
The Joy, Wonder and Promise of the Junior Boarding School

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Neighborhoods of human connection

In Robert Putnam's groundbreaking book at the turn of the millennium, *Bowling Alone*, his research indicates how we as an American society have become increasingly disconnected from each other—our family, friends, neighbors and social organizations such as our houses of worship, recreational clubs, political parties and school based groups like the PTA. Despite significant evidence from leading scholars and members of the psychiatric community that social bonds, that is connectivity, is the leading factor in developing happiness in life, we are increasingly losing our connections. Additionally, while this may not be a scientific gauge, take a look around your hometown area. Houses built prior to 1950 often came with a porch; a porch built in the front of the house where you could sit during your free time and stay connected to your neighbors whether with a wave, a kind word or an invitation to join you for lemonade. Homes built since 1950 often come with either a deck or patio, but in the back of the house, providing the occupants with privacy but separating them from their neighbors and the life of the neighborhood.

My own family history illustrates this point. My father and his numerous siblings grew up in the 1930s and '40s in a lovely neighborhood known as Mt. Carmel in Hamden, Connecticut. My grandparents' house had a front porch from which my grandmother and great aunt would manage the children (and grandchildren). As my uncles and aunts grew up they moved on to begin their families—one across the street, another next door and one just a short bike ride away—all in homes with front porches. My father, the baby of the group, was more adventurous; in the late 50s he moved to the next town in a new development into a house complete with a wonderful *back* porch. While I believe my brother and I enjoyed a healthy life

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and my father still happily lives in that house, the neighborhood lost its cohesiveness, its connection as families retreated to the seclusion of their back porches and tree lined yards. Also, from the 1950s through the 1990s our nation's economy has developed from a local/regional economy into a global economy. Moms and Dads trying to do what is best for their families—i.e. provide them with the best—have pursued jobs in different states and even countries from which they were raised.

Our communities are loosely bonded, our immediate families linked by cell phones not hugs, our connections to grandparents a holiday-only condition, our friendships with neighbors kept to a minimum, our involvement in the organizations listed above are rushed and sporadic. It is no wonder to those of us leading junior boarding schools why we are flourishing—families need and want community connection for their children.

Junior boarding schools are at their heart communities, communities dedicated to raising and educating boys and girls in their most formative years— i.e. approximately 10–15 years old. Junior boarding schools address in compassionate, skillful ways the issues all middle school age children face. Michael Thompson, best selling author, psychologist and consultant to numerous independent boarding schools, in his latest book *The Pressured Child—Helping Your Child Find Success in School and Life*, noted: “All children struggle to manage the pressures inherent in learning, growing, and developing. There are no exceptions. They struggle in life and in school. Learning disabled children struggle every day with lessons and teaching methods for which their brains are not well suited... Brilliant children suffer from boredom and loneliness, from feeling misunderstood, from being labeled as ‘nerds’... The ‘average’ child, for whom, presumably, the school experience should be just right, still struggles with mastering new material, with sitting quietly through a long day of classes, with good teachers and bad, with being more popular or less popular with her peers. As the great comedienne, Gilda Radner used to say on *Saturday Night Live*, ‘It’s always something!’... All loving parents want to see their children succeed in school. We want them to learn well, study hard, make good grades, have good friends and make their way from kindergarten through high school with as much success and as little pain as possible. They want that, too.” Michael Thompson himself made the important decision to send his daughter to boarding school, knowing that for her it was best—the best chance for academic and social connection, an academic and social challenge with proper support, an opportunity to grow within a structured environment.

All children would benefit from greater community and connection in their formative years. Parents cannot change a generation of societal disconnection. But they can make informed decisions on what might be in their son or daughter's best interests in their middle school years. The centerpiece of a parent's decision-making process must be to find the greatest chance for meaningful and long-lasting connection for each middle school boy or girl. Ned Hallowell, a senior lecturer at Harvard Medical School and the Director of the Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health, wrote a definitive book on social development, *Connect—12 Vital Ties That Open Your Heart, Lengthen Your Life and Deepen Your Soul*. Hallowell asserts that each of us live in a continuum of human moments. “A human moment occurs anytime two or more people are together, paying attention to one another. These connections are the key to what counts in life, from a happy family to a successful business to a sense of inner peace, even to physical health and longevity. But these

interpersonal bridges are breaking down...the interpersonal infrastructure of America is weakening. We're losing human contact with one another, even though we don't mean to. We're busy. We're otherwise engaged. We're *somewhere else*." Ned Hallowell knows first hand as a junior boarding school graduate that our schools are places of great connections.

