

NEWB Guidelines on Developing School Codes of Behaviour

Draft for consultation, April 2007



Barnardos' Submission

25th June 2007

Introduction

Barnardos welcomes the development of the Guidelines for Developing School Codes of Behaviour and the invitation to make a submission to the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) of our suggested amendments to the draft Guidelines.

Process (the blue chapters)

We welcome the emphasis throughout these chapters on an inclusive approach, involving the entire school community, to developing the school Code of Behaviour. The focus on the benefits of involving both parents and students in the process, and on using creative means to do this, is particularly useful. Barnardos asks that consideration is given as to how to involve, and to keep informed, parents who do not have a working knowledge of English. For example, the school Code of Behaviour could be documented in the languages most frequently used by parents of students.

We were also pleased to see the document highlight the importance of involving all students and parents including those who don't usually participate in formal committees.

A number of concerns with regard to resourcing this process arise:

- Will independent professional facilitation be made available to schools free of charge and within a reasonable period of time?
- Will teachers and other school personnel who wish to facilitate the process themselves be provided with the training, support, time, advice and the materials to equip them to do so?

There is a need to clearly state who has the final say on a school's Code of Behaviour where a difference of opinion, or a conflict, arises.

Barnardos believes that student support for and sense of ownership of the Code is, rather than may be, vital to ensuring its success. To this end, it is crucial that students have a sense of having actively participated in the process. When poorly executed, consultation can be a disempowering process for many. The importance of getting the process right highlights the need for those facilitating the process to be equipped with the necessary skills and resources. The summary box at the end of this chapter is excellent in how it details what the application of the Guidelines entails.

Philosophy (the red chapters)

Barnardos also welcomes the establishment of principles underpinning an effective code of behaviour. We are also pleased with the recognition of the link between educational disadvantage and unacceptable behaviour and the need for the Code to reflect the school's commitment to address educational disadvantage.

Also welcomed is the emphasis on a holistic approach, and on developing a shared understanding about behaviour between teachers, parents and students.

The attendant focus on developing positive relationships within the entire school community is considered crucial by Barnardos in promoting positive behaviours and learning.

Policies (the green chapters)

The section on promoting good behaviour demonstrates a strengths perspective for considering student behaviour and gives clear guidelines on how to build on what students are doing well with regard to both their efforts and achievements.

The application of 'Standards to promote good behaviour' to the whole school community reinforces the holistic approach taken by the Draft Guidelines.

Sections 7.2/7.3

Barnardos is of the view that increased emphasis need be given to the need to explore with students (and parents) differences in views on behaviour, learning and rules, possibly under the heading *Building Capacity*. It would be useful if these sections could be further developed to include differences in needs, abilities, and comprehension. It would also be important in this section to acknowledge how cultural differences between teachers, students and parents can impact on understanding. This issue can take on particular significance in schools located in disadvantaged areas.

Barnardos would like to see the development of a practice guidance or tool to support and guide teachers in their work regarding difference and understandings.

Procedures (the purple chapters)

Notification of a child's absence from school [p.46]

With regard to the first bullet point under this heading, it would seem important for schools to explain to parents the reasons why it is important that their child's absences from school are made known to the school. The development of a shared understanding in this regard would help increase compliance with that process outlined. With regard to the use of forms by parents to fill in regarding absences, Barnardos asks that schools give consideration to the varying levels of literacy among parents.

Barnardos would suggest that it is also important to outline the procedure to be followed by schools in notifying parents when their child is absent from school, particularly when the absence is continuous. We would also be concerned that parents are notified of a child's absence from school in case a child protection issue has arisen.

Section 9

Building relationships with support services working with the child

Barnardos is of the view that an additional section on '*Building relationships with support services working with the child*' needs to be developed. Support services could include those engaging young people in breakfast clubs, after-schools groups, counselling, family support, etc.

Key points to be raised in the section would include:

- The importance of ascertaining with parents and students whether they are engaged with support services
- Whether it would be useful for the service to be involved in supporting a student to manage their behaviour in the school context and to comply with the school Code of Behaviour; and to offer support and advice to school staff as appropriate
- The importance of seeking the consent of student and parent before making contact with support services and keeping student and parent informed and updated about any contacts

Involving support services, as appropriate, in planning and reviews about a student's behaviour and well-being in the school context, as well as in discussions about the suspension or expulsion of the student where the issue arises.

