Behaviour policy checklist

April 2024

The Children's Society

COMMUNITY FUND

Contents

Introduction

We are a group of young people who have all experienced school exclusion. Over the last year, we have been leading on consultations with other young people in London about secondary school behaviour policies. While not everyone we spoke with had experienced a permanent exclusion from school, many had experienced different sanctions and other forms of exclusion from education.

Behaviour policies set the tone and culture of a school, and outline the values and behaviours expected of students. We believe that the starting point for the way students are treated by adults at school is the behaviour policy, so it is essential that this is inclusive of all students, regardless of their backgrounds and identities. In our experience, this is not always the case.

Behaviour must be approached from a place of empathy and understanding. We want school policies to encourage teachers and support staff in schools to build relationships with students and understand what is causing behaviour, rather than merely outlining punitive responses. Policies should celebrate students' identities and diversity and allow students to express themselves.

Ultimately, policies must make sure that everyone at school feels respected and safe and that school is a place they want to go.

The checklist is based on what young people told us, our own authentic experiences of being excluded from education, and reviewing best practice guidance.

As a group of young people, we are aware of and empathise with the difficult situations currently facing schools. We know that many schools are facing resource and funding issues, dealing with significant levels of student safeguarding, and juggling multiple priorities both academically and pastorally for students. We believe that by working together to adapt behaviour policies, we can embed cultural change to schools' approaches to behaviour that supports both students and staff.

How we built the checklist

This checklist is a culmination of over a year working together as a team of young people who have experienced exclusion, speaking to other young people, researching best practice, and applying our own authentic experiences of exclusion from education. We have used these to develop a set of recommendations that we believe will make positive changes in schools – not just for students, but for staff too. Adopting any number of these recommendations would be a positive step forward.

Between April and August 2023, we ran four different peer consultation sessions, speaking to 44 different young people. Prior to the consultations, we all received training from **Just For Kids Law** on leading sessions with other young people.

To arrange these consultations, we collaborated with four different organisations: Lasting Support Service, Hackney Rep, Mosaic Trust, and the London Violence Reduction Unit's Young People's Action Group. The young people shared their experiences of school exclusions and behaviour policies, and what might help to improve these. However, given the number of participants, it is important to note that views expressed may not be representative on a larger scale.

Our conversations with other young people covered a range of different topics. While those we spoke to represented a diverse range of identities and experiences of the education system, at each consultation similar issues were raised about behaviour policies.

Some young people spoke of issues around wearing school branded headscarves, while others spoke of being penalised for wearing their afro hair naturally. Children with diverse gender identities felt that little accommodation was made for them to feel comfortable in uniform at school. While these are different issues requiring different responses from schools, the underlying feeling around all these comments were questions about how rules around uniform and identities affected students' learning.

Similarly, while all the groups we spoke to understood the need for students to be accountable for their behaviour, the effectiveness and purpose of the sanctions schools used to try and achieve this was often questioned. It was felt by all groups we spoke to that sanctions did little to improve behaviour. It was also recognised that sanctions were sometimes applied disproportionately, with students from global majority backgrounds being penalised for things their white peers weren't.

The young people we spoke to had never been consulted about behaviour policies or the effect behaviour management systems and techniques had on them, despite the significant effect these measures have on their experience at school. It was felt that many issues that arise at school could be avoided if adults took the time to listen and make sure that students felt listened to and were communicated with more clearly. Many said it would be valuable to ensure more student voice was included when behaviour policies were developed.

After completing the consultations, we reviewed all the data and reflected on our own experiences as young people who have experienced exclusion, many of which were similar to the young people we spoke to. From this, four distinct themes emerged where we thought behaviour policies could be more inclusive and supportive. These were:
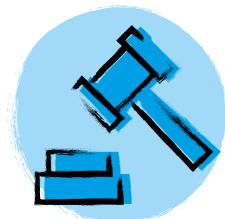
Sanctions

Uniform and identity

Power

Language and communication

Explainer

The Children's Society's DEx programme published a report where young people with special educational needs (SEN) said that they found behaviour policies discriminatory and unclear, and that different behaviour management techniques did not improve their behaviour.[1]

