



Consistency – or maybe a bit of flexible consistency?

Dave Whitaker reflects upon whether the consistent and inflexible implementation of a school behaviour policy is always the best approach for the well being of all pupils.

Behaviour policies can either empower us or deeply frustrate us. They are one of the most contentious and divisive aspects of school life. They can either help us develop and grow as professionals or tie us to a rigid set of rules that we may not even believe in.

There is a sense, under the current government, that the preferred direction for schools is a traditional methodology of strict discipline, zero-tolerance and no excuses. Schools are being encouraged to consider mobile phone bans and silent corridors with ministers backing head teachers to use exclusion with confidence. Encouragingly, many head teachers are taking an alternative stance and looking to develop relationships and restorative approaches as their way of preventing exclusions.

The polarisation of views is a worry. Surely, we need to be looking at what works and at what cost? Cost, in this case is not a monetary price, but the impact behaviour policies have on the lives of the children. What ‘unintended’ consequences do zero-tolerance behaviour approaches have? Are these actually unintended consequences or are they seen as acceptable collateral damage in a system designed to meet the needs of

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some but not all children? Does a relational approach mean schools are accepting lower standards and ‘allowing’ children’s inappropriate behaviour to go unpunished?

A great behaviour policy should not be over reliant on harsh punishments and high rewards. It should be supportive and flexible, with the drive towards intrinsic motivation to achieve high standards of acceptable social behaviour both in and out of school. We do not want to create a society where appropriate behaviour is predicated on the threat and fear of punishment, but we do want high standards and great behaviour.

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Behaviour is complex, therefore managing behaviour is complex too. A great behaviour policy must focus on four key areas:

- High-quality classroom practice that allows all children to prosper and flourish.
- Expertise in relationships, restorative practice, reflection and personalisation.
- Sophisticated approaches to exploring the reasons why children display challenging behaviour – considering emotions and feelings and being aware of trauma and anxiety.
- Delivery of high quality special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) interventions and the support of children with additional needs.

We hear a great deal about how important consistency is in the management of behaviour. However, Oscar Wilde (1885) once said ‘I have always been of the opinion that consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative.’ With that in mind we must use our wisdom, imagination and creativity to make sure we do not fail our most complex children with narrow, strict compliance and get lost in the concept of consistency. Yes, we must be consistent with our expectations and we must also be consistent with the strong and supportive relationships that we develop with the children in our charge. If we are not careful, consistency can be hijacked to justify harsh and unreasonable punishments. Consistency can stop us using any form of discretion and therefore personalisation.

In most aspects of education, we use discretion and personalisation. We plan the curriculum with acknowledgement and consideration of children’s different levels and starting points. We use interventions to allow pupils to catch up with their phonics or their writing. In lessons, skilled teachers use personalisation and differentiation to make sure that work is appropriate, and children can thrive and be successful at many levels. Yet, when it comes to behaviour, we default to consistency as the panacea.

We need discretion to be our solution and we need children to feel like they are understood. Without this we risk alienating them, and this then escalates to an over-reliance on sanctions. Consistency implies that one size fits all. It tells us that we must endeavour to fit square pegs into round holes and if they don’t fit then we throw them away and look for round ones that do fit. In other words, consistency means compliance – but are we looking for compliance at all costs?

By recognising that we need to embrace discretion and therefore adopt a graduated response to behaviour management, we

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are accepting that we are dealing with meeting the needs of our children. When we understand this, we can introduce the concept of ‘flexible consistency’. This concept allows us to move away from justifying inappropriate and unreasonable punishments and take a more sophisticated approach to dealing with behaviour. We can still remain consistent in our expectations, standards and relationships, but be flexible with our solutions and support. Therefore, we focus on the cause of inappropriate behaviour rather than the symptoms. We move away from a behaviourist approach (a reliance on rewards and sanctions) to a relational approach, where individual needs are considered.

Flexible consistency allows us to make reasonable adjustments and to think differently, but without compromising on standards and expectations. We look beyond the behaviour, at the emotions and the feelings, considering the cause and the influences that drive the behaviour. We attempt, to the best of our ability, to deal with these in a way that both supports and challenges the pupils.

Embracing flexible consistency will allow staff in school to be more solution-focussed and to be problem solvers rather than looking for revenge and compliance. Surely that is a good thing to aspire to?

So, our consistency exists in building trusting relationships and growing the connections we make with the children. It also means that we have a consistent approach to how we work with our pupils, even if that is flexible. Children need to be secure in their relationships with the adults in school and these connections must be sustainable through difficult and challenging times.

Consistency is therefore a great word to adopt when associated with an adult’s relationship with a child. Consistency can give out a message of fairness and positivity so that children know where they stand, and this allows them to trust and be trusted. Consistency comes when all adults believe in the same approach and that connections and relationships are the key to successful behaviour management.

Consistency is great – even when it’s flexible. **SEN**