

QUESTIONING ZERO TOLERANCE & SCHOOL SUSPENSION

by Barry MacDonald

As parents and educators, we naturally want to know that schools are safe, secure places where our children can thrive. When we hear about lock-downs, school shootings, bullying, or other credible threats to our students' safety, we may long for swift, certain and decisive responses that will guarantee our children's well-being.

Students, parents and staff need to trust that endangerment of those in our care will not be permitted at school.

I agree that there should be a clear-cut and swift response to those truly threatening—but rare—behaviours such as gun or knife possession. However, many thoughtful educators question the effectiveness of a heavy-handed application of a Zero Tolerance policy, where the law is used as a weapon of control for common misbehaviours. What are the logical consequences of using suspension and expulsion every time the school's conduct code is violated? Who is learning what when suspension is the knee-jerk disciplinary response to a range of typical adolescent misbehaviours such as swearing, defiance, fighting, smoking and even truancy?

It is worthy of note that even among recent national reports reviewing literature on school safety, including the U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Youth Violence, none has designated Zero Tolerance or suspension as an effective or even as a promising approach. Put more simply, there is no data that Zero Tolerance or suspension makes a difference either in improving school safety or improving student behaviour.

We might also ask ourselves why boys at a certain age return from the office or from a suspension to a hero's welcome.

How logical is the idea that a student who skips school should be punished by not being allowed to come to school? How fair is it to impose a suspension that is lengthier than the time missed? And what are the real costs of the suspended student's further disconnectedness from school?

Student success initiatives address underlying causes of misbehaviour and underachievement rather than punishing students by sending them home, particularly for truancy, tardiness and disengagement.

According to sociologist Karen Sterneimer, we may choose to focus on schools as scary places in order to avoid looking at systematic problems facing the schools—problems of overcrowding, tired and obsolescent materials, fragmented communities. It is certainly easier to see troubled students and misbehaviour as the problem, rather than raising questions about larger institutional issues, or about the underlying reasons for student disengagement, apathy, or even aggression.

In my work with youth, parents and teachers over the years, I have consistently found that truant and tardy students are often anxious and frustrated students. These youth, who are

typically overwhelmed with managing school and life responsibilities, need support, not admonishment. Evidence shows children are more likely to grow into caring, courageous and ethical people when they are treated with respect rather than manipulative control.

The following email from a parent raises questions about the effectiveness of suspension and Zero Tolerance as applied to a misbehaviour fairly typical for adolescents on a school field-trip. It also highlights how consequences should be carefully designed so that they do not inadvertently become reinforcers.

~

Dear Barry,

Recently our son was suspended from school. My husband and I have consistently backed up school staff over the years, but this time their decision to suspend seems harsh and just wrong. Allow me to elaborate.

Recently, our son James who is in Grade 11, travelled to a neighbouring town on the weekend with his boys' basketball team for the regional games. The girls' team also traveled to the same town for the same purpose, and each team stayed at hotels across the street from each other. Before departure the youth were told that the two teams were not to have any contact whatsoever and that breaking this rule would result in immediate withdrawal of play and school suspension.

As it turned out, my son and two other boys broke the rule and visited their girlfriends at the girls' hotel lobby on Friday night around 10pm. Apparently when the teacher chaperone approached the lobby my son and his friend hid in the lobby washroom while the third boy ran down a hallway and into one of the girl's rooms.

In response to the girls' nervous gestures and giggling the chaperone suspected something was up and pressed the girls for information. They avoided the truth, but rumour has it that one of the girls kept looking at the male lobby washroom. The jig was up and everyone was caught.

As an example to the other team players all three boys and five girls involved were withdrawn from all of the weekend games and the boys received an official one day suspension from school upon return. The boy who ran down the hallway and into one of the girl's hotel room received a three-day suspension. Upon returning to school after a day at home the school staff gave the impression that because the piper had been paid the discipline was now over.

When I questioned the principal about the appropriateness of the withdrawal of play and suspension he said: "It was the rule.

They broke the rule. Now they must pay the price. Don't worry, all will be well in a couple of days." I walked away incensed with his simplistic thinking and the lack of appreciation for what it's like to be 16.

The youth involved are very angry about not playing basketball and being suspended and it seems that our community of parents are conducting informal parking lot polls and taking sides. While some expected it to happen others tout on about tough love. Is the school's method of managing behaviour appropriate in this situation? What should I do?

Wilma,

Frustrated mom in Metro Vancouver

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Dear Wilma,

Watching our children grow toward independence can be both a heartwarming and heartrending experience.