1   The Children's Society. (2022). Youth Voice **SEND** and Exclusions.

Explainer

With the themes outlined in the checklist, there are clear parallels with exploitation. Exploited children are often treated as perpetrators of crime, rather than victims who require support, and the root cause isn't addressed – much like when sanctions are applied in schools. Similarly, regarding language, the language professionals use about children experiencing exploitation often paints them as making an active choice to engage in exploitative situations, when no child can ever consent to exploitation. Exploiters also abuse power imbalances to manipulate and coerce children. Finally, children who are marginalised by society because of their identity are at higher risk of exploitation.

We have developed a number of different checklist points that we believe are actionable for schools to adopt around these themes. To further develop these checklist points, we have reviewed existing behaviour policies of schools that take an inclusive approach towards behaviour and interviewed staff from an SEN provision who have recently adapted their own behaviour policy.

As well as checklist points around these different themes, through our research on best practice we have identified some general principles we think schools could adopt when developing behaviour policies.

Our intention with this checklist is to amplify the voices of young people on school behaviour policies, which we feel are too often ignored. Many of the issues other young people raised in our conversations reflected our own experiences at school, and we are confident that the measures we are suggesting reflect what we were told by our peers.

Explainer

The Children's Society's aim is for this resource to be used by schools to develop relational approaches to behaviour policies. Recognising the complex and challenging environment schools are navigating, The Children's Society would like to work with schools, alongside young people, to support positive changes that continue to safeguard children and young people. See 'Next steps' section for more details.
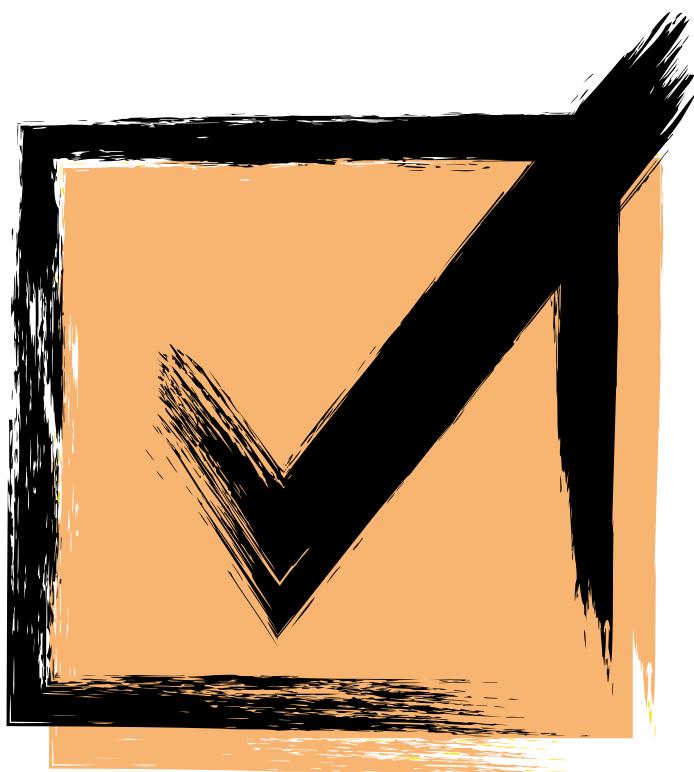
The checklist

General principles

Through our research and consultations into behaviour policies, we identified a number of good practice principles that leave young people feeling cared for, supported, celebrated, and proud. These principles were identified through conversations with both young people and professionals, as well as by reviewing existing inclusive policies.

We believe that schools should adopt the following principles when designing their behaviour policies.

Rights Respecting Schools

Rights Respecting Schools[2] is a UNICEF initiative that supports schools to embed children's human rights into their ethos and culture. It puts the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child at the heart of schools' practices to improve wellbeing.

Those who have participated in the Rights Respecting Schools award have spoken about how it has transformed school culture, made teachers lives easier, and empowered students to be agents of change.[3] All schools should participate in this approach.

Co-production with students

In our consultations, it became clear that students we were speaking to had never been consulted about the behaviour policy of their school or even explicitly been made aware of the policy itself.

