

Article submission

Author : Frederic Fovet, LLB (London), LLM (Cantab), MPhil (Cantab), Headmaster, Collège Northside, Quebec.

Title: ADHD teenagers and the crucial role of boarding staff.

Every year I am astonished at the number of applications I receive from teenagers being asked to leave public schools at age 16. College Northside is a small, congenial environment with a 1:1 student staff ratio and that such students should come knocking at our doors is not in itself astonishing. What surprises me each year is that ADHD children, having been correctly diagnosed years before and having received adequate support at prep school and early on in secondary education, should suddenly find themselves alone, without support and misunderstood as the pressure GCSEs and Sixth Form entry approach.

Much is now known about ADHD in early childhood and most boarding schools adequately assess students thought to be too easily distracted or hyperactive. I have always found the most sound educational reports to have been produced, in the case of most students, when they were a mere 8-10 years old. Often ritalin has been prescribed, parents briefed adequately and a special needs teacher been involved. The situation seems, in most cases, to have greatly improved, with the support available, by Fifth Form. Suddenly though hormones surge and incidents re-appear: not just distraction and hyperactivity this time but also a set of specific behavioural traits that suddenly make the ADHD Fifth Former unmanageable, ill-equipped to deal with the demands of boarding school and unpopular amongst staff and peers: rowdiness and non-compliant behaviour, clashes with authority figures, chronic lying, absence of veto process over rude and inappropriate language, and also petty criminality: substance abuse, kleptomania, pyromania and eventually – if unresolved – systematic thrill seeking through rule breaking; each “symptom” listed above being traditionally, in the public school system, a ground not just for suspension but also for expulsion.

What complicates matters is that the ADHD teenager typically shelters behind a protective “bubble” of self-justification: “I am right and others are being unfair”, “I didn’t do anything to cause such reactions”, eventually leading to the classic “I don’t understand and I don’t care”. The only informed way forward here is “ADHD mentoring” but by this stage, in the usual scenario, the boarding school or the house has lost the child, leaving him/ her helpless and without options, parents and housemaster equally stunned at the extent of the damage and the speed at which it has occurred. Usually all remain clueless as to what to do next and all usual assume there some “fault” in the child, a moral one (weak character, laziness, depression) and one that had never become apparent till adolescence, some shortcoming that is inherent. No readily

available option is available here to maintain that child on the education path. What indeed is a child who has boarded all his/ her life meant to do if he/ she is asked to leave after GCSEs? Specialised schools, like Northside, ready to confront special needs within a boarding environment, are rare and far between. They are also, in essence, tiny and unable to cope with the massive demand which has appeared in the UK.

And yet, it is often, right in the boarding environment itself that lies the ADHD teenager's salvation. What we need is more specialised staff in boarding schools and a generally more informed boarding staff but those children rightfully need to remain in the boarding environment for it is the space for growth the most suited to their needs. Boarding schools offer, however counter-intuitive this may sound, the most adapted recipe to deal with the ADHD related symptoms we listed above and they must fully realise their potential in this area for they have available all essential cures to the problem at hand: close support and presence, 24/ 7 structure and intense sport. If, rather than feeling inadequate and helpless, boarding staff were widely and generally informed and took enough distance to recognize the universality of the symptoms they are often faced with when dealing with ADHD teenagers, a support system could be quickly and efficiently created, allowing more perspective and an opportunity to move away from character: "this is a bad kid" to a more productive "This is a kid who needs specific help". Results are often tangible within an even small timeframe, once this dangerous and crucial corner has been turned and the teenager quickly becomes more soundly grounded in his boarding environment rather than alienated.

This is help and assistance most boarding-houses are well equipped to offer. A housemaster, close to the child but having more emotional distance than the parent, for example, is the ideal candidate to become a "mentor" to the ADHD teenager at this critical juncture: he can allow him/her to break away from the self-justifying isolation and help him/her attain a progressive yet realistic appreciation as to how his/her behaviour affects others and must be moderated. Through the trusted vision of oneself offered by the mentor, the child learns to gauge his/ her behaviour and its effects and manage it more effectively.

