

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO BOARDING SCHOOL PREPAREDNESS

It doesn't seem possible that 22 years have passed since my parents dropped me off at Black Forest Academy, a boarding school for missionaries' kids in Germany. I was entering 9th grade at the time, and I was scared beyond what I could possibly articulate. Yet moving to a new place filled with strangers wasn't as frightening to me as having to say imminent goodbyes to my parents. I was struck with an almost physical agony as the moment approached.

As an alumna and staff member of Black Forest Academy, I've lived the first day of school both as a participant and as a spectator. No separation is easy. Because of the nature of the missionary life, many MKs have said more difficult goodbyes by the time they enter BFA than an American might say in a lifetime. That doesn't mean they're any better at it, and it doesn't mean it's any easier. They've also had to adapt to new cultures and customs, but that doesn't ensure that their adaptation to a boarding school will go smoothly. During my thirteen years on staff, I've had a front-row seat in the experiences of BFA's students, and I'd like to take this opportunity to share with you some of what I've observed. It might not all apply to your situation or to your child, but you might find some help or comfort in the lessons we can learn from others.

DON'T ASSUME ANYTHING

One of the principles I've witnessed during my years working in Storchenblick dorm is that students who are at BFA because they *want* to be there fare far better than those who feel they *have* to be here.

When my brother first heard about BFA through the MK grapevine, he immediately knew this was his "dream school". He pled with my parents to let him apply and finally started in 10th grade. Though there were obvious adjustments he had to make, he absolutely loved dorm life and all the extra-curricular activities the school provided. I, on the other hand, didn't want to go to BFA. The thought of leaving my comfort zone, a Bible school community just north of Paris, caused deep anxiety and depression in the months preceding and following my move to Germany. I clearly remember the knotted stomach and emotional turmoil that kept me awake nearly every night. The clearest memory I have of my first days at BFA is standing at my window watching the taillights of my parents' car disappear around the corner. All I wanted to do was lock the door, crawl into a corner, and not emerge until the end of the year. I felt abandoned, stranded, and paralyzed by fear.

It is important to note that my parents never knew how strongly I felt. The arguments they had presented had been convincing and, out of a desire to please them and obey them, I had consented to attending BFA despite the cold fear that overwhelmed me every

time I thought of leaving home. Each year, I speak with students whose presence at BFA is equally painful or traumatic. When I ask them why they came, their answers are similar: they didn't want to hurt their parents' feelings, they didn't think they had a right to say no, or they didn't want to appear too dependent on their parents. None of the students who came against their wishes thrived at BFA, at least during the first year of their experience.

My first suggestion to you is that you ascertain your child's true feelings about attending BFA *before* you explain your reasoning for wanting them to apply. The general rule should be that you not force them to attend unless they express a desire to. Some circumstances might require that your children attend here whether they want to or not, but if that can be avoided, it will be in the best interest of your child and your family.

If your child doesn't know enough about BFA to form an opinion, you might want to take a trip to Kandern before you come to any conclusions in order to introduce your family to the geographical, educational, and social context of the school. You'll all be able to make more educated decisions if you've seen BFA and interacted with its staff and students.

A word of caution: some of the students who have had the worst experiences at BFA are those who came from families already weakened by the stress, exhaustion, and preoccupation of ministry work. Though a large percentage of healthy families find their bonds solidified and their communication deepened by the BFA experience, rare are the instances when a family that was already wounded was strengthened during the separation. I strongly encourage you to find healing within your family, with all the communication and effort that implies, before sending your child to boarding school. The window of opportunity might close once you no longer live full-time under the same roof.

PREPARE THOROUGHLY

Once your family has made the decision to send a child to BFA, it is important that you all begin the preparation process to ensure that each member of the family is ready for the boarding school experience. Again, one of the first steps you might consider taking is acquainting yourself personally with the school and its environs. If your child can visit the school, sit in on classes, have a meal at a dorm, and converse with future classmates *before* he or she becomes a BFA student, the mental, emotional, and practical preparation will be much easier. Plan a trip to Germany months before your child is to begin. Have the school help you book a room overnight in Kandern. A visit is an effective way of reducing the "unknown" factor and decreasing some of the anxiety often associated with leaving home for the first time.

On a practical level, help your child with the packing process. Make sure special items like favorite pictures and posters make the trip to Germany with you. Those "security blankets" will be a source of comfort during the weeks of adaptation. While your child is

still at home, encourage time with friends and visits to cherished places. At the same time, to facilitate the transition from one world to the next, try to connect your child with other young people who have attended BFA or plan to attend in the future.

