Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

The High Road and the Low Road: The Difference Between Safety and Safeguards

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

## Introduction

Often, a reason why a student of diverse ability is excluded from a general education classroom (referred hereon as mainstream classroom or setting), or removed to a special education setting, is because that student uses behaviour that causes concern to other people. Currently termed ‘behaviours of concern’, these are behaviours that could cause physical harm or danger to themselves or others, or cause damage to property. In schools, “behaviours of concern can result in distress for the students involved, those witnessing the incident, or their parents and staff members.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

For a school deepening its practice as an inclusive school community, the challenge is how best to support students with such behaviours so they can remain in the mainstream setting and in ways that advance their valued membership in the school community.

This tool is designed to be a starter for thinking and action; it is not intended as a complete recipe for responding to behaviours of concern and it does not cover approaches such as Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) and Positive Behaviour Support (PBS). This tool is designed to assist school staff (primarily educators) to reflect on their approach to supporting students of diverse ability, where aspects of a student’s behavior cause concern.

## Ideas

Staff who engage with students (leaders, educators, teacher aides, therapists) at schools striving to be inclusive communities need to understand the following concepts: behaviours of concern, safety measures, and safeguarding measures. This sets the foundation for understanding how such concepts are relevant to providing supports to students to safeguard their continued participation and valued membership in the school community.

Behaviours of Concern

Behaviours of concern, previously called ‘challenging behaviour’, are when a person does something that harms or endangers themselves or other people or property. This term is often used with reference to people living with disability, especially students living with disability. Behaviours are only considered ‘of concern’ when they cause a problem to the person or those around them; keep in mind though that the behaviour is the problem, not the person.[[2]](#footnote-2) Examples of behaviours of concern in schools can include but are not limited to:

* self-injuring behaviour, such as hitting/kicking walls, head-banging
* aggression towards other students or staff, including hitting, biting, kicking, hair pulling
* throwing furniture or other objects at students or staff
* a verbal threat of harm which you reasonably believe a student will immediately enact
* running onto a road or near some other hazard.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Managing Risk

When a person has circumstances that present risks, those around the person will be inclined to act in ways that can manage that risk, including finding ways to reduce that risk.

Take the example of a toddler discovering the world and at risk of placing their wet fingers in a power point, their caregiver might take steps to restrict access to those power points by way of blocking access to rooms where power points are located. This is a ‘safety measure’. Sometimes safety measures can create other problems. Blocking a toddler’s access to all rooms where there are power points might mean putting the toddler in a gated playpen all day; it’s safe but it precludes the positive aspects of exploring the world outside the playpen.

This leads us to contemplating ‘safeguards’. Using the same example, a safeguard for a toddler exploring a room that has power points might include using plastic plugs or safety covers. This manages the risk of electrical hazards that may be encountered from a toddler putting their little fingers or small objects into plug sockets, without obstructing opportunities for play in the room.

For the purpose of this tool, the difference between a safety measure and a safeguarding measure is:

* A safety measure is designed to remove risk. In removing that risk, opportunities can also be removed.
* A safeguarding measure is designed to manage risk, so that opportunities are not removed. Opportunities are retained, and so is some risk

Thinking about the risk of drowning, a range of safety measures are obvious including barriers between people and water, removing water, and so on. However, while it is easy to identify a range of safety measures to reduce the risk of drowning, the default approach is one of safeguarding; people are taught to be as safe as possible around water, which includes learning to swim. This does not eliminate the risk of drowning, but it is a way of managing the risk without limiting opportunities that water presents such as employment (working in industries that involve proximity to water), recreation (going to the pool or beach), and fellowship (being with friends in or near water).

Thinking about the education context, there will always be some students that are viewed as bringing greater risk of harm or danger to themselves and others. For example, concerns about behaviour in the classroom that seems difficult to manage, or the risk of a student leaving the school campus and running onto a road. Sometimes, this can result in the student being labelled as having ‘challenging behaviour’ or even labelled as a ‘challenging student’. When this label is assigned to the student, the focus can then become one of reducing the possibility of that behaviour happening. In other words, the issue is defined as managing the challenging behaviour. This can then lead to solutions that focus on minimising the emergence of the behaviour and containing it when it happens so that other people are less affected by it. This can then result in safety measures that can include removing the student from the classroom or placing the student in a separate room. These safety measures also train other students to see this student as somehow different from them or ‘other’. This reinforces the toxic narrative that people living with disability are taken care of somewhere else, because they are different to regular folk and therefore regular folk aren't involved with them as fellow students, friends, workmates, etc.

By assigning the label of ‘challenging behaviour’ and undertaking safety measures, we have reduced the opportunity for the student to be a valued participant in the mainstream setting, and in so doing have reduced their standing in the eyes of their peers. In this way, the safety measures have reduced the student’s opportunities and make it more likely the student living the disability has a lifestyle characterised by separation from their nondisabled peers; this then continues and expands into adulthood.