We acknowledge that the aims of building good linkages with local support services, and of seeking support from appropriate services, have already been mentioned on p.37 under the heading of *Specialised support for a small minority of students*. However, we believe that the importance of building relationships with support services needs to be a stronger theme throughout the Guidelines. Furthermore, the suggestion on p. 37 that 'support should be sought from an appropriate service' needs to be reiterated a number of times in the Guidelines. It may also be helpful to suggest that schools compile a contact list and build linkages with local support services with a view to making referrals to those services as the need arises. We are aware that most schools will have already made these links through the HSCLT.

Section 12.3 Determining the appropriateness of suspending a student

On p.40, the Draft Guidelines state that 'the objective of a sanction is to help the student to learn'. For a student to learn from suspension, it is crucial that its appropriateness as a sanction is thoroughly considered.

Barnardos suggests that two additional questions be listed under the heading *Interventions tried to date*

[p.60]. They are:

- Is the student and/or their parent(s) engaged with any support services?
- What supports/interventions can the service offer at this time to support the student in the school context?

From our experience of working with children and parents when children have been suspended, we are aware that suspension can cause a lot of tension for parents and in the home, and can exacerbate home situations which are already fraught. Suspension can also impact on a child in negative ways which includes falling behind in schoolwork, missing out on peer relationships, being labelled and excluded, as well as lowering of a child's sense of self and esteem. An additional two questions could also be included under the heading *The possible impact of suspension* [p.61].

They are:

- What might be the impact of suspension on this student's health, development and welfare?
- How can we assess this potential impact?

Section 12.8 Implementing the suspension

When a decision is made to suspend a student, Barnardos considers it crucial that planning goes in to making the sanction, at best, something the student can learn from, and, at a minimum, a sanction that will not impact negatively on the student's health, development and welfare. We would like to see two additional bullet points for consideration when the meeting between principal and parents is described.

They are:

- Consider whether engagement with other significant adults and/or support services could benefit the student
- Identify the supports needed for parents for them to be able to address their child's behaviours and its consequences.

It may also be useful for the NEWB to consider whether a modified model of Family Welfare Conferencing could be useful in formulating a response to the behaviours that led the suspension. Barnardos Family Welfare Conference Service has worked with a number of schools and families to address issues concerning behaviour and attendance. The service facilitates the family and student to come up with a plan themselves which is then agreed with the school.¹ The model can help avoid difficulties escalating in the future and is one that increases ownership of a realistic plan, as the child and family have been so involved in its formulation.

In situations where the school knows that a child is linked into community-based services such as an after-schools group, it would be helpful if the school could ensure that the service is aware the child has

1) See case example 1 in the appendix of this document

been suspended. And finally, a form of 'early warning system' may help facilitate timely responses to children in need and help prevent an escalation of unacceptable behaviours.

Section 13.2 The grounds for expulsion

Again, under the heading *Taking steps to avoid expulsion*, Barnardos asks that the following steps be added to those already listed:

- Identifying support services currently engaged with the child and/or their parents and ascertaining the interventions they could provide at this time to support the student and their parents
- To consider whether to involve the services in an assessment of whether and how expulsion could be avoided.

It would also be important to add local support services to those national services listed under the final bullet point in this section.

Expulsion for a first offence

In situations where a Board of Management forms the view that a child is to be expelled for a first offence due to the seriousness of the offence, Barnardos believes that it is useful to also take the view that a child who would engage in such a serious offence is one in need of support and intervention. As such, it is crucial that a plan for the child is formulated which involves an offer of support and/or needs assessment as appropriate. It would also be helpful to consider whether the student can be linked into some form of learning support or a centre of learning, as appropriate.

Impact of expulsion on children

Barnardos has experience of working with a number of children who have been expelled from primary school and would be acutely aware of the isolation and depression experienced by these children. Their experiences inform our position that children who are to be expelled from a school need first to have a clear and realistic support plan in place based on an assessment of their needs. Barnardos has supported children to be able to return to full-time schooling using a range of interventions to respond to the particular need of the individual child and family. Interventions can include individual work, small group work, family support, ongoing needs assessment, and individual therapy.²

2) See case examples 2 and 3 in the appendix

Responsibilities of the Board of Management

In this section it is stated that when a Board of Management decides to consider expelling a student, they must hold a hearing where the Principal and the parents (and student, if over 18) put their case to the Board in each other's presence. Barnardos would like to see this section amended to allow for all students who wish, to put their case forward, and to be provided with the necessary support and preparation to do so. This preparation would need to be facilitated by a person considered suitable to do so by all involved. This person could also act as an advocate on behalf of the child where a student decides they do not want to attend the hearing, or would prefer the advocate to speak on their behalf. Involving students in this way respects the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, The National Children's Strategy and the spirit of the Child Care Act 1991.

