

Boarding Schools: What difference do they make?

Larry Sharp

No missionary orientation program is complete without a discussion of family issues. Few field conferences pass without a discussion of missionary children's needs. And probably no issue creates more heated debate than boarding schools.

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Early missionary pioneers took for granted that God's call to serve overseas meant long periods of separation from their children. Many of them believed that this was required by God (John 20:21; Matthew 10:5), and that they would receive "an hundred fold" for all they left behind (Matthew 19:29).

However, today boarding schools appear as a dark, ominous cloud on the horizon of many missionary candidates' careers. Doubts about them have largely been inspired by family life books and seminars by Bible teachers, pastors, and psychologists. More and more candidates say that their children must come first, ahead of their work.

Purpose, Methodology, and Background

The purpose of this article is to discuss the social outcomes one might expect from the boarding school experience. Just what are the effects in the child's life? References to former research will be integrated with my own study, which sought to understand differences through a study of the children of missionaries to Brazil.

The research population consisted of 533 adult children of Brazil missionaries, who responded to a 12-page questionnaire. The 60.8 percent response rate was considered excellent, considering the length of the survey and the international character of the population. Names and addresses were received from a wide range of missions, denominations, and schools in Brazil.

The study group was restricted to adults, because of the belief that any assessment of the effects of childhood experiences must wait until the subjects have grown up. Their mean age was 26.3 years and they had lived in Brazil for a mean number of 12.4 years. The group was 49.9 percent male and 50.1 female; 99 percent said they were raised as an evangelical.

Fifty and three-tenths (50.3) percent (N=268) specified having boarding experience with a mean number of years in the boarding school as 5.0. Professionally, the respondents represented a wide range of occupations, with major concentrations in the religious and management categories. Fifty-six and seven-tenths (56.7) percent had earned at least a college degree and 33.6 percent were still students. Ninety-two and one-half (92.5) percent think they speak fair or better Portuguese, the national language of Brazil.

Most of the research to date on the subject of comparison between boarding and nonboarding missionary children (MKs) relates to psychological development, and such

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studies have indicated that boarding school students develop very much like nonboarding students. There appear to be no adverse effects on a child's psychological and emotional development. David Schipper at Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology hypothesized that a boarding student would suffer from a lower self-concept and that the longer he boarded, the lower his self-concept would get. His study of over 500 children in the Orient not only failed to support the hypothesis, but indicated the opposite:

¹ _____ in a similar study, was not able to support the hypothesis that a boarding school experience is detrimental to a child's development, but concluded by saying, "...if any implication is present, it would be the earlier the children are sent to boarding school, the better."

Danielson did extensive research in MK personality development and concludes:

The facts document that MKs in boarding schools develops personalities very much like those of nonboarders. Out of 32 personality traits, MK boarders differed from day students only on one trait. The difference was not great, but the MK boarders are on the average very slightly restrained, while the nonboarder is very slightly adventurous. Both boarders and nonboarders develop wholesome and emotionally stable personalities.³

Facts document that MKs in boarding schools develop personalities very much like those of non-boarders.

Hogben and Sherlock ("Effects of separating school-age children from their parents: A statistical survey," *Social Psychiatry* 13, 1978: 187-192) studied the effects of separating school-age children from their parents, but concluded that it is the quality of care in the situation rather than the separation from parents that affects the child's development.

Rutter (quoted in Wickstrom and Fleck, "Missionary children: correlates of self-esteem and dependency," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 1983, Vol. 11, No. 3: 226-235) indicated that the quality of the boarding school experience could mitigate detrimental factors associated with separation, such as disruptive or discordant homes.

The point here is not to advocate the boarding school as the option for everyone, but only to establish that the boarding school concept does not in itself produce detrimental effects. Yes, there sometimes are problems, but the problems usually can be attributed to factors such as the child's personality, attitudes of the parents, houseparents not suited for the job, or unresolved conflicts or problems within the child himself.

