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Student Health, Safety & Wellbeing – Managing Challenging Behaviours at Seaford North PS

One of the most complex challenges facing schools (and Seaford North is no exception) is managing and responding to challenging and extreme student behaviours. These behaviours can be quite varied but in general terms they fall into one of the following categories:

- Swearing or using offensive language – this ranges from relatively low level language to extremely offensive and abusive language at the top end of the scale
- Physical behaviour towards others – this ranges from a gentle push or tap to kicks, punches and the use of objects
- Vandalism or damage of property – from incidental or careless damage to a deliberate act
- Insolence and/or non-compliance – this might include a rude response to a teacher / adult or could escalate to leaving class and even the school premises

Despite popular misconceptions, there is no simple or easy solution to managing or responding to these behaviours, which are influenced by many factors. Some students may behave in this way as a result of social and emotional issues that they experience, some may have diagnosed conditions that contribute to their behaviour and some may be influenced by differing parental expectations. In addition, the behaviours often vary according to the age and maturity level of the student(s) involved.

At a preventative level, we work incredibly hard to establish a positive and respectful school culture based around respect. This focus is a constant throughout the seven years of a student's time at Seaford North and is addressed at both formal and informal levels. We aim to create a baseline of expectations in relation to student behaviour, to establish the

classroom, playground and school 'norms' that we are able to reference with the students.

The teaching of social skills as part of formal and informal lessons is also fundamental. As an example, we might feel that targeted intervention is appropriate with a group of students experiencing consistent social problems such as excluding another student or even for students playing games 'roughly'.

Restorative Practice is also used consistently at Seaford North. It is a strategy that seeks to repair relationships that have been damaged through inappropriate behaviour and seeks to move towards a sense of remorse and restorative action on the part of the offender and forgiveness on the part of the victim. Within this program, Circle Time is practised regularly within classes providing students with an opportunity to express how they feel about particular situations or events.

For perhaps 99% of our students, this approach is very successful and appropriate – students may need an occasional reminder about what is expected and how they might respond differently to a particular event or incident and for the most part this works extremely well. Our focus is on helping students understand why particular behaviour is unacceptable and how they might learn from the experience and respond differently in the future, assisting them in taking responsibility for their actions and making good decisions. When we establish clear expectations and trust students to 'do the right thing', they very rarely let us down and often exceed expectations.

For a very small number of students, the above approach is not always effective. For reasons we don't always understand these students might respond with anger or aggression directed towards staff or other students. It is very important to understand that these rare, extreme behaviours are and always will be dealt with and followed up. However, clear Departmental guidelines on student intervention and lessons learnt from extensive experience in responding to such situations will often influence our immediate response. For observers watching from afar, it may appear that a student has 'gotten away' with swearing at a teacher or being physically aggressive. This is particularly evident if your child is on the receiving end of physical behaviour. Please be assured that we are

and always will be protective and supportive of students or staff who have been impacted upon by inappropriate behaviour. Appropriate follow up and consequences are applied for inappropriate behaviour – this is best done when the student has calmed down and is able to reflect on and accept responsibility for their own actions, not when their anger level is still high. Be mindful also that we have a duty of care to **all** students. It serves no purpose to 'demonise' students for poor behaviour and our goal is to assist these students in becoming positive, valued members of the Seaford North community. In the heat of the moment it is easy to forget the 'big picture' but our school has an outstanding record of supporting all students and many wonderful examples of students who have progressively learnt to manage their own emotions and behaviours.

Our goal in applying consequences is to help a student understand how his or her actions have impacted upon others and how he or she might make better choices in the future. Consequences are not designed to be punitive – we must always remain mindful that our role is to assist students in growing and learning. However, consequences are fair, clear, purposeful and serious if warranted. Examples of consequences applied at Seaford North include but are not limited to:

- Time out
- Restriction to specific areas of the playground
- Lunch / recess detention
- Suspension
- Verbal or written apology
- Meeting with the Principal / Assistant Principal
- Parent conference
- Withdrawal of privileges

Working with students with challenging behaviours is rarely a 'quick-fix' scenario. For some of our students, an incredible number of hours has been devoted to preventative programs (such as social skills and the teaching of positive behaviour strategies), intervention, debriefing, applying of consequences, the development and implementation of appropriate individual behaviour plans and more. Some may observe or hear of a particular incident and take the immediate view that 'something must be done.' As a school, we are in a position of knowing that a great

deal is being done and that significant progress is being made – a student may now be involved in incidents once every month instead of once every week and this growth and progress is enormous. This progress is generally as a result of the efforts of the student, the support of the family and the incredible perseverance of the staff in developing a strong, supportive relationship with the student whilst continuing to set and expect high standards of behaviour. The reality is that there is no 'magic wand' or quick fix.

As stated in the opening paragraph, this is an incredibly complex area that is often viewed in simplistic but not necessarily realistic terms. The circumstances of each situation will vary and will influence our response and course of action. However, we are deeply committed to the wellbeing of all students and will always respond in a manner that is fair, reasonable and takes into account all relevant factors.

Lee Murnane