The alternative is to reframe the issue. Instead of the focus being managing the ‘challenging behaviour’, attention is on how best to deliver an inclusive education to the student. The right to inclusive education is established in various policies and laws including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. With this context, attention shifts to identifying and providing supports to the student to safeguard their continued participation and valued membership in the mainstream classroom and the school community.

The infographic on the next page is a visual summary of these ideas, giving rise to the concepts of ‘The High Road’ and ‘The Low Road’.

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated

## Actions

Where a student is identified as having some vulnerabilities that place them at risk of being removed from the classroom, school staff (primarily the educator) need to contemplate what types of support have the best chance of advancing and upholding the student as a valued member of the mainstream class.

Actions to assist with this include the following:

Understanding Behaviour

Becoming familiar with the basics of techniques such as ABA and PBS. School staff do not need to be experts, although some jurisdictions are implementing a schoolwide PBS framework; they just need to understand the premise, which is that all behaviour has a purpose. “Behaviours are an important form of communication.”[[4]](#footnote-4) If we can understand the purpose of the behaviour to meet a need, we can identify other ways the student’s need might be met, which can safeguard her/his valued membership in the class. School staff need to be cognizant that “Without effective and functional methods of communication, concerning behaviour may increase in frequency, duration and intensity as students struggle to communicate their needs.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Getting to Know the Student Beyond Their Apparent Vulnerability

This might seem obvious, but it is not uncommon for a person to be defined by a characteristic such as disability; this has been the basis for traditional segregation and discrimination. Even when done benignly, it can result in a person being unknown to those around them and being the subject of stereotyping based on a single characteristic. Key questions for school staff to reflect on knowing the student beyond perceived vulnerabilities include:

1. What do I know about this student’s strengths and gifts?
2. How can I discover this student’s strengths and gifts further, and make sure they are revealed to others?

Reviewing Proposed Measures Before They are Implemented

Where an educator or another other staff member develops a plan, involving measures to respond to a student’s vulnerability or behaviours of concern, it is helpful to review the plan against the following questions:

1. Will this measure make it more likely the student can stay within the mainstream classroom?
2. Will this measure make it more likely the student will be seen in valued ways by their fellow students and other members of the school community?
3. Will this measure make it more likely that the student can learn and grow in the mainstream setting?

A good plan, that is likely to produce a positive outcome for the student, will yield ‘yes’ to all three questions.

## More Information

‘First, discover their strengths’ article in Educational Leadership exploring how neurodiverse students can flourish if educators construct advantageous environments that minimize their weaknesses and maximize strengths. Available online http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct12/vol70/num02/First,-Discover-Their-Strengths.aspx

‘Good Teaching: Inclusive Teaching for Students with Disability’ publication by Department for Education, Tasmania is a practical support resource to give teachers more confidence in working with students with disability. ‘https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/Documents/Good-Teaching-Inclusive-Teaching-for-Students-with-Disability.pdf

Information from the Victorian Department of Education and Training about School-wide positive behaviour support (SWPBS), a framework for school communities to develop positive, safe, supportive learning cultures, and SWPBS in Victorian schools. https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/management/improvement/Pages/swpbs.aspx

Information from the Victorian Department of Education and Training about prevention and early intervention of restraint and seclusion including actions for schools to address behaviours of concern. https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/behaviour/restraint/Pages/earlyintervention.aspx

The Citizenhood publication by JFA Purple Orange about building more helpful and impactful supports around a person living with disability:

Williams, R. (2013). Model of Citizenhood Support 2nd Edition. Julia Farr Association. Available online <http://www.valuesinaction.org.au/application/files/7614/7253/8281/Model_of_Citizenhood_Support_2nd_Edition_FINAL.pdf> or hardcopy via [admin@purpleorange.org.au](mailto:admin@purpleorange.org.au)

## Acknowledgement

This tool was written by Robbi Williams, CEO of Julia Farr group and edited by JFA Purple Orange.



1. State Government of Victoria (2019). Restraint and seclusion: prevention and early intervention. Department of Education and Training. Retrieved from https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/behaviour/restraint/Pages/earlyintervention.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One World for Children (n.d.). CHCECE006 Support behaviour of children and young people. Retrieved from https://aspire-solidus-production.s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/assets/NEXECE006/samples/NEXECE006.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. State Government of Victoria (2019). Restraint and seclusion: prevention and early intervention. Department of Education and Training. Retrieved from https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/behaviour/restraint/Pages/earlyintervention.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. State Government of Victoria (2019). Restraint and seclusion: prevention and early intervention. Department of Education and Training. Retrieved from https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/behaviour/restraint/Pages/earlyintervention.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)