and a privilege for which they should be grateful. Often the child knows that parents may have



made financial sacrifices. Yet what they experience is a catastrophic breach of intimate relationships, loneliness and isolation. How can a young child possibly maintain his childishness in these conditions? He rarely does. Instead, he takes refuge in his intellect, lining up books to save his young troubled being. He has, in effect, made his mind (as D. W. Winnicott, the British psychoanalyst, put it) his “care-taker self”, something outside himself in the absence of loving relationships. As adults, these men often find it extraordinarily difficult to relate openly with others. In banking they are often described as geeks, appearing to speak as if delivering a series of lectures or as though talking to themselves.

This rupture in early attachments breeds a deep distrust of all loving relationships. Clients I have seen tend to switch between displays of a desire for intimacy and a fear of exile, their fear of being hurt after daring to open up to another masked behind a fragile “I can cope”, or “I don’t need you” persona. Men are often deeply ashamed of speaking about their vulnerability. They carry a sense of doom that something traumatic is just around the corner, such as a disaster in a relationship: or else they feel something catastrophic is about to occur at work based on an unsympathetic glance by a boss.

Breaks of any kind, whether real or expected, can be traumatic for the boarding school survivor. City players rarely take a breather between moving from one organisation to the next. Family holidays can be anticipated with glee, yet the lack of structure, the endless free hours to do as one pleases, often result in fraught, unhappy family occasions. The boarding school banker is often found on the beach, distracting himself with his BlackBerry. One day, of course, he will inevitably leave corporate life. Free from the boarding or corporate institution, he is then faced with the one thing he has spent most of his life avoiding – himself. So the City player sets up a hedge fund with friends or seeks other ways to keep postponing the day when he will have to leave what has now become the institutional mother. “Just one more bonus round,” is the justification. One client, on the third year of postponing his departure from banking, told me again that he just needed a bit more money so that he never needed to work again. I decided it was time to ask him how much money he actually had in liquid assets. “£23 million,” he replied.

The irony is that for all the aspirations and hopes of the parents who send their children to boarding school, it does not prepare young people to be our future business leaders. Leadership requires an ability to relate to others as well as yourself and create dependable relations across the firm. Taught to count on himself alone from as young as five or six, the boarding school survivor does



not depend on anyone but his fragile self and his often odd views about relationships. This makes building a business community of trust rather than brittle relations almost impossible.

Perhaps, for some, the boarding school provides respite from an intolerable home situation. I have seen clients who found the predictability of boarding school abuse highly preferable to the less predictable alcoholism and violence at home. However, it certainly seems that many mothers are deeply distressed at sending their young children to an institution, often becoming depressed as a result. Fathers, on the other hand, seem more determined than ever to promote institutional life for their children, particularly boys. But while the school may be a breeding ground for strengthening human competitiveness, is it really worth the very serious psychological damage produced by this sort of neglect?

There are many brave men in the City, strong enough to peer into the window of the past and find ways to lay these boarding school ghosts to rest. After this, they are more able to experience a life that focuses on happiness as well as achievement. In an ideal world, they are strong contenders for leadership in the future.

As one Indian banker put it to me, boarding schools are undoubtedly a peculiar form of British child abuse. Sadly, those survivors who haven't really made sense of their experience tend to march quickly through life wearing a fake coping mask and will no doubt send their children to experience the same sort of thing. And childhood for their children will also end at a tragically young age. Let's just hope that they don't go on to become leaders in the City or indeed anything else.

