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THE INDEPENDENT

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Boarding school is a form of child abuse, says psychotherapist

By Sophie Goodchild and Sarah Rowsell

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Children who are sent away by their parents to boarding school risk severe psychological damage, according to a leading psychotherapist. So bad is the problem that Nick Duffell, who has counselled former boarding school pupils, has now set up a support group.

Boarding School Survivors (BSS) will run workshops for sufferers of "boarding school syndrome" whose symptoms include a hatred of the opposite sex, intimacy problems and obsession with work.

This week, Mr Duffell will tell a health conference in London that boarders cope with the trauma of separation from their families in the same way as victims of child sexual abuse do, by burying their emotions so they are unable to form fulfilling relationships as adults. Successive writers including George Orwell and Evelyn Waugh have portrayed boarding school life as being filled with freezing showers and cold porridge. But J K Rowling has helped to fuel a recent increase in inquiries from parents of prospective pupils through the cosy picture she presents in her Harry Potter books.

This is an alien image to boarding school "survivors". James, 40, has spent the past two years in therapy to help him to come to terms with the trauma he suffered after being sent to boarding school at the age of eight. Bullied and sexually abused by pupils as well as the school doctor, the computer technician said he is still unsure about his sexuality as a result of his experiences and has nightmares about school.

"My parents would not allow me to take my teddy bear with me and even now I can't walk into a toy shop and look at bears without getting upset," he said. "There was this conspiracy about not showing emotions, not crying." Many schools still accept boarders as young as five but Mr Duffell said children should not be sent away before puberty. "Boarding school pupils have to develop strategic survival strategies," the former boarding school pupil added. "Children develop a false self which is brittle but outwardly confident. As a result, we are breeding emotionally constipated people."

However, some mental health experts think the case against boarding schools is unproven. Peter Wilson is the head of a young people's mental health charity called Young Minds. "There are casualties but there are casualties in other schools as well," he said. "Boarding schools have a responsibility to be aware of those who struggle but some young people positively thrive on it."

The Independent Schools Council which represents more than 1,000 private schools in Britain said great efforts had been made to improve the relationship between adults and children in boarding schools. "The people seeking help are those who have gone through bad experiences a long time ago boarding schools have changed enormously since then," said Dick Davison, a spokesman.