¹In fact, the significant results obtained for the sense of belongingness suggest that post-puberty separation from the nuclear family and affiliations with one's peer group in the controlled setting of a boarding school may enhance the adolescent missionary student's self-concept.

My study revealed many qualitative comments in the open-ended section of the questionnaire. The positive and negative character of the comments can be attributed to the transcendental factors extraneous to the idea of separation. Two examples: “I, along with other kids, felt imprisoned...I strong disagree with the boarding school.” “I am very thankful for the education I had in the boarding school...I have never felt underprivileged.”

Probably the biggest factor in MK adjustment to the boarding school is the attitude of the parents. If they are not clearly convinced that this is God’s way and have not prepared themselves and their children problems will _____ adjustment, whether to an on-field boarding situation away from parents or to post-high school reentry to America (Cf. Carol Herrmann, “Foundation factors of trust and autonomy influencing the identity formation of multicultural lifestyled missionaries’ children.” Unpublished dissertation, Northwestern University, 1977.)

Also, when the quality of the relationship between the parents is stable, open, and loving, it prepares the child to exit and reenter the family successfully. If missionary families are not healthy, it will not matter how or where the child is educated; the troubles probably will transfer to the child. If he or she attends boarding school, that institution will get the blame.

Analysis of Some Social Effects

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The socialization question remains. How might I expect my child to act and be different, if he or she separates from us for long periods and spends months and years in the mission boarding school?

In my study of adult Brazil MKs, several interesting differences emerged when comparing 268 adults with an average of five years’ boarding experience as a youth with 262 adults with no boarding experiences. Other variables were held constant. Table 1 (page 30) compares 26 categories using percentage differences. Overall, the study revealed the following:

1. As adults, MKs who boarded are more likely to be religiously committed. They read the Bible, share their faith, and give a tithe more often than nonboarders.
2. Boarding school experienced MKs who boarded are more likely to feel at home in Brazil and want their children to be raised in Brazil.
3. As adults, boarders are more likely to have missions as a career goal and are three times more likely to return overseas as missionaries.
4. Boarders are more likely to have had a teacher who had a powerful influence on their direction in life.

5. Boarders are more satisfied with “meaning and purpose in life.”
6. Boarders are more politically conservative than nonboarders.
7. Adults who did not board are more world-minded, culture-oriented, and have a broader worldview. They are more accepting of others different than themselves, and are more likely to have a Brazilian “best friend,” and to have associated with Brazilians.
8. Nonboarders are advanced in heterosexual adjustment when compared with boarders, and are more likely to date a Brazilian or other non-American. They are more likely to marry someone of another race.
9. Nonboarders have higher educational aspirations and have better educated parents.
10. Nonboarders are more likely to speak the local language fluently.
11. Nonboarders are more often in the professions and have higher incomes as adults.
- 12.

Table 1 describes other comparisons between boarding and nonboarding experienced MKs, with notations for significant differences. It is interesting to note that boarders and nonboarders report equally to have had a “very happy childhood.” Seventy-five and three-tenths (75.3) percent of the boarders agreed that time parents spent with them was adequate, only 4.9 percent less than the nonboarders.

TABLE 1

Percentage differences among Brazil-experienced missionary children relative to boarding experience in Brazil.

ITEM A	OVERALL PERCENT	BOARDERS	NON-BOARDERS
1. Had a “very happy” childhood	62.0	61.0	62.8
2. Felt time parents spent with them was adequate.	75.8	75.3	80.2
3. Rate “home life” as the most meaningful experience as teen.	53.2	51.0	58.8
4. Would marry someone of another race.	70.6	66.8	74.7*
5. Presently “very satisfied” with meaning and purpose of life.	67.0	71.1	63.0
6. Presently seriously considering working with Third World poor.	39.7	48.5	30.7****

7. Consider themselves to speak excellent Portuguese. 45.8 33.0 58.8****

Table 1 (continued)