When kids get off-track in some way, parents are often told that teaching responsibility requires laying down the law, as well as demanding compliance with increasingly strict rules. Yet, as any parent of an adolescent knows, it's a lot easier to make the rules than to enforce—or negotiate—them.

Before considering any disciplinary action, we need ask ourselves: "What's the task?" Is it reasonable to expect that young males and females in Grade 11 not visit each other while on a parallel sports fieldtrip?

Your school's NO OPPOSITE GENDER PEER CONTACT RULE ON TRIPS reminds me of the simplistic tactics counseled by Supernanny or Assertive Discipline, where everything—including young people's feelings and critical reflections—are sacrificed to the imperative of obedience. Black and white rules, with unswerving enforcement, may work with canine training, but have limited effectiveness with youth.

Television's no-nonsense Supernanny who orders that kids stand in the "naughty corner" would likely support your school administrator's decision to suspend, but I have grim reservations about the effectiveness of suspensions, as well as what is commonly referred to as a Zero Tolerance approach to teach youth appropriate behaviour. At its core the Zero Tolerance approach relies on bribes and threats with the underlying purpose of enforcement. But what if the school's rules do not reflect best practice? What if the rules are a set-up for failure? What if these rules have been designed simply to "get the trains to run on time"—not minding whom they run over?

Zero Tolerance is counter-productive because it doesn't teach respect or cooperation. No one is born with perfect social skills. Don't we need to model the respect and kindness we want to see in adolescents?

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Suspension is a controversial school practice. Being suspended often reduces the student's sense of connectedness to school, so that the youth have less and less to lose. It can also be counter-productive when a boy who bucks the system receives a hero's welcome upon return. Are staff and administrators at your school aware of the studies that question the limited effectiveness of school suspension? Are they aware of measures they can take to reduce the use of school suspensions, and the current research about the benefits of restorative discipline?

When young people are forced to obey rules that to them seem arbitrary, they often feel disrespected, and then have to figure out some way to shore up their personal integrity. Depending upon how powerful they feel or what options they see as open to them, they may fight openly, or they may resist passively. Laying down the law teaches that might makes right, and that respect goes in only one direction—up!

It is natural for boy-girl interaction to occur on a field trip. This occasion could provide parents and teachers opportunities to provide mentorship, a chance to discuss hormones, attractions and self-guidance. They might even arrange co-ed chaperoned meetings or activities while young people are away from home.

Responding to the predictable ups and downs of teenage experimentation is less about managing or controlling behaviour, and more about promoting dialogue, reflection and responsibility. Engaging in authentic conversation with teens means learning to let go of some control, some part of the adult agenda. Adults must learn to listen to young people as they engage in the potentially awkward and unpredictable process of working with youth to decide what socially responsible behaviour looks like. This doesn't mean that youth automatically get their way. They do, however, need their say.

Learning to set up discipline that teaches takes time, patience and skill. However, evidence shows children are more likely to grow into caring, courageous and ethical people when they are treated with calm reason and the warmth of empathy rather than the tools of Darth Vader-like control.

I encourage you to discuss my comments and suggestions with your school administrator. Remember too that your school principal may have pieces to the puzzle that you are not aware of or rationales that you have not considered. If you are met with defensiveness, provide some time and space for reflection and revisit the discussion a few days later.

If you think that your school administrator is open, you might consider mentioning *Boy Smarts* – chapter nine, "Discipline that Teaches Rather than Punishes"—and also collaboration nine in *Boy Smarts Action Study Guide*, which deals with restorative measures and alternatives to suspension.

Another useful resource for school administrators is the British Columbia Ministry of Education document *Focus on Suspension: A Resource for Schools* (1999), which was made available to all BC school administrators and encourages educators to develop alternatives to suspension: "Suspension may in some situations have no effect or even increase the likelihood of the behaviour reoccurring...out-of-school suspensions can contribute to a student's alienation from school and the likelihood of the student dropping out."

Although a few school administrators hand out suspensions easily, most school principals recognize their limitations, and even their counter-productiveness. These wise principals, who know that the unflinching enforcement of rules does not create inner responsibility or pro-social behaviour, reach for more creative responses to young people's behavioural challenges. They know well that students learn respect for self and others through a supportive school climate, respectful interventions when necessary, and skilled, empathic guidance of the next generation.

Barry MacDonald is a BC educator, author of *Boy Smarts – Mentoring Boys for Success at School*, and founder of www.MentoringBoys.com. 

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