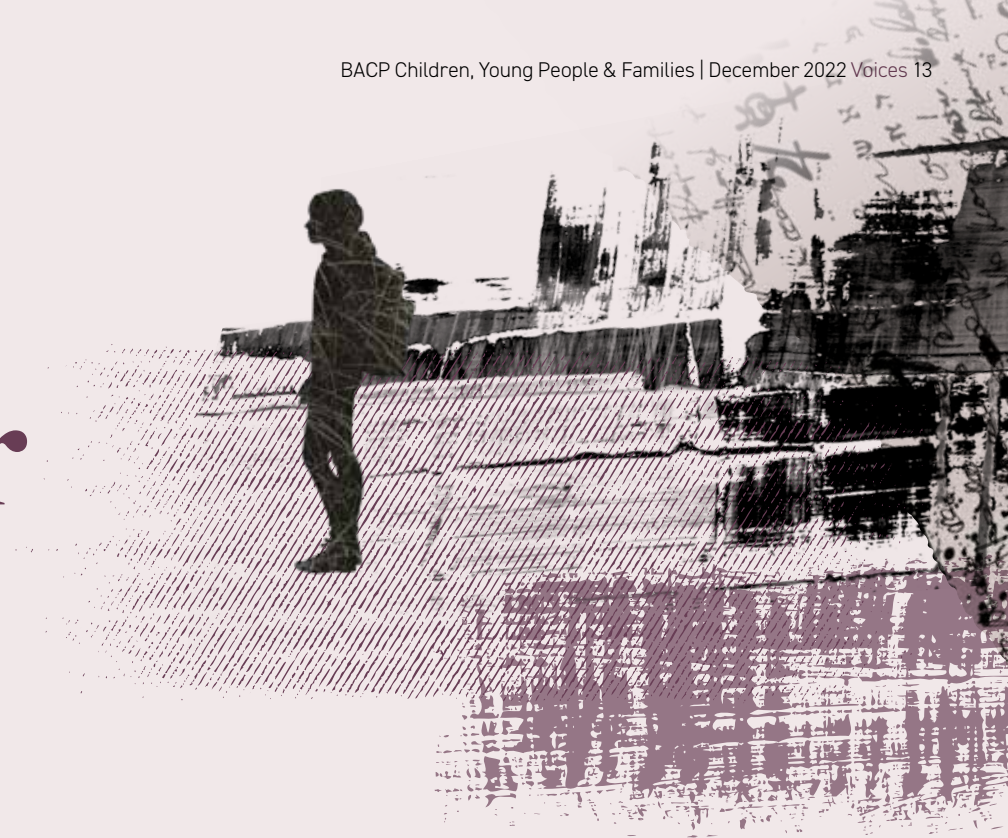


# What's it like for girls?



In the last article of our four-part series, **Amelia White** examines what it's like for girls growing up in a co-ed boarding school

.....

**W**ith Enid Blyton's stories of midnight feasts and excitement at Malory Towers filling my head, and a sibling already away at school, I chose to go to a co-ed boarding school.<sup>1</sup> I'd been told it was an amazing opportunity and received so much validation for getting awarded a place, why wouldn't I want to go there? I can barely remember my first day, but I was very proud of the fact that I didn't feel homesick or shed a tear when my mum left. (Although in recent years I have understood that the cough and projectile vomiting that occurred throughout my first term was probably a somatic symptom of suppressed grief). I remember my nursemaid at the time, a girl in the year above, leading me away from my mum, and I turned my back quickly without even a hug and walked away. This is a tendency I have to this day when it comes to goodbyes. That was the moment I broke my attachment and dependence on my mum and became an independent, resilient girl, with only myself to rely on. I was 11. My experiences at boarding school have continued to shape my patterns in relationships ever since. I now work as a therapist and specialise in supporting adults to process their own trauma from boarding school, enabling them to integrate the lost,

cut-off, abandoned child part of themselves that got left behind when they first went to school.

In the past 20 years, there has been a move away from traditional single-sex boarding schools towards co-educational schools. Those such as Wellington College and Marlborough began introducing girls in their sixth forms in the 1970s and 1980s, and in recent years have become fully co-ed. Charterhouse changed its status from September 2021 to accept girls from Year 9. Generally, these schools allow both genders

**...attachment to their caregiver has been broken and they must survive without them**

.....

to eat, learn and have some co-curricular activities together, but have separate single-sex boarding houses where they sleep.

Advocates of this move claim that co-ed schooling offers a better preparation for children as it is more representative of society and the workforce. On the UK Boarding Schools website, it states, 'Co-educational schooling demystifies the opposite sex and helps children to build relationships and confidence from an early age. Co-educational schools provide a

mutually supportive environment for both boys and girls to live and work together and learn from each other.'<sup>2</sup>

While I agree with some of the arguments in favour of co-ed schooling with regards to growing up alongside the opposite gender at a day school, when it comes to boarding schools there needs to be further understanding of the deeper impacts of growing up in such an institution in which children don't go home. If you are a counsellor working in a co-ed boarding school, I think it is important to be aware of the following ways that children may be struggling and some of the impacts.

## Homesickness

According to Joy Schaverien, who first suggested the term 'boarding school syndrome' in an article she wrote for the *British Journal of Psychotherapy* in 2011, 'The term homesickness encompasses complex symptoms of unprocessed grief'.<sup>3</sup> That first night when a child is left alone in a boarding school and must adjust to the reality that their parents will not be returning, is often a threshold moment. Their attachment to their caregiver has been broken and they must survive without them. Schools pride themselves on providing a busy timetable of activities, so that the children don't have the time, space or privacy to feel their emotions, let alone express them. If they show them, they may be picked on because, often, children do not want to see in each other the feelings that they too are so desperately trying to suppress. This occurs for all children, regardless of

whether their school is co-ed or single sex, and children may need support to help process their loss. They experience loss of their parents, grandparents, bedroom, pets and siblings overnight, as well as the loss of their childhood self. These children need a safe, nurturing place to process their feelings so they can move into their next stage of development; otherwise, they become stuck in grief, which may have repercussions as an adult.

