

## **Newsletter articles**

### **Article 1**

#### **Unpacking Our New Code of Conduct**

*“Parents, staff members and students will actively promote and support the school in the community, highlighting the school’s positive attributes and reserving issues of concern for resolution through proper process.”*

The main push of this aspect is to give the constant message to our community that you care for our school. Educational research indicates that one of the most powerful influences on your child’s educational success is your attitude to education. If you show your children that you highly value education and support the school that they attend, then they will adopt the same attitude and maintain a desire to succeed in order to please you.

This is why it is good practice for schools to develop partnerships with their families and offer opportunities for parents to be engaged in the education of their children. It is why we need supportive and mutually beneficial relationships with each other.

Of course, schools will always have problems associated with the range of social interactions that go hand in hand with an institution that is solely about people. Because of this, it is important that we have processes for dealing with problems in a systematic and easily accessible way.

Our Code of Conduct asks everyone to deal with any issues of concern by using our processes rather than eroding the children’s perceptions of school by airing the issues publicly or resolving them through conflict. To maximise their success at school, it is imperative that we keep the children’s perceptions about school as positive as possible.

### **Article 2**

#### **Unpacking Our New Code of Conduct**

*“Parents, staff members and students will respect and comply with the policies of the school, as determined by our school Board, the administration body of the school, and the law of the land.”*

This one is fairly straightforward and self-explanatory. However, it is surprising how many folks challenge and refuse to comply with policies. Policies are extremely useful in a large institution, such as ours, because they provide clear guidance and consistency about how we do things.

When families and staff members sign up for our school, they tacitly agree to comply with the expectations of our school Board and it is our school Board that sets policies other than those laid down by the law of the land. If a policy ceases to be relevant or is flawed in some way, then the appropriate response is to alert the school Board. The policy will then be examined and relevant changes made if our school Board agrees that there is an issue.

It is important for you to be aware of our school Board policies, as this helps you to determine whether or not your values and the values of our school are a good match and whether or not our school is the right school for your children.

### **Article 3**

#### **Unpacking Our New Code of Conduct**

*“Parents, staff members and students will actively attempt to resolve issues of concern by engaging in appropriate interactions with the relevant people.”*

We are all each other’s customers and, together, need to focus on the needs of our prime customer, the individual child. All of our school-based relationships need to support our ability to provide a high-quality education to our prime customer and we need to take great care with each other so that everything we do contributes to that provision. By engaging in appropriate interactions with the relevant people to resolve issues of concern, we allow the optimum conditions for avoiding conflict and reaching amicable agreement.

I keep on stating that the two most powerful influences on a student’s successful education are the family’s attitude towards and involvement in education and the quality of the individual relationship between a student and her or his teacher. These are the two things that we must support as much as possible. If we can clear away anything that prevents these influences from thriving, then it is imperative that we do so.

At the school level, in order for a teacher to develop a positive and caring relationship with each student, a high level of trust needs to be established. This requires support from the family for, without such support, a teacher will be reluctant to take the risk of investing warmth and working camaraderie in the child and the child will likewise be wary of the teacher.

Our teachers need your authority and implicit permission to develop a relationship with your child that instils trust and faith so that they can take risks without fear of destructive criticism. By feeling supported, our teachers are far more likely to relax into individual relationships that encourage and reward the risk takers and share a laugh about the mistakes along the way. Working with a family in a climate of anxiety and conflict obviously strongly prevents the student/teacher relationship from thriving and the student from blossoming.

### **Article 4**

#### **Unpacking Our New Code of Conduct**

*“All interactions shall have the goal of achieving outcomes mutually acceptable to the parties concerned.”*

We do not want interactions with our families to be based on struggles for power and control. We want the best outcomes for your children, based on sound educational and psychological theory and practice. We need your trust in us as professionals and

you need our trust in you as parents who know their children's needs and preferences. Pooling those two areas of expertise to arrive at decisions together will help to ensure that the most effective decisions are reached.

We really appreciate parents who make a time to sit down and talk about their child's needs with the classroom teacher. The more information a teacher has about each student, the better they are able to tailor the educational programs to suit the student's needs. Our teachers particularly need to know when a child is going through a rough time or feeling unwell so that they can make adjustments and keep a closer watch on their welfare.

Relationships between parents and teachers usually break down when communication is poor or when time cannot be adequately devoted to exploring the issues. Often, this happens when resolving a conflict between students.

When there is conflict between students, the situation is usually complex and often has a history that is not readily available to adults. Because teachers are very busy people and have huge demands on their time, the resolution of conflict between students can take several days to address adequately and sometimes we can never really be sure that we have got it absolutely right.

Teachers always work towards fair and consistent outcomes. They gather witness reports and accounts by the children involved. They discuss the children's actions and the consequences of them and make the best decisions they can in the light of the information at hand. At times, teachers can be dealing with more than one case of conflict at the same time. As you can appreciate, this can be quite demanding, given that the regular educational programs also need to be planned and delivered.

Often, when the children go home, they understandably relate what has happened from their point of view and are usually defensive about their actions. They do not necessarily bend the truth but simply forget important aspects because of their child-like perspective of the events and the emotions arising from them. It is at these times that we really appreciate your support and trust that we have done our best to resolve the situation.

If you feel that we made a wrong decision, please alert us without your child feeling that you are coming to their rescue. If they feel that you are coming to their rescue, then the line is drawn in the sand and discussions begin adversarially.

Rather, explain to your child that you are happy to check what happened with the school and that the adults will talk it over and arrive at adult decisions. This leaves the option open that the school may have been right without making any promises to the child that you may not be able to keep. It is under these neutral and open-minded conditions that we are most likely to arrive at mutually acceptable outcomes that serve the best interests of the children.