Young people suggested that students should be consulted about behaviour policies, through the school council, so that issues could be raised before any student is disadvantaged by a policy.

Student voice and experience must be valued, and consulting with student councils and the wider student body about behaviour policies is a good starting point for this. All stakeholders, including governors, parents and carers should be encouraged to work alongside students to ensure behaviour policies meet everyone's needs. Schools can also run assemblies at the start of the year on their behaviour policy, with space and time being made in form groups for all students to provide their thoughts and reflections. Student voice when developing policies is essential and will lead to better outcomes for both students and staff.

Good practice for SEN is good practice for all

When we spoke with other young people, they told us that more accommodation is needed to be made for children with SEN. This also resonated with some of our own personal experiences as young people who have been excluded from the education system.

We know that children with SEN are over four times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than their peers who do not have SEN.[4]

2   UNICEF. (n.d.). **The Impact of the Rights Respecting Schools Award - UNICEF UK**.
3   UNICEF. (n.d.). **What is a Rights Respecting School? - UNICEF UK**.
4   GOV.UK. (2023). Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England, Autumn term 2022/23 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK (**explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk**)

When reviewing the **Relationships and Behaviour Policy** of West Lea School, an SEN specialist provision in Enfield, London, it was clear to us that the SEN-friendly provisions outlined in the policy would be good practice for mainstream schools to adopt.

What is good practice for children with SEN is good practice for all children. Mainstream schools can learn from SEN specialist provisions.

Policy on a page

Young people we spoke to would often comment that behaviour policies were too long or difficult to understand, and contained lots of unclear and ambiguous language.

While we acknowledge that there are essential measures schools must legally include in their behaviour policies, there are certain aspects specific to students that can be made clearer and more concise.

At the start of their policies, schools should put the expectations of students, and what students can expect from adults in the school, in clear, age-appropriate, accessible language, bullet-pointed on a single page accompanied by pictures that illustrate each individual measure. A single-page summary would make the entire policy more accessible for all stakeholders at the school.

Themes

The checklist covers four distinct themes that emerged in our consultations with other young people and includes quotes young people shared with us, as well as recommendations we have built out of these and our own experiences.

It is presented in four sections:

Sanctions

Uniform and identity

Power

Language and communication

Sanctions

Young people we spoke to felt that sanctions were often disproportionate and rarely improved their behaviour or addressed the cause of it.
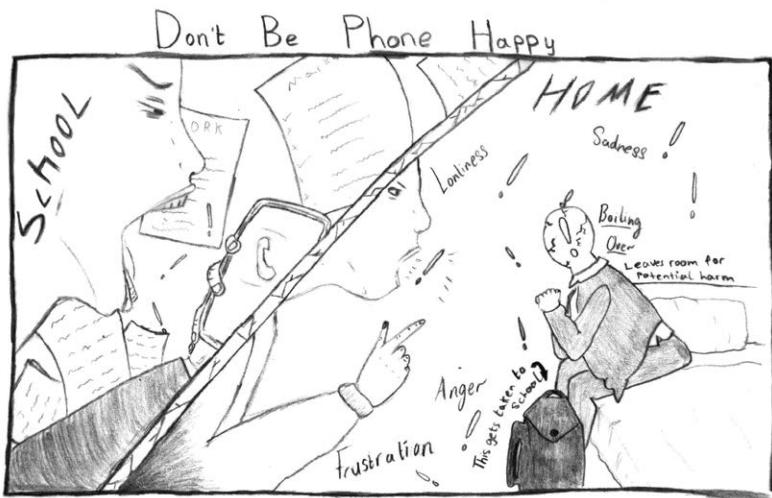
Many young people identified the issue of missing out on valuable learning because of sanctions and spoke of the stress this would lead to because they were falling behind in class.

