

Life at a boarding school can help turn pampered 'little emperors' into well-adjusted citizens, writes Louise Law

# On their own feet

**D**oes the spoiled child stand a chance in the 21st century? Considering that independence, confidence, collaboration, leadership through service, resourcefulness and the ability to adapt to rapid change are the hallmarks of this century, the rise of the "little emperor" – and "little empress" – should signal concern.

In mainland China and Hong Kong, these are the children of time-strapped professionals who reinforce a materialist culture at home, unwittingly narrowing their child's outlook, creating a person who shuns a challenge. It is not unusual to find children at senior primary level who cannot tie their shoe laces, button their clothes, or sleep alone. For such a child, it is easier to live in a limited, albeit secure, comfort zone. Why is it that parents encourage high academic results, yet ignore the vital life and self-management skills that are imperative to the development of a successful person?

In the West, overindulgent parents are labelled "helicopter parents"; in Japan, they are "monster parents". Locally, parents who overly pamper their children are raising darling "princes" and "princesses" who pitifully manifest the "three lows" – in self-management, emotional quotient and resilience. On the mainland, the rise of the "little emperors" is a little more complex given its one-child policy.

Overprotectiveness and overindulgence, which educational psychologist Elizabeth Hurlock identifies as unfavourable parental behaviour, pose problems for the future of our children. A case in point: on enrolment day this year at a Beijing university, parents who had been barred from attending the admissions process nevertheless turned up. Instead of encouraging their children to be more independent, many parents travelled overnight to help their children enrol in the university, then stayed for days to help them settle in. Surely this defeats the aim of the orientation process.

Ultimately, parents have to let go; to inspire independence; to mentor the child through new challenges rather than hold their hand through these situations. Encouraging the child to venture into the world can help that child thrive later on. In its extreme form, there are "boot camps" aimed at children who cannot complete a simple task such as packing a bag. The "junior soldier summer camp", for



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example, is becoming popular with Chinese parents who prefer a quick-fix approach.

However, schools and universities also share responsibility in creating a well-adjusted, community-minded citizen. Schools with a good pastoral programme that is supported by a warm and positive culture go a long way in easing the pampered-child syndrome. Boarding schools, sometimes described as a "home away from home", tend to fill this role even better, by encouraging independence, emotional maturity and resilience through a daily routine.

A good boarding school creates a stimulating environment and provides opportunities for students to learn to become independent. There are many fine examples of boarding schools in Britain. Their time-honoured boarding traditions

have produced eminent leaders, confirming time and again that attending a boarding school is an education in and of itself.

There are also examples here in Hong Kong, where boarding life is focused on providing students not only with a quality academic life, but also on developing necessary life skills. Even a short period of boarding can transform a spoiled child, by giving them an opportunity to improve their time-management and social skills, values, health and fitness, and strengthen their self-discipline. Most importantly, it can teach them the respect and compassion needed to live in harmony with others.

Boarding schools require students to make their own beds and tidy their rooms. If it is not done properly, the matron will insist that it is done again. There are specific activities required at certain times: doing homework and studying; taking showers and exercising.

All these reinforce self-discipline and self-management. Students are required to eat the food prepared for them, even if it's not to their personal taste. Boarders learn to tolerate and live in harmony with room-mates who may happen to be difficult. They are encouraged to help and seek help from their fellow boarders, as siblings do at

home. While a few students cannot adjust to boarding life, many benefit from such education.

It is encouraging to hear parents comment on the positive transformation of their children after life at a boarding school. One mother, whose son is in the middle school, spoke enthusiastically at a recent boarding orientation about the changes in her son after a year of boarding. He used to lack initiative and was completely dependent on his helper, but now manages his time better, does his homework on his own, is better at sports and takes care of his room and belongings. "He is pleasant, cheerful, and willing to help others. He knows how to look after himself now," the mother said. She even received a call from the parent of a fellow boarder, thanking her son for the help he gave the new student. In short, he is developing into a young leader of the 21st century.

It is time for parents to take note: a first-world city with a global outlook requires good leaders and citizens. Students with high academic achievements but inferior life skills don't make the grade. The good news is that parents and schools can jointly make a difference.

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