Junior boarding schools provide boys and girls the neighborhood in which to make connections, the faculty who act in *loco parentis* to foster that connectedness, fellow students who share a desire to find connection in their lives, and the program and curriculum to develop healthy, connected middle schoolers. Junior boarding schools provide students with heartfelt connections to all of Hallowell's 12 Ties. Please allow me to share thoughts on four of those ties and their direct representation in junior boarding schools.

Connection with:

- Yourself—Junior boarding schools provide its students with safe communities where a young adolescent can develop his or her inner voice, his or her personality, without fear of retribution from his peers. During the middle school years all boys and girls struggle with developing a confident personality in the face of negative peer pressure. In the junior boarding school neighborhood, students can live and learn in safety, clear of that peer pressure due to the significant and coordinated faculty presence in their lives 24 hours per day.
- Ideas and Information—Needless to say young people today are bombarded with information through the Internet, videos, television and the like. Junior boarding schools regulate and monitor the stream of information from those sources making sure that our students receive healthy doses of each.
- Pets, Animals and Nature—All of the schools in the Junior Boarding School Association are blessed to have beautiful campuses filled with such aspects of nature as fields, streams, reservoirs, and countless animals. Indeed two of us even have working farms on campus. As middle school boys and girls navigate through the challenging years of personality development, they often will find solace and companionship in the friendship with a school pet. At my school one of the most sought after student leadership positions is that of lunchtime dog walker—those of us who own dogs recruit students to walk our dogs during our lunchtime recess. Additionally, our campuses give young adolescents a place to explore the outdoors in safe, supervised activities.
- Your Friends and Community—Above all else junior boarding schools are communities gathered together by a common mission, bound by a shared vision, and linked by the human connections made within each created neighborhood. In assessing whether or not your son or daughter may need and/or want a boarding school experience, please do consider the security of knowing that your child's math teacher may also be his coach and his dinner table head. And his history teacher may also be his advisor; and his science teacher his dorm parent. All are trained and compassionate professionals who have dedicated their lives to helping middle school aged children grow and prosper. Please also know that your son or daughter will live and learn with a community of students from all over the globe—a diverse group economically, ethnically, racially and religiously. All, however, bonded through the ties of their junior boarding school neighborhood. They will learn to grow together with significant adult involvement and supervision. They will laugh and play together in structured games and activities. They will build friendships that will

last a lifetime. I am a boarding school graduate and I can proudly say that I am closer to my boarding school friends from Choate than I am to any other group that I have been associated with during my childhood and early adult years.

These are but four of the 12 Ties that Hallowell so eloquently identifies as the keys to a healthy, happy life. All twelve are present in junior boarding schools. All of the members of our Junior Boarding School Association (JBSA.org) have phenomenal facilities and superb programs. All have challenging curricula and countless opportunities for intellectual growth. But more than anything else, junior boarding schools are communities, neighborhoods consisting of students, faculty, staff, employee families and pets. We are communities dedicated to nurturing middle schoolers through a challenging time in their development. We are neighborhoods created to serve with care and compassion the students who grace our campuses. We are extended families adopting, albeit figuratively and temporarily, our students and treating them as our own children. We are neighborhoods of human connection all dedicated to the betterment of middle school boys and girls.

In *Finding the Heart of the Child*, co-authored by Michael Thompson and Ned Hallowell, Ned writes in a chapter entitled *From Lost to Found: Finding the Child's Right Place*: "What you will find, between the lines, almost invariably, if you listen well and listen hard, is that most of all what a child wants, right then and there, is...a person who can play with him and not be on his case, who can hear him without being too full of advice, who can explore with him without telling him where to go, who can offer guidance without minding if it's heeded right away. Basically he wants a person, a connection. In this disconnected world, that can be hard to come by. For these disconnected kids, all the fancy plans and all the fancy places and all the fancy tests, return inevitably to the need for human connection with a good person. If you can find a way to offer that and have it accepted, you have found the lost child."

There is no better description of the joy, the wonder and the promise of the junior boarding school. Come visit us and see our neighborhoods of human connection.

