

Parenting Early Age Boarding School Children: Challenges For Parents

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ABSTRACT

Biblically, parents are children's trainers until such a time when the child is adequately grown to take care of themselves. Since parenting is training, it cannot be done effectively with either party being away from the other. Placing children in boarding schools, some at a very early age however breaches this and exposes children to other influencers than their parents. While these influences form their personalities, the question of whether they are well nurtured remains. This paper identifies the challenges that parents face in parenting early age boarding school children. The study used a qualitative design approach. Data was collected using interview with parents, who by then, had their children in boarding school, and those whose children had already gone through boarding schools. A population 200 was targeted in all the four churches. A sample of five (5) parents was purposefully selected from the four churches. The study found out that indeed, parenting boarding scholars is different from parenting day scholars. It also revealed that children in boarding schools exhibited some change in behaviour both negatively and positively. On disadvantages attached to boarding schooling for early age children, this paper revealed that parents risk their children in boarding school to poor feeding, poor medical attention, irresponsible care takers and bullying by older children. The authors concluded that parenting a child in boarding school is challenging. This paper thus recommends ways to improve parent-child relationship.

Key words: Boarding School, Children, Parenting, Challenges, Behaviour, Discipline, Teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Spending sufficient time with a child is a requirement for effective parenting. Parents and their children need to be together, just like a coach and his team, for better training. Among the Jews, parenting involved teaching the children the law of the Lord while the family sat in the house, when they walked by the way, when they lay down and when they rose up (Deut.6:6-7).

In many African communities, the fathers trained their boys while the mothers trained the girls. Parents devoted time to instruct their children in the path to proper character formation. This resulted in having responsible members of the community as highlighted in Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* [1].

When children are taken to primary boarding school at a young age, time with their parents is drastically reduced, something that can impede effective parenting. Dobson and Gary in their book, *Children at Risk* [2] report that "A study by researchers at the University of Texas at Dallas revealed that children placed in non-maternal care at an early age were less cooperative,

less popular, and less confident than their peers. In addition, they had poorer study skills and made lower grades” (p. 126). Separating children from their parents early in life exposes children to these risks.

Parenting is an energy consuming but noble task. Wright [3] says, “Bringing up children can be exhausting and mundane, but there is no reason why it should not be enjoyed too” (p. 11). The parents as good shepherds must lead their flocks to green pastures and still waters. They must defend them from the ravenous wolves of the day out to destroy our generation. Parents must always be concerned about their children and correct them from negative influence like the internet abuse. The choice to be a parent is lifelong engagement that one must give thought to before getting involved. According to Campbell and Chapman [4], “The choice to be a parent is the choice to have your heart walking around outside your body as long as you live” (p. 12).

Over years, there has been an outcry of character deformation in the boarding school system of education. Negative influences have been reported especially in the secondary schools. On 15th July, 1991 for instance, nineteen female students of St. Kizito Mixed Secondary School lost their lives in a stampede after male students invaded their dormitory and raped some of them [5]. In this regard, it is noteworthy that homosexuality and lesbianism have become rampant in many schools in Kenya. Drug abuse is becoming a common thing in some boarding schools too. In Nyeri High School, students suspected to have been suspended earlier locked up the school prefects in a cubical in one of the dormitories, doused them with petrol and set them ablaze [5]. In the same weekend, students at Kianyaga Secondary School attacked the deputy school captain’s room with a petrol bomb, which left the students badly wounded.

In addition, early pregnancies have been reported and some end up in crude abortions that lead to the death of the victims. Parents must wake up from their sleep and save their children. They should not entirely leave the parenting responsibility to the teachers. Lickona [6] warns that “even if the schools can improve the student’s conduct during school hours, the likelihood of lasting impact on the character of a child is less when values are not reinforced at home” (p. 36). Some parents take their children as young as seven-years-old to boarding schools. Life in boarding school, at that age denies the child an opportunity to be childish. Play time in boarding school is limited and most of the time is spent in class. Boarding schools become a jail to the child [7].

It is the parents’ responsibility to raise their children up until they are able to stand on their own. After that, they should be left to choose their destinies. McGinnis [8] says, “One of the most important lessons we as parents must learn is to let go our adult children and let them live with consequences of their decisions” (p. 102). Parting with the children is one of the most difficult decisions parents must make. However, a time comes when they have no choice but to let go the children, to discover life on their own. Responsible parents keep an eye on the young adult, to make sure that they do not go in the wrong direction. This makes parenting a life-long process.

As discussed in the foregoing introduction, it is vivid that parents face a number of challenges in parenting children in boarding schools. Literature reviewed elicited diverse forms of challenges posed by external environment to proper parenting. These challenges are summarised into four main categories namely: social, economic, emotional and spiritual challenges.

