

## RNCF 2006 study into 'assisted boarders

The Royal National Children's Foundation conducted research in 2015 to assess the impact of its own support for vulnerable young people at boarding school. The research was conducted among 97 of RNCF's beneficiaries aged 15-18. Two-thirds of these young people had single-parent mothers and there was an almost even gender split. This is a summary of the RNCF findings:

### Experience of boarding school

90% reported an improvement in their feelings of personal security. 94% judged themselves to be either 'secure' or 'very secure'. Just 6% had made this assessment before boarding. 90% described their experience of boarding school as 'positive' or 'very positive'.

32%, who described their experiences positively, did not apply these sentiments to their first 12 months at boarding school. One such respondent commented: *I wasn't used to this way of life. Initially I felt angry because many fee paying kids are naïve to real life. Now I'm older, I can adapt to different situations, and I know why people think the way they do.* More common were feelings of initial isolation: *I did have to take time to... fully get to know the people there before I could fully settle in and enjoy it.* All those who talked about having difficulties settling in were clear that they now felt comfortable and happy at boarding school.

We also asked their teachers whether these boarders initially had trouble settling in, and if they were settled in boarding school today. Of those who answered the question, teachers reported that 46% of Foundationers had had trouble settling into boarding school, but that 93% of the children and young people were now comfortable and settled in their schools.

### Family Life

We asked the young people and their parents and guardians how they felt boarding school had impacted their family life, if at all. 94% of parents and guardians, and 69% of Foundationers felt that boarding school had had a positive or very positive impact.

Most parents and guardians explained their answers with reference both to their inability to look after their children at home, and to their happiness at seeing their children flourishing. *'Although having my only child attend a boarding school has been difficult, it's meant my health hasn't suffered as much. I am able to get the rest I need and my son hasn't become my carer.'* 40% of the young people also gave similar answers.

Their answers were more likely than their carers' to focus on their own achievements. Over 30% of the boarders explained their answers with reference to carers' pride at their successes, or improved relationships at home: *'My family understands that I am mainly focused on my future and what I enjoy doing... I do see my family regularly on exeat weekends and holidays*

*which has shown to be far better for our relationships.'* Though parents and guardians sometimes highlighted pride, in no answer was this the only given reason: *'To see my daughter 'grow' in herself and positively flourish has been such an amazing experience for me. It has actually "kept me going" at times, knowing that if she can do it, so can I.'*

## **Impact indicators**

We asked the young people to assess the impact of boarding on their lives, according to 5 key developmental criteria:

1. *Relationships with peers*
2. *Relationships with adults*
3. *Self-esteem*
4. *Academic Achievement*
5. *Acceptance of school structure.*

Overwhelmingly, they felt that boarding had a positive or very positive impact, on all the different criteria. 79% judged boarding to have had such an impact on their academic achievement and levels of self-esteem; 84% felt boarding had positively affected their relationships with adults, 85% felt the same about their relationships with their peers. Finally, 87% thought boarding had improved their acceptance of school structure.

We also asked parents and guardians to assess the impact of boarding on their children's lives, according to the same criteria. Here, 'positive' or 'very positive' responses were even more popular. Exact percentages ranged from 88% (relationships with adults) through to 97% (self-esteem).

## **Greatest impact of boarding school**

The young people were asked to name the greatest impact (positive or negative) that boarding school had on them. The question was open ended, yet answers showed some common themes. The single most repeated answer (25%) focused on the sense of stability and confidence that boarding school established in their lives: *'Being comfortable and feeling care and love towards me.'* A further 18% highlighted the opportunity to make friends from a wide variety of backgrounds, whilst 15% emphasised the independence boarding school fostered.

10% did not answer the question, and 5% chose negative impacts. One of these focused on the feelings of inadequacy regarding finances: *'It is very expensive and I can't afford to pay full fees and I kept reminding myself about it'* whilst the other focused on being away from family.

## **Future plans**

We asked them what they wanted to do when they leave school. 90% had firm ideas about the future, 13% above the national average for this age group.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Cascaid report, p.4](#)

Answers were varied, including careers in law and finance, agricultural engineering, carpentry, becoming a British Army Human Intelligence Officer, working in catering, becoming a counsellor, and video games design. Of the 10% without firm plans, all felt confident about the future. One wrote that she wanted to *'be happy'* whilst another commented *'I am not quite sure what I want to do when I leave school but I am sure my school will guide me in the right direction'*.

Further study was the single most frequently given response, at 62% (compared to the national average of 68%)<sup>2</sup>. 81% were clear about the subject they would study, where, and for many, what they wanted to do upon graduation.

74% said boarding school had changed their conceptions of their futures. Of these, 41% felt boarding school had given them the ambition and motivation to achieve their goals: *'Boarding has affected so much of me that I feel like I can go anywhere! With the skills and nurturing I am glad I have received, it has helped me realise that there are lots of things I can accomplish with effort and determination'*. 29% noted boarding school had broadened their knowledge of the opportunities open to them, whilst 9 per cent highlighted the good guidance and advice of their teachers, with the same percentage again emphasising the facilities on offer to them at boarding school.

### **Headteachers' views on 'Assisted Boarding'**

In addition to asking the young people, their parents and guardians and their teachers, about the impact of assisted boarding, we also surveyed headteachers.

75% of headteachers felt that the presence of 'assisted boarders' affected school life either positively or very positively, and 15% felt that Foundationers had no clear effect on school life, either positively or negatively. No headteacher felt they had a negative or very negative impact.

Headteachers' explanations of their answers showed common themes. 30% noted that these young people diversified the school community and 15% referenced their school's ethos: *'Their presence is integral to the ethos of the school and explains our very strong pastoral systems'*. 25% remarked that these young people were more likely than other students to throw themselves into school life. The 20% who felt that 'assisted boarders' did not have a clear impact on school life explained their answers with reference to the fact that *'They are not treated any differently to anyone else in the school'*, whilst one headteacher wrote: *'It depends what you mean ... They are less likely to be "supermen" - that is not a criterion on which we choose them. But they keep us loving and mindful and we do it FOR THEM!'*

We asked headteachers what, if anything, was the most important impact of boarding school life on these young people. Every head who answered the question (95 per cent) answered with variations on one theme: *'It gives them stability which for whatever reason may not always be possible in their home life'*.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.4