Worryingly, some young people told us that they felt that teachers did not consider the effect that certain sanctions, such as a phone call home or sending a student home for wearing the wrong uniform, could have on a student's home life and their relationship with their parents or carers.
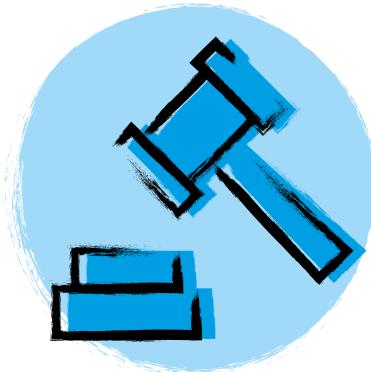
Explainer

In previous research from The Children's Society's DEx programme, young people have also spoken of sanctions not improving their behaviour,[5] and more recently, in a study in Nottingham, The Children's Society's Next Generation programme also found that young people who had experienced exclusion felt that sanctions made no difference to future behaviour.[6]

5 The Children's Society. (2022). Youth Voice SEND and Exclusions. 26.
6 **The Children's Society. (2023). Behaviour management and school exclusions: Voice of the next generation. 19.**

Explainer

To address the issue of missed learning, some schools have introduced a goal time limit for how long students are outside of the classroom (for example, West Lea School).[7]

7 **West Lea School. (2023). Relationships and Behaviour Policy.**

Explainer

Recent research conducted by the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition about behaviour management techniques found that the use of common sanctions such as isolation or removal rooms was seen by 90% of young people as harmful to their mental health.[8]

8 **Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition.** (2023). Behaviour and Mental Health in Schools.

Young people told us about sanctions:

"Sanctions are disproportionate."

"Don't make a scene."

"Worrying about breaking rules affects physical and mental health."

"Sanctions don't fix behaviour, can build up more anger and be very degrading."

"Playground bans are unfair."

"You're missing valuable lesson time if you're sent out – 15 minutes is way too long."

"Don't be 'phone happy' – lots to consider when phoning home."

"Isolation doesn't work."
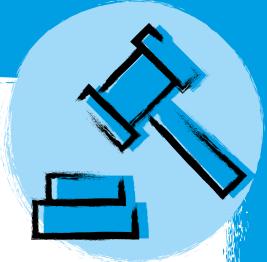
Checklist: Sanctions

- **Solutions rather than sanctions**
  - Responses to behaviour should be about focusing on what is causing it, and what solutions can be found to address it.
 - We advise using the term solution instead of sanction. See **'Language and Communication'** section.

- **Prioritise restorative conversations**
  - Students we spoke to often didn't understand why their behaviour had led to a certain sanction or didn't receive an explanation about why they were receiving a certain sanction or punishment.
  - Before any further escalation, ensure a restorative conversation has taken place between staff member and student.

- **Regulation instead of removal**
  - Removal from the classroom should be a last resort. It should be done in the best interest of the student and framed as an opportunity for a student to regulate themselves.
  - If a student must be moved out of the room to regulate, avoid drawing attention to the situation or the student, as they may already be feeling shame or embarrassment. School staff can model the behaviour they would like to see in these situations.

- **10-minute time limit if removed from classroom**
  - If a student does need to be removed from a classroom in order to regulate, aim for a time limit of 10 minutes for how long they are away from the learning environment. Every minute out of class is a minute of lost learning.
  - Removal from the classroom should be based on circumstance and need. If a student is taken out of class, teachers should ask what they need to help regulate themselves and where they might spend the time out.

- **Accountability for effectiveness of sanctions**
  - School leaders – headteachers and governors – need to hold teachers accountable for how effective sanctions are.
  - Adults should record which sanction a child is experiencing, and senior staff should then have a meeting with them about whether the child's behaviour has improved. If there has not been a positive change, alternative support options should be explored to find a solution for students.

- **Phone calls home to be used constructively, rather than as a punishment**
  - There should be a focus on co-operating with parents or carers as a constructive, ongoing conversation, and consider the parents' or carers' needs.
  - Students should be asked about what the best way to speak to their parents or carers is and informed that the call is to look for solutions with parents or carers.

Sanctions: Actions we have taken in our behaviour policy

Solutions rather than sanctions	■ .... ■ ....
Before escalation, ensure restorative conversation has taken place	■ .... ■ ....
Regulation instead of removal	■ .... ■ ....
10-minute time limit out of class	■ .... ■ ....
Staff accountability for effectiveness of sanctions	■ .... ■ ....
Phone call home should be used constructively	■ .... ■ ....

