



No turning back

The tuck box is packed, the uniform pressed and your child safely delivered to their new boarding school. So what now?

Carolynne Dear speaks to the parents left behind.



After months of preparation, the time has finally come. Boarding school beckons and that final goodbye is imminent.

"I know it was the right thing to do," says mum-of-two Sam, who has just dropped her first-born at a well-reputed school in England's leafy south west. "I just can't believe he's gone. After years of dreaming of some peace and quiet, the silence has turned out to be deafening."

Having successfully manoeuvred her brood through three international moves and four school changes over the last thirteen years, one more move, this time from Hong Kong to Canada, pushed the family into deciding to put their children into boarding school. An expat and boarding school child herself, Sam is confident of her decision, but that did nothing to ease the emotion of waving goodbye.

"Seb took one look at the rugby fields, the cricket pitch, the boarding house, and that was it, he couldn't wait to move in. And now his younger brother is counting down the days until it's his turn,"

she smiles sadly. "It's good the boys are so positive, but it leaves me feeling very empty."

Justine Campbell, family counsellor and director of Mindquest Group, admits her waiting room is bustling with "boarding school mums" come autumn.

"Parents are kept so busy during the lead-up, the reality of what has happened usually hits home a few weeks after the departure," she explains. "Most parents will already have spent a fairly emotional year just getting the kids into their school of choice in the first place, so a degree of fatigue will also be setting in. The primary caregiver, usually the mother, is often the hardest hit emotionally when a child leaves home," she adds.

"I held it together right up until the bit where it was the last goodbye, the final hug," remembers mum-of-three Catherine. "I was desperately holding the tears back so Charlotte's last memory wouldn't be of her blubbing mum, but when I reached the airport later that afternoon and the check-in staff asked "are you flying alone?" it all came out. I was such a mess the girl on the desk ended up giving me an upgrade!"

One mother who wished to remain anonymous experienced severe depression in the six months leading up to her son's departure. "He wanted to go back to his former school," she explains. "I was extremely upset by his decision. I didn't want to socialise, I lost weight, it hit me so hard. Although I would say, for me, the reality of him being away has actually been easier than the lead-up."

Just as parents react differently to the situation, children can too. It's also not unusual for kids who have been begging to go to boarding school to suddenly do an about face when they get there.

"There is no "cookie cutter" response, all emotions are valid," says Campbell. "For parents to experience a sense of guilt is a common reaction, but not always the case. It's when these emotions don't move along, and you find yourself overloaded, that's when you should be reaching out for help - you need to be able to process what you're feeling."

Campbell encourages women to talk. "Whether it's to a trusted friend - someone you know who will step up and support you

- or a professional, you must open up. I see so many women in this sort of "grey zone", exhausted from flying backwards and forwards for exeat weekends and so forth, and trying to juggle that with family demands back in Hong Kong.

"Contact the school secretary to find out if there are other Hong Kong families within the school; get on a social Facebook site in Hong Kong to establish connections with other boarding school parents - it's ok to admit you're not coping and to seek help from others. Maybe another mum would be happy to take your child out for the weekend if you're struggling to fly back?"

"Actually the mechanics have been a bit tricky," admits Catherine. "I had just dropped my daughter back at school in Sydney and returned to Hong Kong when her teacher emailed to say she was being presented with a major award the following week. There was no way I could fly back so quickly as my two other children were just about to go back to school here, so I had to scramble to contact one of her friend's to take a picture for me."

Campbell advises parents reach out to the school or school community in advance. "Speak to the house master or mistress, or

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I opened my inbox to the heart-stopping one-liner: "Worst day ever!"

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whoever it is that deals with pastoral care. They will have seen many international students pass through their door and will understand your concerns. Explain that you need somebody to take pictures for you at school events - no doubt many parents will step forward if you reach out. The school will also probably have some kind of photo library itself.

“Also, think about festivals, such as birthdays, in advance and again, speak to the boarding master. For my own son’s birthday, the master was entirely receptive to me ordering a cake and some pizza for his house as we had discussed it all beforehand.”

A good relationship with the school is also important for when problems arise. Campbell explains how her son once emailed with the heart-stopping one-liner: “Worst day ever!”

“It arrived at 8am Hong Kong time, which meant I needed to deal with it immediately or spend the whole day worrying while he went to bed for the night. The email exchanges went on for a bit, with him refusing to explain what the issue was. In the end I contacted his boarding master, who agreed to speak with him. It turned out he’d misplaced a cheque I had sent to pay for an excursion, and was worried about my reaction. Because I had a good working relationship with the house master the problem was nipped in the bud,” she says.

Communications, and how these are to be managed, should also be talked about before the child leaves.

“Things to consider include the time difference, school rules and how much the

“ There is no cookie cutter response. Maybe siblings are just happy to be rid of their annoying older brother. ”

child will be able to manage given that they are going to be busy at their new school. You may want an email a day, but that might not be achievable. Also bear in mind that school rules and the time difference may mean that siblings get little chance to communicate during term time,” says Campbell.

Managing the family back in Hong Kong can also be a challenge. Elisha, who has two



Busy school days mean communications may not be as regular as you'd like.

sons in boarding school and a seven-year-old daughter in Hong Kong, says she has experienced challenging behaviour from her daughter. “I’m not sure whether to ignore it, or whether to address it somehow,” she admits.

“Again, all emotions are normal,” says Campbell. “And again, the key is communication. Every family member will be experiencing differing emotions, and every emotion is valid. It’s possible a younger child is just happy to have lost their annoying older brother. Or maybe they were really close. Whatever the situation, offer siblings the opportunity to open up.”

She also encourages families to “move on” without feeling guilty. “We live in Hong Kong where rent is sky high, so it’s perfectly acceptable to want to shuffle living arrangements around once the child has gone.”

“Charlotte had the biggest bedroom in the apartment, with an ensuite,” admits Catherine. “My husband was keen we offer it to her brother, but I was scared stiff of her feeling pushed out.”

Campbell agrees that common sense wins the day here. “Think about it logically - how often will the child actually be in Hong Kong once you’ve factored in family holidays? Then sit down and talk to them - if they’re big enough to be involved with the decision about going to boarding school, they’re big enough to talk about bedroom allocations

at home. Just make sure they are included in discussions as they too may be trying to process mixed emotions.”

Elisha admits that a house move - unrelated to the departure for boarding school last year - has been a blessing. “It means we’re living in a house with no memories, so I don’t have to keep walking past empty bedrooms reminiscing. It’s also kept me busy - I admit the first month or so after term began I spent a good deal of time “nesting”, sorting out my cupboards and so on,” she says.

While Campbell recommends keeping busy in those first few weeks, she also advises against jumping into time-consuming projects too quickly. “Give yourself time to sort your emotions out. Often if you embark on something too big too soon, all you’re doing is papering over your feelings,” she says.

“At the end of the day, I think you just need to trust your child,” says Catherine. “Be confident that you’ve raised them well. And when they do come home, it’s all positive - the school has done all the nagging for a change! The anticipation of seeing my daughter each holiday is like having several Christmases a year.”

If you have concerns about anything raised in this article, contact Justine Campbell at Mindquest Group, mindquestgroup.com.