When your child has applied to BFA and been accepted, you'll receive a packet from the school that includes a Student Handbook. This can be a useful tool for discussions regarding the community life your child will be entering. You might want to read the handbook as a family and react to it together, making the list of rules and regulations less intimidating by lightening the reading. Put some thought into your child's strengths and weaknesses, and use the handbook to facilitate discussions about the challenges you foresee. Living in a dorm isn't always easy, particularly for a child who hasn't ever shared a room or had to blend personal life habits with the habits of others. The handbook will clearly outline what will be expected of your child in a school residence. Talk about caring for possessions (laundry, loaning clothes), keeping a room clean (room checks will happen weekly), doing grates (there will be daily and weekly chores), respecting curfews and accepting restrictions. Many students react strongly to a perceived loss of freedom when they enter the dorm, and others don't understand why curfews, chores, and meals are requirements. Take advance measures to minimize the adjustment life in a community will necessitate.

One of the key factors that determine whether a student will be content or unhappy is *communication*. It becomes critical well in advance of the beginning of the school year. Anything you can do to strengthen your family's bonds and communication skills will be a precious asset to your child at BFA. Knowing that one's parents are loving and supportive, always eager to listen and counsel, and constantly available will make the difference between a child who suffers alone, in silence, and a child who expresses his feelings, receives feedback from those he loves most, and is able to move forward.

During the months of preparation for your child's departure for BFA, take every opportunity to talk about your child's current and future life. Keep abreast of his/her emotions regarding leaving home. The more you can do to promote safe and honest communication *before* your child departs for BFA, the greater the chances of seeing your child thrive. Students who come as victims, because their parents don't have time for them or because caring for them impeded ministry, are the ones who struggle the most academically, socially, and spiritually at BFA. Those who come with the certainty that *nothing* is more important to their parents than their happiness and wellbeing are the ones who do well both in the dorm and at school.

BE THERE IN PERSON

When the time comes for your child's first day at BFA, the best thing you can do is *be there*. No matter how loudly or forcefully a student declares not to need parents, there are very few who don't look secretly comforted to have them there on the first day of school! Accompanying your child to Germany (even if just one of the parents) will allow you, again, to minimize the trauma of the experience. There will be list upon list of items

to buy, places to go, rules, guidelines, restrictions, and expectations. It can all feel overwhelming to young people who haven't yet experienced the positive sides of BFA: school spirit, class activities, dorm bonding, etc. You'll be able to explain what's confusing and to de-dramatize what feels upsetting.

Make sure you make the time to help your child get installed. Unpacking and setting up the dorm room can be a therapeutic activity for the more fearful students. Take a walk into town and explore a little. Ask the questions your child might not feel bold enough to ask. Familiarize yourself with the way the dorm functions and meet the young people who will be your child's friends for the year or years they spend at BFA. This will also allow you to ask more pertinent questions when you communicate with your child after you leave Germany.

One of the most important things you can do at the beginning of the school year is meet in person with the dorm parents in whose care you'll be leaving your child. With so many new students arriving every year, they will rely greatly on information you can provide about your child. Take the time to speak with them in private during your stay. Let them know about your child's strengths and weaknesses. Inform them of the challenges you foresee. Tell them about relevant past experiences and about any fears or concerns you or your child might have. Establish the type of communication with them that will allow you to email and call without qualms once you've returned home.

Most importantly, if you're able to accompany your child to Germany at the beginning of the school year, be an honest, supportive source of stability for him/her. The transition period is different for each student. Some are completely at ease in their new surroundings after just a few days. Others still aren't quite acclimated when they return after Christmas break. Whatever the rate of their adaptation, the worst time is often the days preceding the start of classes. If you can be there to lend your calm and courage, you'll be a tremendous source of comfort for your child.

SAY GOODBYE WELL

There is no such thing as painless goodbyes. Missionaries, of all people, know that! And saying goodbye to one's child is probably the worst of them. When my parents left BFA after dropping my brother and me off for the fall term, they drove only far enough to pull off the road, then sat in the car until their weeping had subsided. Every year, I watch other parents trying to control their emotions and mask their anxiety as they say final words to their son or embrace their daughter one last time before getting into their car and driving away. As painful as it is, the act of saying goodbye is a necessary and healthy way to close one stage of life and begin another. As such, it is critical that it be said correctly.

At the end of the opening ceremony on the day school begins, parents will be encouraged to say their final farewells before their children head off to classes. You'll only be given a few moments, and the crowded chaos will prevent anything intimate or meaningful

from happening. It's imperative that you begin saying your goodbyes well in advance of the "official" allotted time.

I encourage you to start the parting process in the weeks preceding your child's first day of school. You might want to take a family vacation on the way to Germany. In the days before the beginning of classes, find the right time to reiterate your love and devotion to your child in words he or she will carry into the tough days ahead. Make sure your child knows that your family is the most important part of your life. One of the worst memories of my time at BFA was when a shy young lady, tears streaming down her face after her parents' departure, whispered, "Well, at least they can get back to their work now." She had deduced from her parents' behavior that the trip to BFA to drop her off had been an ordeal that had taken them away from something more important than family.

Don't hesitate to show your emotions as you say goodbye. Your child will model his or her behavior after yours, and the last thing you want to be is a lesson in denial. It's important that your emotions, whatever they are, be appropriate and sincere. It is the only way of making a goodbye constructive.