Identity and uniform

Young people we spoke to felt their identities were repressed by policies, forcing them to be someone they weren't.

While there was agreement that school uniform was necessary and could be beneficial in a lot of cases, some specifics were seen as unnecessary, illogical, and oppressive to certain students.

Rules around hair and hairstyles were described as racist and white-centered, with students with afro hair being disproportionately affected. Young people with afro hair felt as if their identities were being repressed when their white peers weren't, and that they would face sanctions merely for expressing their culture.

For students with diverse gender identities, those we spoke to felt little to no accommodation was made for them to feel comfortable in uniform and there was a lack of understanding from staff about the harm this could do. Similarly, students who wear religious headwear felt that policies did not accommodate them and that added costs associated with purchasing a school-branded headscarf were not fair.

Explainer

In December 2023, the Government issued new transgender guidance for schools. However, children's charities have raised concerns about this guidance.

Ultimately, young people found that worrying about rules around uniform and hair would distract them from learning, doing more harm than good.

Young people told us about identity and uniform:

"You're **forced** to be someone **you're not,** we feel **repressed** at school."

"What does hair **have to do with** education?"

"Hair policies are **specifically** tailored to white hairstyles."

"**Sensitivity** around religious headwear."

"**Bullying policies need** to **specifically ban** transphobia and gender **identity bullying.**"

"Hair policy **does not** match my **culture.**"

Checklist: Identity and uniform

- **Rules on identity and uniform should highlight how the world should be, rather than what it shouldn't be**
  - Policies that set rules and conditions around children's identity and culture condition them to think that their identity and culture do not fit the norm and are wrong. This can have long-term damaging effects. Policies should celebrate different identities, rather than penalise students for them.

- **'Hair we celebrate'**
  - Instead of policies outlining banned hairstyles, they should outline hair types and styles that school celebrates. These should be inclusive of all hair types, including natural afro hair.
  - Young people we spoke to experienced policies that weren't inclusive as racist and damaging to their wellbeing.
  - When deciding on celebrated hairstyles, school leaders should give students from global majority backgrounds the opportunity to provide feedback so their culture and identity is respected.

- **Prioritise comfort**
  - If students are comfortable in their uniform, they are in a better mindset to learn.
  - Uniform rules should be more flexible to allow students to wear the uniform of the gender they identify with, without needing to make a declaration about their gender.
  - Rules should use common sense with weather – if it is warm, allow for shorts and skirts, if it is cold, allow for jumpers and coats. Being too hot or too cold is more distracting to learning than wearing clothing appropriate to the weather.

- **Remove rules around school branded religious headwear**
  - Young people we spoke to told us that it feels unfair that students who wear religious headwear are faced with higher costs and the threat of sanctions for not wearing a school-branded headscarf.
  - Arbitrary rules on headscarves can cause students stress. Students should be allowed to wear a headscarf in the colour of their choice.

- **Explicitly ban transphobia and gender identity bullying**
  - While many policies outline how school will respond to some discriminatory bullying, rarely do they explicitly mention transphobia or gender identity bullying.
  - If adults are unsure of what language to use or how transphobic and gender identity bullying manifests, they can provide students who identify as this with the opportunity to provide feedback. Having shared and agreed language to describe these aspects that are widely understood across a school community could be highly beneficial.

- **#CutTheCost of uniform**
  - Schools must commit to cutting the cost of school uniform so that it is affordable for all students and families, as per the School Uniform Act. More information about The Children's Society's **#CutTheCost** campaign is available at **childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-campaigns/cut-the-cost-school-uniforms**.

Identity and uniform: Actions we have taken in our behaviour policy

Celebrate all identities and cultures

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- ....

Remove racist hair rules and celebrate all hair types and styles

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- ....

Consultation with students from global majority backgrounds about hair policy

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- ....

Remove rules around school branded headscarves

- ....
- ....

Explicitly ban transphobia and gender identity bullying

- ....
- ....

Cut the cost of school uniform

- ....
- ....