Barnardos also asks that the kinds of supports needed for parents to participate in the hearing are considered and identified by the NEWB. For example, how will parents with poor literacy skills be supported to make a written submission to the hearing? Can parents bring a friend or support person to the hearing? Who is responsible for checking that parents understand the purpose and process of the hearing? Will interpreters be provided where parents do not have a working knowledge of English?

Summary

Barnardos welcomes the strengths perspective and focus on positives evident throughout the draft Guidelines. Our suggestions for amendments to the Guidelines have been detailed in this submission. Three key themes underpin the changes we suggest and they are as follows:

- The need for adequate resourcing (including expertise, personnel, training, time, support, materials) of the process of developing the school Code of Behaviour to make it a real participatory process.
- Responses to a student's behaviour take account of how that action could impact on the student's health, development and welfare
- Increase the emphasis on involvement of local support services.

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Appendix

Case Example One: Mark, aged 14 years

Mark is a 14 year old boy who was getting into trouble in school, (being disruptive in class, being suspended regularly, not showing up for school every day). Mark's Year Head contacted the Family Welfare Conference Service Coordinator who then met with the family to go through the concerns the school had about Mark. The Coordinator and the family identified some other extended family members who could be of support to Mark, which included an aunt and an uncle who were also contacted.

Everyone came together to a family meeting. The head teacher from the school began by explaining the concerns the school had. She also answered any questions the family had. The family then met in private to come up with a plan for the young person. Everyone came back together to go through the plan and to see if any extra resources were needed to help Mark and his family. The agreement was as follows:

- Mark would be in at 10pm every school night and at 11pm at weekends
- Counselling would be set up for Mark (at his request)
- Uncle Joe would have Mark over to stay for a short weekend break during the summer
- Mark would join the homework club two evenings a week
- Mark agreed to try and behave better when he was in class
- Mark's mother would attend a family centre; her sister (Auntie Phil) would accompany her to the family centre for the first few visits.

The above was also agreed with the head teacher. The outcomes for Mark have been good. He is more settled, and says the counseling helps him to relax more in school. He is not as tired in the mornings and therefore goes to school more regularly and on time. Mark's mother is not as stressed as she has the support of her sister and she is also making good support links in the family centre.

Family Welfare Conferencing offered everyone the chance to sit down and talk about the issues and to agree a plan. It is a model which can be used to help prevent difficulties escalating in the future. The family is supported to come up with their own plans and suggestions, thus meaning that there is more ownership over the plan (It's not just something they are being told to do by professionals). The young person is part of the whole process and, once again, this helps make the plan more realistic as its not adults telling a child what they think should happen.

Case example 2: Frances, aged 12 years

Frances was 12 years of age and had become excluded from school as result of her behavioural difficulties. As a consequence Frances was not receiving any educational input or experiencing significant structure in her life which was affecting her developmental potential. Barnardos was already working with Frances' family and the staff agreed with her parents to respond with an appropriate service to meet Frances' need to be prepared for secondary school by providing some structure in her life. This involved Barnardos engaging Frances in individual work for two-hours a week over a three month period to provide Frances with educational support and to focus on relationship building in order to achieve the central outcome of Frances attending school on a full-time basis.

This initial intervention prepared Frances to become part of a small group work provision involving others her own age over the summer months and continuing again the following September. This provided Frances with the opportunity to enhance her social skills resulting in Frances achieving her primary outcome of attending secondary school in October of that year.

Case example 3: Ciara, aged 11 years

Ciara is 11 years of age and is attending school her local primary school on a part-time basis as a consequence of her behavioural difficulties. The school personnel were concerned that Ciara's behaviour could exclude her from school permanently. In order to respond to Ciara's needs Barnardos agreed to facilitate a space for Ciara to work with a therapist over the summer months prior to her family agreeing to refer Ciara to the appropriate service in order to receive a psychiatric assessment. Pending the outcome of this and based on an assessment of Ciara's needs, Ciara could receive a suitable intervention in the new term to meet her needs so that she can attend school on a full-time basis.