## **Article 5**

### **Unpacking Our Code of Conduct**

*"All interactions shall be conducted in a calm and reasonable manner."*

If you are angry with an issue, then the trick to meeting this guideline is to allow time to cool down before talking it over with someone. It is pretty certain that the best solution to a problem will not be found from angry debate. Reason does not prevail during heated discussion and it is difficult to consider someone's point of view if you are being verbally abused.

This is another reason why we often take time to resolve conflict between children. The cooling off period is most important if we are to successfully identify what happened and achieve a rational outcome. By maintaining a school culture that is driven by the global expectation of our Code of Conduct, *“At the school, parents, faculty/staff members, students, and other users of school facilities will be treated with respect and courtesy at all times, with care taken to preserve dignity and personal integrity”*, we will increase self-esteem, positive attitudes and a corresponding increase in the effectiveness of our programs.

## **Article 6**

### **Unpacking Our Code of Conduct**

*“All interactions shall be issue-based, avoiding personal conflicts.”*

Apparently, two of the most useless emotions we experience are blame and guilt. If we become stuck in these emotions, then neither is constructive. They do not help us to move on and solve problems. It is understandable to feel them for a little while but we need to get over them quickly and agree on what needs to happen next. If a person feels that they are under personal attack, then the barriers go up, resistance sets in and the best solutions are rarely reached.

One of the most successful ways to arrive at solutions that everyone is prepared to accept, is to focus on the real issues rather than the personalities of the people involved. Everyone makes mistakes and we are not obliged to like everyone we interact with but, we can rise above our mistakes and dislikes to reach agreement by calmly describing a problem and discussing what needs to change. If this is done with a “no put-downs” approach, then the chances of success are considerably high.

As well as being the expectation at an adult level, this has huge implications for the review of our student discipline program next year. I feel that we need to have less of a “crime & punishment” approach and more of a “mediation & conciliation” approach. When taking care to separate a child's behaviour from the essence of who the child is and, as custodians of self-esteem and forgers of resilience, we need to step away from power struggles, preserve dignity and allow a degree of personal control by our students as we address anti-social behaviour.

Of course, it is important to take great care of the baby when examining the bath water and we need to preserve the positive features of our current approach. I would expect that there would still be a graded series of consequences for unacceptable behaviour but less of a lock step, impersonal approach.

Personally, I think that, at the lower level of the “crime” scale, it is OK to negotiate consequences between the affected parties. Often, an acknowledgment of what

happened, a sincere apology, a handshake and an agreement to let bygones be bygones is the ideal outcome and can go a long way towards preventing further conflict.

## **Article 7**

### **Unpacking Our Code of Conduct**

*“All interactions shall give due consideration to the points of view of all parties concerned.”*

It’s amazing how often I think that I have covered all options before making a decision, only to find that someone else has another really good idea. It pays to be receptive to the opinions and ideas of others.

Listening carefully to why a person is feeling the way they do allows a deeper understanding of what the issues really are and what the best response is. It allows people to move towards the ideal solution together.

The golden rule when using this strategy is, “Seek to understand, then be understood”. The idea is to clarify and explore the perspective of others in order to identify and simplify the issues and arrive at a plan of action.

A technique for doing this is to restate what you think a person is trying to communicate to you by using the words, “Do you mean . . . . .?” This is a really good technique to use with children as they often do not have the language to express their needs and it helps them build language structures to use in the future.

## **Article 8**

### **Unpacking Our Code of Conduct**

*“An appropriate time and place shall be mutually arranged for discussing issues that are sensitive, contentious, and confidential or in need of prolonged consideration.”*

Issues that are private or have the ability to adversely affect someone’s self-esteem should never be discussed in the corridors or other semi-public areas of school.

It is far better to make a mutually agreed time to talk, grab a cup of coffee, avoid disruptions and dedicate time to focus, clarify, explore and resolve such issues calmly and purposefully. The investment of this dedicated time pays off enormously by ensuring that we have got it right, that we have minimised the chances of any unacceptable events happening again and that we have a satisfied customer who has been treated with courtesy and respect.

## **Article 9**

### **Unpacking Our Code of Conduct**

The rest of our Code of Conduct is dedicated to dealing with unsatisfactory behaviour and how we relate to our larger community. The first step in resolving unsatisfactory behaviour is at the personal level through assertive, calm language that describes the

behaviour and suggests change. If that fails, then the next step is to appeal to authority. In the case of students and staff members, that authority is the principal. In the case of the principal, the authority is the school Board.

The community section is about having a meaningful intersection of our school with the community that it serves. Schools that have a working relationship with their community allow students to gain an understanding of personal fit and a sense of engagement with society. Schools that operate in isolation from their social context run the risk of alienating students and educating them to be successful at dealing only with the past and not keeping pace with the present and future needs of their community.

The ability of young adults to contribute positively to our society is greatly supported by an understanding of how society works and what its expectations and tolerance levels are. Developing and practising the high-level skill of establishing and nurturing networks of mutual benefit, within the community context, further strengthens this ability.

It strongly supports our aim to develop interdependent citizens, those who rely on each other in order to thrive. This relationship of mutual benefit is difficult to define and teach in isolation and is probably best realised through the revelation of personal experience.

For this reason, we rely on the goodwill of community members to reach out and mentor our youth, providing opportunities for them to experience the adventures, risks, joys and anxieties of the world of business and service. We also ask for practical support and involvement at the school level as a demonstration to our students that our community values education. This investment should reap the harvest of providing our future with people who are resilient and positive and who care for our society.