The sports oriented world of the boarding school also offers the ideal and much required outlet for the ADHD teenager: the daily and intensive "burning" of energy through sport and exercise is the key tool in helping the ADHD teenager. Results are immediate and usually lead to a radical improvement of attention in class and academic performance. It is of such vital importance and direct impact that a school like Northside has made a policy of taking students into the Canadian wilderness two full days a week, through the year, and results are notable. Imagine now the total disarray and despair of a hyperactive child who is told to leave his boarding school and move back home to an urban environment! It is often the final act that breaks the kid's soul and disrupts his/her emotional growth for many years. The renowned ADHD world specialist, Dr Hallowell, often points to the John Irving anecdote. This high school "drop out" had been unable to handle the routines of school and the demands of academia and the only thing that had motivated this low achiever at school, a boarding school in Connecticut I may add, had been the enthusiasm and drive of his wrestling coach: he went on to become, as you well

know, an author of world fame. It is often the coach, the sports teacher, the Head of Games that becomes the driving force, the motivator that rebuilds those kids' self-esteem and shows them they can perform and deliver like the rest of them. The sports teacher or coach may well have to diversify the sports on offer; he may have to challenge the child by seeking new and innovative ideas outside the traditional school set-up of cricket, rugby etc. He won't have to look too far though, typically, before he "connects" with the child and relights a spark in his or her eyes. At Northside we have had huge success with skiing, but also rock-climbing, and kayaking. The ADHD child often likes a sports he/she can practice alone and excel at; and with a little coaching and encouragement, the sky is the limit. This connection between the sports coach and the ADHD student – which is so predominant in British public schools – is the number one tool towards success and the resolution of the adolescent crisis.

The final characteristic of the ADHD teenager is that he /she will systematically move away from the support of home and create rifts with his home life and in his relationship with parental figures. This is a difficult stage for any teenager but it becomes excruciatingly delicate and intricate in the case of ADHD students, particularly with regards to the issues of lying, impulse control – or lack thereof – and the mild Tourette's like utterance which are so common when it comes to inappropriate sexual remarks with third parties or feelings of anger towards parents. Parents quickly become alienated, threatened and scared and eventually build defence mechanism that the teenager will be unable to overcome. Only the dedicated pedagogue, the well informed boarding staff, matron or housemaster will be able to "deconstruct" these behavioural issues and show the parents how these difficulties fall under wider, more general and universal symptoms and diagnosis. This is when the specialist teacher or boarding staff member must step in and be able to direct the parent towards books, website and other reference material. There is nothing more reassuring to a worried parent than to read the accounts of others just like them who have experienced those very same problems. It puts an immediate end to the fear and the feeling of utter loss they usually find themselves in. Suddenly the emotional status quo is broken, the connection and trust re-established between child, parent and school staff. I have often been told by parents of ADHD teenagers that I knew their child better than they did. I have always made sure I used this knowledge to re-introduce their child back to them in a different light, one that would be more useful in guiding them, and I have always made sure that I shared my understanding to give them greater insight.

Too often the parents of ADHD children have been led to think that quick and early diagnosis at prep school had eliminated the issue of ADHD for good. ADHD is cyclical and the diagnosis will reappear regularly in an individual's life affecting in turn different stages of his/ her growth. It is never "solved" and it must never be thought as such, at the risk of creating more damage later. It will be the cause of different issues at different ages and give rise to a varying number of behavioural problems. The grounded and well adjusted ADHDer is ready for this and manages the issues, as they arise, in full self-knowledge and a clear understanding of his condition and the way his/ her brain works; the receptive parent must be equally informed and calm; the greatest boarding staff will be resourceful, loving and inspiring and pinpoint to the child the features of the boarding

environment that will assist him/ her towards a smooth transition to Sixth Form and the world of adults. Here definitely lies the greatest Special Needs challenge of boarding schools this decade.

Frederic Fovet is the Headmaster and co-founder of Collège Northside, an experimental British Boarding school based in Quebec.