

Expertise a real godsend in guiding teens' minds

Laura Cencigh-Albulario

ADOLESCENCE is a terrifying minefield for some parents but at boarding schools, managing growing pains is all in a day's work.

Decades of experience and access to experts on all the dicey topics equip boarding schools to help children become young adults, says Brisbane Grammar's director of boarding Simon Hill.

"We know boys inside-out and can take a consistent, up-to-date, research-based approach," he says.

"Things like handling social media, alcohol and drugs are a minefield for parents. There's a level of embarrassment for boys to discuss sensitive issue with their parents, while we can deal with them in a professional, empathetic way."

According to Hill, the key is allowing adolescents to have the essential trial-and-error experiences of growing up, but in a controlled manner. "Adolescents will always make mistakes but we let them do it in a safe, supported and prepared environment," he says. "We've seen it all before so we can nip any problems in the bud and deal with them."

With several studies linking boredom to adolescent risk-taking, the busy schedule of boarding life is another benefit.

"We strongly believe in keeping our girls busy and active as an antidote to spending too much time on technology," says Merran O'Connor, director of student wellbeing at St Catherine's School in Toorak, Melbourne.

"A busy house is a happy house," Hill adds. At Brisbane Grammar, activities range from social events with girls' schools to volunteer work with local charities.

A recent Australian study published in the *American Educational Research Journal* found widespread parity in the educational and personal wellbeing between day and boarding students.

Researcher Andrew Martin, Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of NSW, says this shows a turnaround from the "dark ages stereotype" that boarding is damaging. "It's now a more positive experience," Prof Martin says.

Based on a survey of more than 5000 boarding and day students, any differences found in the study were mostly in the boarders' favour, including more positive relationships with parents.

Prof Martin attributes this to the removal of the daily battles about homework and technology from the family dynamic, as well as the classic adage of absence making the heart grow fonder.

Boarders in the study also reported a higher sense of meaning, satisfaction and purpose in life. Certain personalities – extroverts, open and agreeable students – were found to particularly thrive in boarding schools, but Prof Martin says schools are doing a better job of supporting all types of students.

Hill says: "We're turning away from that whole 'here's what we're all going to do' approach and trying to cater more to introverts."

"Our mindfulness time on Sunday afternoons allows boys to have some quiet time out."

At St Catherine's, meditation sessions and quiet areas balance out the intensity of communal living.

"Communal living, by its very nature, requires co-operation, communication and adaptability," O'Connor says. "The boarding house environment fosters independence, resilience and self-reliance."

According to Hill, promoting these skills in a supported environment creates well-adjusted individuals. "The coping techniques boarders learn are perfect preparation for living in halls of residence at uni," he says.

"In the workforce, they're more mature in interviews, presentations or dealing with customers than colleagues who have always been at home, with their parents doing all negotiations."

Despite its benefits, Prof Martin says parents shouldn't expect boarding to circumvent all the challenges of growing up.

"For a male, it's not until they're 25 or 26 that their brain has fully matured, so there's only so much we can do to speed things up," he says.

"Boarding school is not a cure-all magic wand, but it is a positive educational alternative to consider."



Knox Grammar School boarder Hugo Morgan with parents Daniel Morgan and Annette English.

Support smooths out the bumps in the road

For many, the transition from home to the boarding house can be a difficult journey but the experts agree: positivity and communication go a long way, writes Polly Simons

WHEN Annette English dropped her son, Hugo Morgan, off for his first day as a Year 7 boarder at Sydney's Knox Grammar School, the 12-year-old wasn't the only apprehensive one.

The mother of three from regional NSW had already seen two daughters through boarding school but worried that Hugo didn't conform to the sports-loving stereotype of country boarders.

"He didn't want to go, and I worried he was going to be lost," she says.

Now, almost two years later, Hugo is an active member of the school and doing well academically, but English admits the transition was "bumpy".

Hugo's experience is not unusual, says Knox's head of stage four boarding, Julien Manuel.

"The hardest thing is obviously the separation," he says. "For families, they might be losing their second-in-charge on the farm and it can leave a big hole."

Boarding preparations for prospective students can begin two years in advance with regional events to reach out to potential students.

"Parents need to start talking to prospective boarders then: what are their concerns? Is there anything they want to talk about?" Manuel says. As their first day approaches, many schools host orientation days and other activities to familiarise new boarders before school starts. Others offer mentoring programs and early contact with staff or students. "We show new boarders it's not a scary place," Manuel says. "It makes a massive difference."

For children coming from isolated

areas, the transition may be even more dramatic, particularly if they have previously been schooled through distance education. A lack of exposure to sports or music can dent their confidence and make them reluctant to join in activities, and they may be unfamiliar with basic classroom concepts such as raising their hands to ask a question or wearing a uniform.

"House parents have a good understanding of the issues they may be facing but teachers are often surprised at the things they don't know," says Wendy Hick, president of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association.

"For special occasions such as birthdays, football games and prize-giving assemblies, families often feel a huge guilt they can't be there," adds Hick, who recommends families commit to visits for special occasion weekends, giving boarders something to look forward to. Keeping children updated on details of home can also help them feel connected.

"Often they are very used to discussing things with family, and all of a sudden they're facing all these new experiences and they miss being able to tell them about it," Hick says.

For all the preparation you put in, however, there's no guarantee homesickness won't strike.

"Homesickness is a big thing and you need a strategy to help children attenuate their emotional response to it," says Dr Paula Robinson, of the Positive Psychology Institute.

While it's important to

acknowledge and empathise with any negative emotions, particularly in the early days, letting negativity overwhelm the conversation helps no one, she says. "Studies have shown you need three positive emotions to even out every negative one. For parents, it can be as simple as asking, 'What did you enjoy about today?'"

It's not just students who find the separation difficult however. "Often the boys adapt very well, as long as you make them feel like they belong, and it's the parents who are more apprehensive," Manuel says.

Increasingly, schools such as St Joseph's College are incorporating accommodation for visiting families, while others have open-door policies for parents to visit any time. At Knox, boarder families are matched with day families who can become a "home away from home" for the student, while new parents are issued with a week-by-week guide to keep them in touch with school activities.

"It helps parents to realise it's natural (to miss their child) and we try to school them in what to expect and put them at ease," Manuel says.

One thing both experts and parents agree on however is no matter how many times you do it, sending children to boarding school never gets easier.

"You need to recognise that it will be hard on you," says Annette English.

Hick, whose two children were boarders, agrees. "But you see the good things they're doing, the friends they're making, and it does make it easier."



Keeping girls busy is the key to happy boarders at St Catherine's School in Toorak, Melbourne.