Social Challenges

The influence at school affects the character and behaviour of the child, and it may become difficult for the parents to guide and direct the child. Considering the short periods of time the parents have with their children, the influence at school supersedes that of the parents and the family. Children may pick bad habit out there that may ruin their entire lives. However, Dobson [9] advises children not to conform to the ways of this world, but to take control of their behaviour, mind, body, and life (p. 53).

Economic Challenges

It is more expensive to take children to boarding schools than day schools. Considering that the parents have to pay for the boarding facilities and provisions, more money is required at school. Parents have to dig deeper into their pockets to maintain the wellbeing of their children at boarding schools. Wright [3] says that family life is dynamic. It never settles down. It always brings new challenges (p. 117). By taking their children to boarding school, parents should be ready to face a new challenge of financial requirement.

Emotional Challenges

The idea of separation of the parents and the children has side effects to both parties. The children live in loneliness of being away from their parents and other siblings and this may cause nostalgia, affecting them in their studies negatively. "Between 11 and 22 percent of the nation's children suffer from some type of mental or emotional disorder" [10] (p.165). Additionally, some parents live in fear wondering how their children are faring on in school. Such parents keep calling the school to find out how their children are doing.

Spiritual Challenges

Not every school will take care of the children's spiritual wellbeing. The child may drift back from the spiritual care provided at home while being away from the parents. Parents have to choose between spiritual and academic welfare of their children. Most of them consider the latter, leaving the child without spiritual care. This will have a negative effect on the child's spiritual state now and in the future.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

According to Creswell [11], "employing the wrong research design would be likened to asking the wrong question" (p. 60). Descriptive design was adopted for the study to collect information about relationships and experiences by looking for correlations and making predictions based on the data [11]. Selected parents in Calvary Temple churches in Kikuyu Township were interviewed. This was the most suited place as the authors had had some contact with the members from these churches for a period of time in the past and the Overseer of these churches and so it was easy to reach the parents who had children in boarding primary schools.

The study examined a population set drawn from the selected churches of Calvary Temple in Kikuyu Township. Parents with children in the boarding school, and those whose children had completed their primary school course but had gone through boarding schools were interviewed. The study was carried out in 4 different congregations of Calvary Temple. The total number of parents in the four churches was 500. However, the parents who had children or who had had children in boarding school were approximately 200. These were parents in the four different churches which are under Calvary Temple in Kikuyu Township. This meant that the population in each church was approximately 50 parents.

Purposive sampling technique was used for the study. The respondents (five parents) were purposefully selected from each of the four churches. In total, 20 parents were interviewed. According to Gorden [12], “interviews provide a rich and detailed description of the human experience” (p. 61).

Data analysis was done using a Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and findings presented in form of graphs, tables, frequencies and percentages. Data from interviews were transcribed and reported according to specific themes.

RESULTS

In order to establish the challenges parents face in parenting their boarding school children, authors examined the difference between parenting children in boarding school and those in day schools; behavioural changes for boarding school children and challenges that parents go through in parenting such children.

Difference in Parenting a Boarding School Child from a Day School Child

It was necessary to examine how parenting these two groups of children differed. This aimed at eliciting aspects that bothered parents with regard to children in boarding schools, vis a vis children in day schools. Respondents were asked if parenting a child who is in boarding school is different from other forms of parenting. The results of the findings are presented in table 1.

Table1: The difference between parenting boarding school children and other forms of parenting

| Differences of parenting in boarding | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Bonding time is less | 7 | 35% |
| Makes parents' responsibility lighter | 4 | 20% |
| Monitoring is dismal | 3 | 15% |
| Peer influence | 2 | 10% |
| Discipline is instilled | 2 | 10% |
| Cost is high | 1 | 5% |
| No difference | 1 | 5% |
| Total | 20 | 100% |

Source: Author (2016)

At least (35%) of the respondents agreed that parenting a child who is in boarding school is different from other forms of parenting because the bonding time with the child is less. The respondents claimed that when the children are away for too long, the time of separation denies the parents sufficient time for parenting them. The respondents pointed out that separation with the child denies the parent quality time to nurture, care and mould the child at an early stage.

Some parents (20%) opined that parenting a child who is in boarding school makes their responsibilities lighter. The respondents claimed that in boarding school, children are well taken care of, they get feedback from the caretakers, have the opportunity to put into context the child's experiences in boarding school and that they pay attention to their children when they return home during holiday breaks.

