

HOMESICKNESS: Challenges of Building New Bond by Brian Fisher, AdmissionsQuest, Inc.

AQ offers an inside look at the problem of homesickness on boarding school campuses.

Jumping In: Challenges of Community Building

Joining a new community can be an exhilarating experience for everyone, but it, also, often evokes feelings of longing, apprehension and uneasiness. Facing unknown circumstances, new boarding school students express wishes that life and situations would not change. Homesickness grows out of grasping for the comfort of the known.

Homesickness involves the desire to hold on to past settings and expectations, or to the way students believe things to have been at home. It is the basic hurdle to overcome when heading off to boarding school. Committing to a new environment and to new people (friends, students, faculty) proves difficult for student and for family.

Parents also experience homesickness; distance brings a yearning for daily interaction with their child. They must remain aware of their anxious feelings in order to provide positive grounding as their student joins a new community.


Jeff Desjarlais, Director of Health and Wellness Education at Concord Academy, Concord, MA, uses this rule of thumb for parents and students when addressing homesickness concerns: “The further you are from the familiar, the more you’re going to have to cope with some kind of loss.”

How, then, can faculty and parents best help a student participate in new relationships and in a new community?

Schools Practice Complete Engagement

Engagement builds the bridges necessary for establishing bonds in a new community. Boarding schools focus the opening weeks of their school year on building and solidifying community bonds. Everything, from scheduling, to activities, to meals, brings students together when they arrive for orientation. Most schools bring new students in a day or two before the returning students, allowing all new students to share equal footing and providing time and opportunities for new students to gain a comfort level with each other. New students do not know the ropes, nor do they possess any inside scoop; everyone learns the new together. Returning students arrive a day or two later to fill out the student body. With all students present, schools then work through an orientation program designed to establish, and foster, shared senses of community and purpose.

Concord Academy bases its approach to homesickness on the assumption that all students will miss home. Addressing homesickness directly by acknowledging



it and talking about it with the students, Concord consciously provides new, and returning, students with opportunities to meet new students and adults during their orientation, creating bonds within the community for the school year. Concord's orientation program exposes students to as many faculty members and other students as possible. Students interact with each other and also meet student leaders, such as Orientation Leaders and Boarding Orientation Leaders. Students meet adults woven throughout the community, such as Heads of House, Advisors, House Parents, and Club Advisors. These meetings and new relationships form the bridges for bonds within the school's community for the school year.

Concord focuses on two points to assist students working through homesickness:

1. Orientation leaders directly address and speak about homesickness, what it means, how it feels, and how one can overcome it.
2. The entire orientation process teaches connection to the school community.

"We look at homesickness as a grieving process, losing something that's familiar. We work to teach kids to move from that sense of loss to something that they've gained, an addition instead of a subtraction," explains Desjarlais.

Bringing students together within a common frame of reference, with shared senses of purpose, and with support for each other, is paramount to building a healthy community of students and faculty who may have arrived with little in common. Schools use the connections established during orientation to keep students busy - focused on their jobs as students, athletes, artists, and community members.

Everyone wants to do their best when they know that their efforts mean something to themselves and to those around them. When this is established, the student has moved beyond his personal needs or wants to the understanding of what his efforts mean to others.

As a dean of students, during my opening of school presentations, I told parents: "I work to keep your kids busy, tired, and broke. If your student is busy, he's engaged, participating positively, and growing. If your student is tired, he always has more to do. And, if your student is broke, he lacks the pocket money necessary to buy trouble." Busy, tired, and broke, are the components of full engagement.

Engagement brings most students into their new school, but, as we all know, jumping into, and becoming part of, a new or foreign community takes trust and effort with certain levels of safety and comfort. Some students find their comfort level more slowly than others; some jump right in; others may need time, direction, and support.

Trepidation: Uncertainty of Jumping In, Sharing, and Participating

Try as we might, parents and faculty members cannot mitigate or erase the fears that come with moving to a new place and being asked to join new students and adults in a community. Carol Hotchkiss, author and Director of the Durango Institute, points out that working to become a new community member may not be a familiar behavior or practice for many students. Today's "students don't have a lot of experience with community," she cautions. Modern students often lack "community building skills, such as senses of sharing, obligation to the whole, compromise, conflict resolution and mediation."