COMMUNICATE AT ANY COST

Do you remember the young lady I mentioned in my previous point, whose parents had communicated with her that their work was more important than their children? Not surprisingly, this young lady's time at BFA was punctuated with crisis upon crisis. With little communication coming from her parents, she eventually developed peer relationships that compensated for the loss and finally reached the point where she asked her parents *not* to write or visit her anymore. She had built a new life for herself in which her parents had no role. Sending her to BFA might have simplified their ministry, but it had destroyed their family. I occasionally saw their daughter happy, but I never saw her joyful.

This young lady is thankfully the exception at BFA. For each sad experience, there are dozens of good ones in which family ties are actually strengthened and deepened because of the skills developed to compensate for distance. In healthy families, the separation creates a greater desire to know each other and relate to each other. Vacation times become intense days of sharing and cherishing. The family members become more expressive, more devoted, and more united.

Once you've left your child at BFA, it falls on you to make it a beneficial or detrimental experience for the family. When I mentioned earlier that open and safe communication needs to be established in the months preceding separation, it was because that's the basis on which all future communication will be built. If you've invested time and energy in learning how to draw information and honest emotion from your child, if you've earned the trust and respect necessary for true expression, you'll be able to naturally bridge the distance between Germany and the country in which you live.

Once your goodbyes have been said, *schedule* your communication. Your child will be so busy with schoolwork, dorm activities, and everything else that fills a BFAer's days that he or she might not feel the need or find the time to call home or write an email. Even if they appear to have no desire to initiate communication, it is critical that they still see you doing so. They should continue to feel connected to all members of the family—mother, father, and siblings. Some families have resorted to only one parent maintaining contact on a regular basis, and the relationship between the other parent and the child has suffered from it. Make the phone calls regular, not limited to a time when something noteworthy has happened. If you can't call, write emails frequently (multiple times per week) and encourage your other children to do the same.

BFA sends out regular communiqués at least twice a week to keep parents informed of the activities happening on campus. You can use these as a springboard for phone or email conversations. Ask them about the fall party. What did they dress up as? Who asked them to the Christmas banquet? What did they learn during spiritual emphasis week?

When you speak or write, be bold enough to ask “real” questions. I've seen so many students withhold information from their parents because they were afraid of hurting them, worrying them, or appearing too dependent on them. If you allow this pattern to develop in the first weeks of the school year, it will become the norm. In my experience, most students love to be asked deeper questions and don't shy away from answering if someone is bold enough to ask them. Whether you have a reason to suspect unhappiness or not, it's never a bad idea to say, “Are you doing okay today? You don't sound like yourself.” Ask your child about grades *before* the report cards come out. Show concern about the rooming situation—are the roommates getting along? Have they made new friends this week? What's the hardest thing about BFA so far? Are they finding time to have fun? Have they been spending time with God regularly? Have they made the basketball team? How did they do in the last soccer game?

Asking informed and personal questions will also help the units of the family to feel connected despite the distance. When times get harder, the students will know, from the questions you've asked in the past and the regularity of your contact, that you care. And if they've gotten into the habit of telling you about their daily lives, they'll be all the more likely to let you in on the struggles or challenges they're facing.

Some of BFA's parents live in countries where communication, either in writing or on the phone, needs to be limited or “coded”. If you plan in advance, using a network of friends and relatives, you'll still be able to have packages and letters delivered to BFA. If you saw the reaction of a dorm student receiving a package, you'd know it's a precious commodity indeed!

Two years ago, an exceptional young man graduated from BFA. He had been named MVP in two different sports, had been a lead actor in the school play, performed complex rhythmic numbers in four large community events, and had excelled academically as

well. During his four years at BFA, his parents had never attended one game, one performance, or one award ceremony—and they lived within a few hours' drive of BFA. As critical as phone and email communication is, there's nothing like witnessing your child's "big moments" in person. If it's at all possible, I encourage you to make a trip to BFA at some point during your child's scholarship in order to be here for a game, a ceremony, or a performance. There are affordable places to stay in local Bed & Breakfasts, and your child's joy (expressed or unexpressed!) at having a parent here for a significant event will be worth the investment.

IN CONCLUSION

Anyone who has been a parent or a student at the beginning of a BFA school year will attest that there is simply no easy way to make the transition. No matter how wonderful the school is, no matter how happy your child will be here, no matter how much you've talked and prayed about it, the act of leaving a child in a boarding school will entail painful adjustments on both sides. Yet if you have the certainty that you prepared thoroughly and said goodbye well, the inevitable pain of separation will not be compounded by the worry that you should have done things differently.

Please be assured that the staff and faculty of Black Forest Academy (or the boarding school you've chosen) stand by you as you prepare for this new phase of your family's life. If you have any questions or concerns regarding enrolling your child in a boarding school, contact the school and ask honest questions. If you'd like to discuss your specific circumstances directly with me, I'd be happy to communicate with you as well. Simply contact me. My information is in the "contact" page of this site.