Power

Young people we spoke to felt powerless at school, with unbalanced power dynamics giving school staff too much power over students. Many questions were raised about how teachers are held accountable for how they enforce behaviour policies and treat students.

It was felt by the young people we consulted with that in their experience, teachers had the power to use behaviour policies however they wanted. Young people were also not aware of consequences staff could face if the policies were applied unfairly.

Regarding managing behaviour incidents, young people told us that they would like to be empowered to make decisions about their behaviour, by being given clear, consistent instructions about what the consequences of their behaviour could be that they themselves could be held accountable to.

Young people also felt like their voices were never considered when policies were developed. This could be an area for school governors and boards to consider when approving policies.

Explainer

In previous research by The Children's Society, young people have said that power imbalances between students and staff can cause tension.[9]

9 **The Children's Society. (2023). Behaviour management and school exclusions: Voice of the next generation. 22; The Children's Society. (2022). Youth Voice SEND and Exclusions. 12.**

Young people told us about power:

"Don't feel like you can challenge."

"The [behaviour] policy is used very inconsistently."

"Teachers have too much power to punish."

"Who are teachers accountable to?"

"Are there consequences if teachers don't follow policies?"

"What is 'disruptive' is subjective, and up to the teacher's discretion, which can be unfair."

"Holds students to a standard that teachers themselves aren't held to."

"Refresh behaviour policy every year with student council."

Checklist: Power

- **Record students' views when recording behaviour incidents**
  - When a teacher is recording a behaviour incident, give the student an opportunity to provide their view and include this in the record.

- **Ask 'why?'**
  - Always give students the opportunity to explain why they are behaving in a certain way.
  - Allow for a respectful conversation to happen between teacher and student to identify what is causing behaviour.

- **'What to expect from adults in our school'**
  - Ensure students are aware of what they can expect from adults in school.
  - Make it clear what will happen if a teacher does not meet these standards.
  - Have a printed copy of a document outlining expectations of teachers visible in every classroom.

- **Visible step-by-step guides of behaviour management process**
  - Policies must outline a clear, step-by-step process of how behaviour will be managed. This could be summarised on a single page and co-created with students.
  - Include examples of which behaviours would lead to each step.
  - Processes must ensure that flexibility and personalisation for students will be considered when managing behaviour, and that students will be treated with equity.
  - Have a printed copy of a document outlining behaviour management process visible in every classroom.

- **Give student council bodies power to raise concerns**
  - Create a process where students can raise concerns with student council bodies about behaviour incidents or management and give the student council bodies the opportunity to raise this with senior staff.

- **More support for teachers**
  - Designate a support member of staff who can be on call to come and support a teacher with behaviour incidents.
  - Teachers should also be offered reflective supervision to discuss issues they may be facing.

Power: Actions we have taken in our behaviour policy

Recording students' views in behaviour incidents

■ ....

■ ....

Addressing what is the root cause of a student's behaviour

■ ....

■ ....

Outline what students can expect from adults in school

■ ....

■ ....

Ensuring behaviour management process is clear and visible in every classroom

■ ....

■ ....

Give student bodies more power to raise concerns

■ ....

■ ....

More support for teachers

■ ....

■ ....

Language and communication

Words are powerful. Often, the language used in policies is punitive, with similarities to language commonly used in a criminal justice context.

Language in policies often attributes blame to students for disrupting others' learning, creating feelings of shame and embarrassment. Language can also be very ambiguous, leading to inconsistencies in how policies are implemented by different staff.

Young people also spoke of how they experienced teachers communicating with them, where they felt little respect was shown, including language labelling students with a reputation and students rarely feeling listened to by staff.

The way teachers and teaching staff communicate with students stems from language outlined in school policies. Communication and language must be respectful, clear, and easy to understand for all.

Explainer

In previous research with young people, The Children's Society identified that many students equate feeling listened to by teachers to feeling cared for. The importance of listening cannot be overstated.[10]

10 **The Children's Society. (2022). Youth Voice SEND and Exclusions. 22.**

Young people told us about language and communication:

"Words are very prison-like."