ITEM A	OVERALL PERCENT	BOARDERS	NON-BOARDERS
8. Consider themselves “more than average” religious.	88.6	91.2	85.7
9. Read the Bible “very often.”	46.2	54.7	37.5****
10. Share the faith “often.”	38.1	44.6	30.9****
11. Give more than 10 percent to religious endeavors.	37.4	45.0	29.5****
12. Career goal in religious professions.	38.0	43.5	32.9
13. Presently employed as missionary.	13.8	24.2	8.2****
14. Life seems filled with despair.	4.0	2.6	5.4
15. Dated a Brazillian or other Third World national.	58.3	53.1	63.8*
16. Had a Brazillian “best friend.”	61.5	54.6	68.0***
17. A teacher had a powerful influence on their direction in life.	56.9	63.1	50.9*
18. Felt disadvantaged compared to peers in North America.	4.6	3.3	5.8
19. Above average autonomy and freedom in the home as teenager.	83.8	86.8	80.5
20. Consistently and often talked with parents regarding Christian values.	55.4	60.8	50.2*
21. Presently feel more at home in Brazil than in any other country.	30.4	37.3	23.4***
22. Would like their children raised in Brazil.	34.0	42.6	25.0****
23. Prefer to pursue occupation in Brazil.	28.1	36.2	20.2****
24. It is better to be a citizen of the world than of a particular country.	27.3	20.1	34.8***
25. My country is probably no better than many others.	40.6	35.0	46.4
26. Missionaries should be trained for the war on poverty.	67.1	62.4	71.31

a. Significance level:****>.001; ***>.005; **>.01; and >.05 using Chi Square.

b. Boarders N=268; Non-boarders N=262; Conservative/Independent N=118; Baptist N=301.

Both world-mindedness and Christian commitment were developed as a scale operationalized by means of a factor analysis program using several items each. Christian commitment measured attitudinal and behavioral questions common to the sociologists, such as frequency of attending church, reading the Bible, tithing, and so on. World-mindedness was developed by analyzing questions about interaction with Brazilians, attending cultural events, learning the language, and so on. Table 2 indicates significant differences between boarding and nonboarding students in that nonboarders are more likely to be world-minded, but boarders are more likely to be committed to their Christian faith and to return as a missionary.

TABLE 2
Dependent Variable Indices by Boarding Experience:
Mean Differences and Significance Levels

<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>Overall Mean</i>	Boarding <i>Yes</i>	Experience <i>No</i>	<i>Significance</i>
Worldmindedness	17.38	17.18	17.59	*
Christian commitment	52.00	53.41	50.53	****
Return overseas a missionary	5.97	6.27	5.65	****

- a. The higher the mean score the greater the propensity toward the Index.
- b. Significance level: **** $\geq .001$; *** $\geq .005$; ** $\geq .01$; * $\geq .05$
- c. Summated scales built through factor analysis; Christian commitment —16 items, alpha .03; Worldmindedness—5 items, alpha .64; Return overseas —2 items, alpha .81.

Overall research substantiates the social factors demonstrated in this study, but there is another important consideration indicated in the majority of the literature on the socialization of MKs. Missionary children are more intimately related to and dependent upon the family than North American teen-agers. Parents play a more potent role in the socialization of MKs. (Cf. Ray Downs, “A look at the third culture kid,” *The Japan Christian Quarterly*, Spring, 1976: 68-71).

Fifty-three and two-tenths (53.2) percent of the 533 MKs in my Brazil study responded that home life was the “most meaningful experience” for them when compared to school life, church life, and community life. A survey of more than 3,000 Canadian teen-agers indicated that peers are a much more significant influence than parents. (Cf. Don Posterski, “Youth Today,” *Faith Alive*, November, 1985: 10-19). Boarding school teen-agers, however, are even closer in values to their parents than are MKs in general. (Cf. Ruth Useem, “Third culture factors in educational charge,” *From Cultural Challenges to*

Education, by Cole Brembeck and W. H. Hill, Eds., Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1973: 121-138).