It was found out that parenting a child who is in boarding school is different from other forms of parenting because monitoring the child is dismal. This is evidenced by 15% of the respondents who consented to that. The respondents pointed out that the parent is not able to monitor the child's character on a daily basis since child growth takes place almost daily.

Peer influence was the other aspect was responded to. This aspect had (10%) of the respondents claiming that parenting a child who is in boarding school exposes the child to be negatively influenced by the peers. They added that children in boarding schools compare and compete with each other on social status, hence putting pressure on their parents by demanding items and treatment of a higher status than what their parents can afford.

Only (10%) of the respondents thought that parenting in a boarding school helps in instilling discipline. The respondents pointed out that their children had become better in terms of discipline since they were taken to the boarding school. They said that their children had become self-driven. However, (90%) of the parents thought otherwise; that parenting a child in boarding school does not guarantee discipline in the child.

Only one of the respondents supported the fact that parenting a child in boarding school is more expensive than in day school. Even though this percentage (5%) cannot be used to conclude that parenting in boarding school is more expensive, it sheds some light on what could bar some parents from sending their children to boarding schools. Again, and more importantly, it shows some aspects in parenting boarding school children that differ from parenting day scholars.

Behaviour Change Because of Boarding School

Behavioural change was another aspect that needed to be examined in attempting to unveil the challenges of parenting children in boarding schools. Respondents were asked whether they noticed a change of behaviour in the children as a result of being in boarding school, both on positive and negative notes. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Change of behaviour as a result of being in boarding school

| Change of behaviour | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Become more responsible | 5 | 25% |
| Better disciplined | 3 | 15% |
| Character formation | 3 | 15% |
| Emotionally affected | 3 | 15% |
| Self-esteem improved | 2 | 10% |
| Negative peer influence | 2 | 10% |
| Dropped spiritually | 1 | 5% |
| Total | 20 | 100% |

Source: Author (2016)

Only 5 (25%) of the parents mentioned that their children have become more responsible as a result of being in boarding school. The respondents pointed out that the children became better organized, mature and more responsible in the way they behaved. The percentage presented is a clear indication that 75% of the parents think otherwise and have not seen any change in behaviour as pertains their children's responsibility because of being in a boarding school. However, 15% of respondents consented that they noted a change of behaviour in their child who became better disciplined. The respondents claimed that their children had improved in behaviour, become morally upright. However, in relation to behaviour change related to character formation of a child, 15% of the respondents consented that children were better exposed to great character formation in boarding schools. The respondents mentioned that their children were able to make their personal decisions and had portrayed a mature mentality. This was seen as a positive contribution boarding schools had on children.

Equally, 15% of the respondents claimed that boarding school affects the emotion of children. The respondents said that their children in boarding school prefer to keep matters to

themselves in privacy and even seek solutions solely. They further pointed out that the children become stressed because of pressure to perform better and attain higher grades. One respondent reported: “My child felt abandoned in the first few months. She hated it all, being away from home, she was emotionally affected while in boarding school” (R₀₀₃- Personal Communication, 2016). Contrariwise, 10% of the respondents indicated that child’s self-esteem was improved while in boarding school. In this regard, the respondents mentioned that personal confidence is formed in boarding school and explained that the child is able to express himself/herself better, socialize better and learn to choose good friends.

However, a few (10%) of the respondents claimed that their children developed a negative attitude in life because of the negative peer influence in boarding school. One respondent mentioned that, “I noticed love messages on my son’s phone; this was a clear indication that he was already influenced by his peers in a negative way” (R₀₀₆Personal Communication, 2016). The respondents mentioned that their children went through hard times to cope with negative behaviour from the peers in school. Only 1(5%) of the respondents claimed that the children had dropped spiritually because of boarding school. The respondent argued that, “My child no longer had the zeal for the things of God such as attending church services and reading the Bible since he attended boarding school” (R₀₀₄Personal Communication, 2016). The respondents said that the boarding school did not put much effort to teach the children spirituality.

Disadvantages of Boarding School

After knowing how parenting boarding school children differed from parenting day scholars and how behaviour changed when children learn in boarding schools, it was necessary to examine the disadvantages of parenting their children in boarding schools as it posed challenges to the parenting process. The respondents pointed out some of the disadvantages of boarding school on their parenting role. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Disadvantages of boarding school

| Disadvantages of boarding school | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Bonding time is less | 6 | 30% |
| Responsibility in underage | 2 | 10% |
| Negative influence from peers | 2 | 10% |
| Cost is high | 2 | 10% |
| Drop in academic performance | 1 | 5% |
| Spiritual side affected | 1 | 5% |
| Poor feeding | 1 | 5% |
| Bullying by other students | 1 | 5% |
| Poor medical attention | 1 | 5% |
| Irresponsible care takers | 1 | 5% |
| Discipline is low | 1 | 5% |
| Child experiences home sickness | 1 | 5% |
| Total | 20 | 100% |

Source: Author (2016)

Out of the 20 respondents, 6 (30%) of them agreed that the bonding time with the child in boarding school is less. The respondents mentioned that the child is denied time for parental love and participation in the family affairs while the parent has no time to play their parental role thus has no opportunity to discover negative behaviour of the child on time.