Arriving at their new school, students suddenly find that they are expected to join a new community without any prior experience in doing so. Fewer kids today participate in neighborhood and community institutions that used to bind communities together, such as scouting, churches, and community athletics. "Kids today need some real, concrete help in community building," Hotchkiss argues. Some students will arrive at their new setting with an eagerness or willingness to adapt to, and to accept, the challenges. Others may need some suggestions as they work to internalize the requirements of community membership.

Setting Aside the Self: Understanding the Greater Whole

Complaints coming from the homesick student most often emanate from (using my favorite definition of adolescent) a student's propensity to "define the world in terms of oneself." As Ms. Hotchkiss terms it, facing the demands of "some pretty fundamental sharing," some students recoil, longing for the comfort, space, and terms, of their home life. These students face the difficult, but rewarding, task of developing and using their personal resources to build new relationships. Parents can, and should, contribute to their student's growth, even from a distance.

Parents

Parents should expect complaints over the phone, via e• mail, or even a letter home. Most importantly, the call or note will draw every concern that, as a parent, you might have had in choosing a boarding school. When the complaint arrives from hundreds, even thousands of miles away, parents and guardians must help engage their student to reach out and find a place in their new school.

Parents Must Keep In Mind A Few Principles

- Discomfort and change are components of growth.
- Deferred gratification and self• sacrifice are requirements of community membership.
- Expect your student to argue "I can't," or "They won't let me do X."

- Remember that your student is not the first to experience these living requirements and that those who have been through these situations have achieved success.
- The good that it fosters in your student is a principle reason why you chose this school.

When Your Student Voices A Complaint

- Remember your reasons for choosing the school.
- Listen, then remind your child why the school's requirements produce positive results.
- Keep your personal feelings in check while helping your student to understand that you support his being away at school.
- Encourage your student to participate in school life. Ask what he's doing? What is he planning on doing? Keep the focus on fully participating in school life.
- Support the school.

Your student is building bonds and has responsibilities to an entirely new group of people. It's a difficult and scary process, but it is an indispensable part of maturing.

Be supportive. Call and send mail regularly. Revel in your student's growth, involvement, and independence. Before long, calls will taper off; then, sometimes, finding out what your student is up to at school will be like finding a needle in a haystack, difficult but rewarding.

Two Kinds of Distance: Cultural and Physical

Returning to Jeff Desjarlais' proposition that "the further you are away from the familiar, the greater your perceived loss," parents and schools must dedicate themselves to recognize and preemptively address students whose cultural and physical backgrounds lie furthest from their school setting. Language and cultural norms serve as the most basic hurdles for international students in their assimilation into their school. Students from different backgrounds in America face similar obstacles as well.

A common set of principles and initiatives can help to connect these students to their new environment:

- Assume that these students feel and think more than they express.
- The distance that these students feel often results not from "cultural or difference" issues but from feelings of exclusion.

- As adults, faculty, and parents, do not assume that you know how these students feel and think. Reach out. Ask questions. Ask: “What do you think? How do you feel?”
- Include these students in plans and concerns.
- Provide these students with as many connections and opportunities for growth and expression as possible.

When to Become Concerned

Homesickness will persist in a few students for a variety of reasons, which almost always stem from family situations, family dynamics, or family illness.

- If your student expresses persistent, prolonged homesickness that inhibits his ability to participate, call the dean of students or the administrator who oversees mental health. The dialog that you open will serve as the key to addressing your student’s needs.
- Keep the school aware of any concerns.
- Work with the school to help your student focus on school, on the new opportunities, and on setting goals for the future.

Always keep in mind how and why you reached your decision to provide your student with boarding school opportunities.

Working through homesickness, like any illness, proves challenging to mom, dad, and the child. But like all growth and learning experiences, your student will emerge more confident and with a stronger set of abilities to recognize, learn, understand and adapt to new circumstances. As a parent, you will find yourself marveling and smiling at your child’s growth.

Contributors

Jeff Desjarlais is the Director of Health and Wellness Education at Concord Academy.

Carol Hotchkiss serves as Co- Curricular Consultant to Schools and Director of the Durango Institute for Co- Curricular Education in Durango, Colorado. She can be reached at: carol@durangoinstitute.com or through the Institute web site: www.durangoinstitute.com.

Reference

Building a Residential Curriculum, by Carol Hotchkiss and Edward Kowalchick, served as a reference for this article and provides a thorough and detailed guide to understanding and building residential community. You can order a copy of the book through the Durango Institute web site: www.durangoinstitute.com.