### Survival

It is essential for a child to attach to their peer group and find a way to make friends so that they can feel safe. They might adapt their personality or detach from their emotions, 'harden up' and become independent, thus convincing themselves that they don't need parents and therefore don't need to feel abandoned. The small, lost, abandoned child is still within, even though the child may appear to be strong and resilient. There is a need and want to be cared for and nurtured, even though they feel they have had to cut off this part of themselves. They may start to become hypervigilant, which may be expressed as anxiety, as they feel they work hard each day to make sure they are safe and fit in with their peers. This applies to all

children, regardless of whether they are in a co-ed school or not, and this hypervigilance is very present in the adults I work with.

### Single-sex boarding houses

In co-ed boarding schools, while lessons and social activities may be mixed gender, boarding houses are generally single sex. Therefore, children spend most of their time

changes to the physical body as it gets flooded with hormones. As Nick Duffell says, 'At puberty, children need more than just parents, they need parenting.'<sup>4</sup> In the first few weeks after I arrived at school, we had 'Corruption', a tradition in which girls in the year above told younger girls about sex and periods. This involved various traditions, such as putting tampons in glasses of water to demonstrate their use and marking us out of 10 according to our sexual knowledge.

### Impact on girls growing up in a boys' school

Many co-ed schools began as boys' schools and are founded on patriarchal and traditionally masculine values, such as rationality, endurance and emotional repression. These are prioritised over feminine values, such as nurture, care and empathy. Girls can grow up with an inner misogyny, which they may not be aware of themselves, and a deep distrust of other women. It wasn't really until I had teenage daughters myself that I realised how misogynistic I was towards women who wanted to wear make-up or spend any time on their appearance. I started to realise that I was in danger of shaming my daughters for wanting to explore their femininity and

## ...an ex-boarder finds themselves caught in a paradox of desperate longing for love and an utter terror of finding it

.....

with their own gender, and the same hierarchies may apply within their boarding house as would within a single-sex school, with older pupils increasing their power each year. It can be difficult to go through puberty and adolescence in an institution without parents and role modelling. Without that nurture, it can be hard to make sense of the



enforcing my own misogynist values onto them. They have helped me to explore and embrace my own femininity in a way I was unable to as a teenage girl, letting go of the shame I felt about having any of those desires myself. Speaking to a colleague who works as a counsellor in a co-ed school, she highlighted how the senior leadership team included more men than women and how some girls still feel they are growing up in a boy's school.

### **Safeguarding and pastoral care**

Children may be growing up in an environment with very little role modelling of healthy relationships and pastoral care. One housemaster in charge of 50 pupils in a boarding house is unable to keep an eye on them and know what they are up to in a way that parents of a child who returns home to them can. Children going through puberty are fuelled by hormones, and sexual desire may be firing in all directions. The absence of parental love, physical touch, hugs and soothing can leave children with a greater need for love, attachment and physical contact, leading some to have sexual relationships at a younger age than they may be emotionally ready for.

One female ex-boarder, who went to a co-ed school, told me, 'At our school, the boys in the top year (18-year-olds) would choose a

"fruit bat" from the youngest year (age 11). One boy used to visit me in breaktime. I do remember him bringing me chocolates and cards and asking me if he could give me a peck on the cheek, all of which made me feel uncomfortable.'

## **Many co-ed schools began as boys' schools and are founded on patriarchal and traditionally masculine values ... [which] are prioritised over feminine values**

.....

As a therapist working with adults who have been to boarding school, an overriding difficulty I hear about is being in intimate relationships. This is not countered by being in a co-ed school because the trauma predominately comes from the early breaking of the attachment with parents and the

subsequent response to that feeling of abandonment that was suppressed at such a young age. Often, an ex-boarder finds themselves caught in a paradox of desperate longing for love and an utter terror of finding it, as it can feel incredibly unsafe.

### **Benefits of counselling in schools**

Children in boarding schools grow up in an environment without love and parenting to help them navigate the difficult adolescent stage of development and sexual awakening, which can leave them vulnerable. Having a kind, empathic counsellor alongside them to help explore their thoughts, feelings and emotions can be fundamental to how a child in a boarding school manages their wellbeing and how they then navigate the world when they leave. These children lack daily parental support and care, so offering that through counselling, and knowing someone is interested and showing care, can be hugely beneficial for children's self-esteem. They may learn healthier ways to express and regulate their emotions, rather than shutting them down or using risky behaviours. Fundamentally, they may not feel so alone.

**Amelia White** is a therapist and tutor who has worked for many charities and organisations over the past 12 years, including the NHS and Brighton University. She has specialist psychotherapy training with ex-boarders, which she undertook with Nick Duffell. Amelia provides individual therapy, courses and workshops for ex-boarders and therapists. [www.theboardingschooltherapist.com](http://www.theboardingschooltherapist.com)

### **References**

- 1** Blyton E. Mallory Towers. Hampshire: Dragon;1980.
- 2** UK Boarding schools. [www.ukboardingschools.com/co-ed-schools/](http://www.ukboardingschools.com/co-ed-schools/) September. 2022.
- 3** Schaverien J. Boarding school syndrome: broken attachments a hidden trauma. *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 2011; 17(2): 138-155.
- 4** Duffell N, Basset T. Trauma, abandonment and privilege: a guide to therapeutic work with boarding school survivors. London: Routledge; 2016.

