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# Boarding schools: pupils' suffering has been ignored for too long

The ex-boarder may never develop emotional intelligence

[The Observer](#), Saturday 10 May 2014 21.27 BST



Mr Squeers from *Nicholas Nickleby* by Charles Dickens. Photograph: Rischgitz/Getty Images

We applaud Alex Renton's courageous article about abuse and neglect in boarding schools ("[Abuse in Britain's boarding schools: why I decided to confront my demons](#)", *Magazine*). The suffering caused by the British habit of sending children away from parental love and the safety of their homes to educational institutions has been ignored for much too long. Materially rich but emotionally poor, with small classes, large playing fields but "no hugs", as Renton puts it – boarders lose out on a normal childhood. Children may learn to function competently, but at the cost of dissociation from their feelings of abandonment, even if there is no outright abuse. The ex-boarder may never develop emotional intelligence.

To most people, the inherent wrong of early boarding is obvious, as was clear from the majority of comments on Renton's article. For those requiring more convincing, the evidence is weighty and wide-ranging. Attachment theory plus the work of clinicians over the last two decades and now the findings of neuroscience leave no doubt about the psycho-emotional consequences of depriving children of touch, warmth and a "secure base".

The privileges of boarding education can no longer compensate its cost to our society. Its elitism is at odds with the goals of an inclusive liberal social democracy; it remains a major force in the sidelining of women and the maintenance of an outdated class system. If boarding once played a role in preparing men for the rigours and cruelties of an imperial age, our present interdependent world calls for a different, more complex and caring set of values. We call for an end to early boarding along with the privations that are demonstrably detrimental to children's wellbeing.

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