The respondents further said that boarding school creates separation between parents and children. One respondent said that, “Separation creates a big gap with family members; our youngest child considers our first born a stranger in the family who visits only during holidays”

(R004Personal Communication, 2016). This has an implication on family togetherness and leads to weak ties between members of the family.

Some (10%) of the respondents argued that boarding school mounts much responsibility to the children who are still underage. The respondents mentioned that children in boarding school suffer a lot of pressure from parents to perform higher; the children on the other hand suffer too much academic concentration hence they become stressed up.

Another disadvantage of boarding school as supported by (10%) of the respondents was that children suffer negative influence from peers. The respondents mentioned that children are forced to learn bad behaviour from their friends which in turn destroys their good moral values. The respondents also mentioned that children who have been negatively influenced pressurize their parents to provide them with things they want other than needs when they go back home such as demands to watch movies and smart phones, among others.

High cost was also attributed to maintaining children in boarding school as (10%) of the respondents claimed that boarding school is very expensive. One of the respondents said that, "I pay a lot of money every month for my son who is in boarding school. At times I am forced to take a loan from the bank to meet the financial demands of the school" (R008Personal Communication, 2016).

Academic performance is one major aspect to measure in school and while some parents prefer boarding school to boost their children's academic performance, 5% of them in this study said that when children go to boarding school, they drop in academic performance. The respondents argued that the condition of the boarding school in most occasions is not favourable to the child. This in turn affects academic performance of the child. On the other hand, some (5%) of the respondents argued that the spiritual side of the child is affected when they are taken to boarding school. The respondents pointed out that children may lose family values especially spiritual values.

One respondent said that the child while in boarding school lacks proper feeding because of poor diet of the school meal programmes. The implication here is poor health of children whose growth rate is still high and needs proper food supplements to enhance growth and development. Immunity too can be affected leading to continuous and recurrent illnesses that required hospitalisation in severe conditions, thus attracting financial challenges as discussed earlier. Where there are financial constraints, poor medication becomes the end result. This may happen at home or at school as one (5%) of the respondents mentioned that there is poor medical attention in boarding school. Evidently, the whole issue of medication becomes a stumbling block to academic performance as ill students stay away from school while under medication.

Only 1 (5%) of the respondents argued that bullying may occur in boarding school by the older children. The respondent reported that children were bullied during the first years of joining the boarding school. As such, distress sets in disturbing the whole learning process. It also ignites issues of superiority and inferiority complexes. When one feels inferior, confidence is drastically interfered with leading to situations where children fear to express themselves in public or even when with their parents. Some may choose to be introverted and, in most cases, they may not express their problems. Instead, they may choose to seek solutions by themselves or among the peers. Thus, they may end up getting inappropriate solutions.

One (5%) of the respondent claimed that there are irresponsible care takers in boarding who may sometimes mistreat or mishandle the child. If the care takers are not keen in handling juveniles at school, behavioural issues arise. For instance, when the care takers are partial in treatment, gender insensitive or too strict, issues of rejection and hatred come up. These affects the general behaviour of the child, thus indiscipline cases.

One (5%) of the respondents claimed that discipline is low in boarding school. The respondents argued that teachers concentrate more on academics than discipline issues. In light of the heavy responsibility at boarding schools, that would otherwise be done by parents, teachers have been overwhelmed. Thus, they tend to give more attention to the academic achievement other than discipline. Little do they know that for a good performance, discipline among students is central and ought to be given proper attention by both teachers and parents. Parents seem to have delegated their role in discipline management to teachers which should not be the case.

Lastly, homesickness affects early age children in boarding schools. One (5%) of the respondents claimed that a child in boarding school becomes desirous to be home; in most cases the child feels lonely. Most of the children are taken to boarding school at an early age which separates the child from the parents at the time when they have to be in school thus missing their parents. According to the respondent, homesickness was identified as debilitating to children's capacity to flourish socially, emotionally and academically whilst at boarding school.