"Teachers **should** refer to us by our **chosen names.**"

"The **language in policies** is very **ambiguous.**"

"Teachers don't always know how to offer support and how to deal with bullies."

"Talk to students and listen."

"School is about more than just learning subjects – need to learn things like accountability, importance of doing certain things."

"Teachers don't talk to students how they would talk to another adult."

Checklist: Language and communication

- **Support rather than stigmatise**
  - Students can be burdened with reputations because of language adults use about them, which can be very difficult to shake.
  - Policies should contain a section titled 'Language we don't use about our students' outlining phrases and words adults should not use about students and suitable alternatives.

- **Respect chosen names**
  - If a student has transitioned or has changed their gender identity, it should be explicitly stated in policies that teachers will respect this and use students' chosen names and preferred pronouns.

- **Clear language – no ambiguity**
  - Ambiguity in language used in policies leaves them open to individuals' own interpretations and the young people we spoke to described how they had found these harmful if a student already has a reputation or if it feels to a student like a teacher does not like them.
  - Language in policies must be simple, clear, and universally understood by all. Classes can agree on expectations using a common language everyone understands.

- **Understand students' language**
  - Students will use language that is different from what teaching staff use.
  - When restorative conversations happen, space must be given for both adults and students to explain what they meant by certain language.
  - If there are common terms and phrases students use that adults interpret negatively, but that is not a student's intention, these should be sense checked with the student council.

- **Positive language**
  - Language used in policies and by staff should be strengths-based and focus on students' positive qualities.
  - Language should frame and model what should be done, as opposed to what shouldn't.
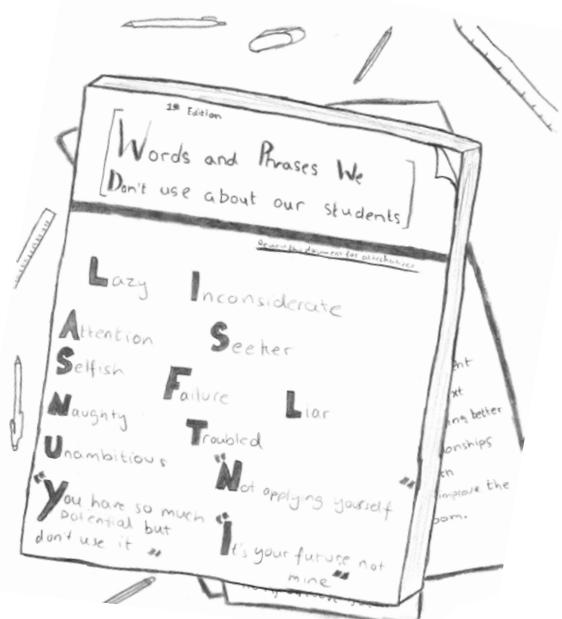
Language and communication: Actions we have taken in our behaviour policy

Support rather than stigmatise

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- ....

Outline language you do not use about your students

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- ....

Respecting students' chosen names

- ....
- ....

Use clear consistent language

- ....
- ....

Understanding the language students use

- ....
- ....

Using positive, strengths-based language

- ....
- ....

Next steps

This resource is the first phase of this project.

While this resource can be read online and implemented by schools, we want to proactively work alongside students and school leaders to help adapt behaviour policies and approaches to behaviour to make school more inclusive for all.

In phase two of this project, we will offer schools and their governing bodies the opportunity for in-person sessions with us, the team of young people who developed this checklist, to discuss the resource and how it can be used to make behaviour policies more inclusive.

Explainer

The Children's Society will be producing a supplementary resource to support schools to embed these checklist points into their behaviour policies. This will include references to other resources and guidance to support this.

Adopting any of these checklist points would be a positive step forward. By working together, we hope to implement change in schools' approach to behaviour that will support both students and staff.

If you would like to be involved in phase two of the project, please contact:

infodex@childrenssociety.org.uk or

info@thedifference.com

Every young person should have the support they need in order to enjoy a safe, happy childhood.

That's why we run services and campaigns that make children's lives better and change the systems that are placing them in danger.

The Children's Society is bringing hope back to children's lives.

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The
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Society