The basic research also suggests that MKs in general are relatively inexperienced and insecure in peer group relations, particularly with the opposite sex (though they appear more sophisticated and mature than peers in North America in relations with adults). Boarding school teen-agers are more immature with the opposite sex than nonboarding teen-agers, often due to “incest taboos” generated in these family-like groups. (Cf. Useem and Downs, cited above.) Boarding students consider themselves part of one big family and their peers are their brothers and sisters. Fleming reports delays in heterosexual adjustment for boarding students. (Cf. Frank Shepard, “An analysis of variables of self-perception and personal ambition in overseas-experienced American teen-agers: Implications for _____ planning. Unpublished dissertation, Michigan State University, 1976.)

Friendship patterns for missionary children, and particularly boarding school MKs, are different than for their peers in the homeland. MKs depend on one or two close friends, referred to by one MK as “total friendship,” and they find it difficult to make and break relationships. Their childhood socialization experiences take place in tightly knit social settings, where they identify with closed societies such as a mission group or MK school. Because of the close relationship to a mission, the child is much more likely than an American teen-ager to be able to communicate and socialize effectively with adults. They identify and are more involved with their father’s work than their American counterparts.

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Similarly, in peer group relations MKs relate usually to a church group and a school group, a much more narrow friendship sphere than one would expect for North American youth. The result is the “total friendship” factor. All of this has advantages and disadvantages; it is important that we realized the differences and implications, so as to assist in the social adjustment period when our MKs return to their parents’ homeland.

Conclusions and Summary

The research suggests that there are social differences one might expect from the MK experience and the boarding experience in particular. Social adjustment during the reentry stage is our greatest concern. Up until that point the evidence indicates that MKs are not disadvantaged on the basis of their boarding school experience. MK boarders take with them advantages as well as disadvantages when compared to nonboarders (see Table 1). For example, it may help to be more committed to one’s faith, but it may hinder to be less broadminded and more desirous of living overseas as an adult. It is helpful to know that some mission agencies are designing programs to facilitate MK reentry.

Parental separation from their children is not an easy issue. However, it can be right for some families and some children in some situations. When it is the right solution, it is up to mission leaders to provide the best possible boarding school facilities.

Parents need to guard against applying the same decisions to all their children. The boarding school may be an excellent option, but it is not for everyone, and mission leaders should not expect families to choose it first. The boarding school experience, for most, can and does yield a positive, well-adjusted young person. If parents are called to overseas living and decide that the boarding school is right, they can rest assured that they are in good company.

The boarding school may be an excellent option but it is not for everyone.

One thing is clear: missionary children gain a host of advantages connected with missionary living. The problem of a quality education, even in the boarding school, should not hinder parents considering missionary service. The answer for the missionary parents of more than 10,000 school-age children overseas is a prayerful integration of their personal values and duties with the personalities of their children, with the teaching of Scripture, and with other contextual factors so as to decide on the best pattern for each child. God gives grace for those who know that boarding school is His will and He provides alternatives for those who feel the children should live with the family.

All in all, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages, says the MKs themselves in the Brazil study. What else would motivate 98.1 percent of the 268 adults with MK boarding school experience, from a wide range of mission backgrounds, educational experiences, and present walks of life to indicate, “If I could do it all over again, I would choose to grow up as I did”?

END NOTES

1. David Schipper, “Self-concept differences between early, late, and nonboarding missionary children. Unpublished dissertation, Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology, LaMirada, Calif., 1977, p. 86.
2. D. L. Wickstrom, “Self-esteem and dependence in early, late, and nonboarding missionary children.” Unpublished dissertation, Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology, LaMirada, Calif., 1978.
3. Edward Danielson, *Missionary Kid—MK* (Manila: Faith Academy, 1982), p.9.