DISCUSSION

The elements of parenting children in boarding school revealed make it different from parenting children who are in day school. Thus, a significant difference was established. However, there was one parent who thought parenting in boarding school is not of any difference with the other forms of parenting. This was supported by her opinion that just like parents, school caretakers do that which a parent would have done thus plays the parental role well.

Again, the study noted a change of behaviour of children as a result of being in a boarding school. According to the findings, some respondents indicated that the child in boarding school becomes more responsible. It is reported that children became disciplined and developed in character while in boarding school. Self-esteem of the children was also said to improve in boarding school. However, child's behaviour was negatively affected. The study found out that children in boarding school had a negative peer influence, emotionally affected and had dropped spiritually. According to Lafrance and Collins [13]:

Those who attended residential schools report that the residential experiences were extremely painful and avoid introspection of this highly emotionally burdensome and damaging experience. Others who did not attend are indirectly affected because they cannot understand why an educational experience should leave such bitter emotional scars (p. 106).

Further, boarding school was found to have some shortcomings. One of them is less bonding time between the parent and the child. The study showed that separation between the parent and child has a negative effect to the both parties. According to Lafrance and Collins [13]:

The practice of separating children from their parents and their way of life had a drastic impact on almost all Aboriginal families. The structural, cohesion and quality of family life suffered. Parenting skills diminished as succeeding generations became more and more institutionalized and experienced little nurturing (p. 106).

According to Walker, Colvin and Ramsey [14], “the parent-child contact is the important thing and the activity chosen is usually incidental to the time spent together and the positive interactions that occur” (p. 299). Okorodudu [15] has noted that, “...parents spend little or no time at home to assist in the upbringing of the children. The children invariably fall into evil association” (p. 63).

Setting high responsibility among underage was also identified as another disadvantage of boarding school. Negative peer influence, high cost, drop in academic performance, drop in spiritual life, poor feeding, poor medical attention, irresponsible care takers, low discipline and the child becoming nostalgic are other disadvantages identified. Unger [16] argues that, “Extracting small children from their parents...and keeping them away from their influence, caused parents and children to become strangers to each other” (p. 16). According to Okorodudu [15], “The incidence of parental separation may result in adolescents’ embarrassment, depression and even make them miss school, perform poorly academically and participate in delinquent behaviours” (p. 62).

The study also established bullying as another disadvantage of boarding school. According to Walker et al. [14], “Bullying is a form of highly aggressive behaviour that involves coercion, intimidation, and threats to one’s safety or well-being” (p. 189) while Walton and Goddard [20] define bullying as, “a form of poor behaviour that causes particular unhappiness and disruption to the learning of individual pupils” (p. 44). They argue that, “Bullying can involve one-on-one situations but more often involves intimidation of a single individual by a hostile group of peers” (p. 189). According to Walton and Goddard [17], “Anyone can experience bullying, but there is evidence that some groups, including disabled children and looked-after children, are more likely to be bullied than others” (p. 44). Walker et al. [14] (p. 190) suggest that, “High rates of bullying in a school are often a precursor to violence and should be a red-flag indicator that immediate and drastic actions need to be taken to reduce them”.

Regarding irresponsible care givers, Yue, Yaojiang, Fang, Chu and Huan [18] argue that, “. . .school personnel are poorly trained in boarding school management and lack sufficient time to provide care and support to boarding students-especially for ones as young as those in elementary school” (p. 524).

CONCLUSION

Parenting children in boarding and day schools differs in various ways. Thus, they are never the same as supported by the evidence in the previous section. Behaviours too may change when one changes school from day school to boarding. This implies that boarding school has an impact on behaviours of children. The negative changes in behaviours pose a challenge to parenting in that being away from parents, it is easy to indulge in unbecoming ways as a result of environmental influence and lack of close monitoring. Parents recognized that parenting a child in boarding school is challenging. They risk their children in boarding school to poor feeding, poor medical attention, irresponsible care takers and bullying by older children. Sending children to boarding school also places financial burden on parents while homesickness is experienced by some children, frustrating the child’s capacity to flourish socially, emotionally and academically while at boarding school. Concern was also revealed regarding academic pressure being linked to high parents’ expectation. The findings showed that children taken to boarding school for the first time dipped in their academic performance, yet their parents expected them to perform highly. Parents felt that their children were pressurized to perform better regardless of their weakness. All these issues imply negatively on parenting as there is little time for parents to monitor their children’s behaviour and guide through.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the challenges in parenting a child in boarding school, this paper proposes nine ways to improve parent-child relationships. They include: parents to spend more time with their children, regularly visit their children in school, close monitoring of behavioural changes by teachers, positive parenting techniques, spiritual support, financial support, parents discuss discipline related topics when with their children, and encourage open communication with the children.

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