

Rules of engagement: setting standards for adult behaviour in school

Many organisations set ‘golden rules’, as benchmarks for action, or guidelines for behaviour. Many schools in the UK have adopted the principles of Jenny Mosely’s Circle Time, which has at its heart 10 Golden Rules for children to follow. But what about *adults’* behaviour? Thinking about what adults are expected to do can be just as important when establishing an ethos for a school. When staff at Grangewood special school began defining rules for the way that adults should communicate with children, they could not have realised the enormity of the impact this action would have. Working practices, teaching, and most importantly children’s communication and behaviour changed dramatically. The key to all of this change was simple: looking at the school day from a child’s point of view.

Grangewood School is in Eastcote, in the London borough of Hillingdon, and is typical of most primary special schools in the UK. Over the years there has been a marked change in the pupil population, with more children attending who have severe and profound learning difficulties, including those with complex medical needs and limited mobility. Many pupils have Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), with associated behavioural needs. Like many special schools, Grangewood has a large staff, made up of teachers, Teaching Assistants, Mealtime Supervisors, care staff and visiting therapists. They also have a group of ‘Apprentices’, who are usually 16 year olds from a local college, working for one day a week at the school.

Head Teacher John Ayres described the starting point for the school’s journey: a journey that they are still on, and that now embraces other local schools. “We were working on a mission statement for the school. We wanted to avoid producing something that was top-down, overblown and ultimately meaningless. During a staff training day involving the whole staff, we hit upon the idea of writing the statement from a child’s point of view: as if the child were here with us, telling us what he needed.” What emerged was a list of statements that have come to embody not only the ethos of the school, but act as explicit guidelines for how adults should work:

Treat me with respect and dignity Talk to me, not about me Listen to what I have to say Give me time to respond and interact in my own way Try to understand me: I can’t always understand my feelings Stay calm with me, even if I do not stay calm with myself Allow me to make choices and decisions for myself Let me know what’s going to happen Help me to stay safe Telling me what I am good at builds my confidence.
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Figure 1 Grangewood’s 10 golden rules.

The rules are prominently displayed throughout the school, and in fact they were the first things I noticed as I sat in the school lobby. John was pleased that I had responded to the rules with interest: "When new staff or visitors come here for the first time, they often appear to have a look of stark terror in their eyes. This is quite understandable, because how is anyone without experience of working with children with complex learning needs supposed to know where to start? I tell them that by following the golden rules they will be halfway towards doing a really good job. Our induction for all staff- no matter how short a time they will be with us- is to go through the golden rules and discuss what these mean in practice. I believe that this is the best training they can get."

Talk to me, not about me

Having established the 10 rules, the staff began to work on each one: to describe what they mean in practice, both from a child's point of view and as guidelines for adult behaviour. As a result the school has an ethos that is tangible, and practices that are truly 'child-centred'. On my visit I wanted to look particularly at how adults interacted with children. Practice based on the rule 'talk to me, not about me' was in evidence everywhere.

When working with children who have limited movement, and who may seem very passive, it can be natural to assume that they will not understand what is being said to them, or about them. Consequently adults may inadvertently get into the habit of talking about the child in his presence, as if he is not there.

Unfortunately I immediately fell into this trap when chatting with children in Hannah Paine's class during break time. I could readily interact with a chatty child as she went up and down the slide, and her verbal responsiveness led me to focus a lot of time on her. Courtney meanwhile, was sitting in her wheelchair, and seemed very quiet. I immediately started asking staff questions about her, assuming that she would not understand what I was saying. In the nicest possible way Hannah directed each of my questions to Courtney, who from her reaction made it very clear to me that not only could she understand everything that I had said, but was able to respond, with support, to each of my questions. No harm was done, but this was a salutary lesson for me!

Let me know what's going to happen

We may not realise that changing from one activity to another, either within a classroom or moving to another room, can have a fundamental influence on how children are going to be able to respond and learn. This is particularly true for children who have little mobility and who use wheelchairs. Staff at Grangewood are very aware of this, and as a result all children will be given plenty of time to understand that activities are coming to an end and that they may have to move. As a result it is common practice to see adults getting down to children's eye level and explaining to them exactly what is going to happen. Adults will always assume that the child understands, as well as giving visual cues such as signs and symbols and 'objects of reference'.

Helen Evans' Foundation Stage Class were coming to the end of a very lively session that involved a parachute, balloons and bubbles. Time was allocated to changing the mood to one of relaxation, and talking to the children about what was going to happen next, and then moving slowly to the next room. Each adult talked with the children individually, so they were aware, at whatever level they could understand, that the activity had ended, and that we were all going next door to have a snack. All of the adults, that is, except me.

I was asked to support Ethan, who has very restricted movement and uses a wheelchair. Without thinking, I moved him from the circle and into the other room. When he was there I made a point of saying, "There we are Ethan, it's snack time now". I had, after all, followed the golden rule and let him know what was going to happen. However, as Helen pointed out to me, in the nicest possible way, Ethan had no idea why he was suddenly being taken from one room to another. Although he couldn't necessarily show it, he could be feeling very disorientated and worried by suddenly being whisked away from an exciting activity, with no prior warning. I set about apologising to Ethan, with the assumption that he could understand what I was saying. No harm had been done, and I had learned another salutary lesson.

Golden rules for Transition

If it is advisable to let all pupils know about changing activities, it is absolutely essential for children with ASD to have carefully assisted transitions. Once the 10 golden rules were embedded throughout the school, for the benefit of all pupils, staff turned their attention to looking closely at how to help the very specific needs of children with ASD. If you have ASD, one of the biggest challenges will be transition: from one activity to another, from one room to another, or even understanding that you need to shift your focus of attention within an activity.

John Ayres puts it this way: "If you are a child with ASD, coming to the end of an activity can be like coming to the edge of a cliff. It is really scary, and can increase anxiety enormously, leading to challenging behaviour. This can be just as threatening for children with visual and or hearing impairment. To help us empathise with how it must feel for children, we took part in an exercise where we were blindfolded and put in a wheelchair and moved around with no warning. It was very disorientating and frightening. "

Deputy Head teacher Hilary McDermott explained how staff followed the same process for developing rules for transition as they had for the 10 golden rules. "Once again we imagined that a child was telling us what he needed. In this way we could come up with a set of statements that we now use to plan effective approaches to support classes and individual children with transitions. They also act as a starting point for visitors and newly appointed staff, as well as an effective way of reminding ourselves about what works."

Use of timetables

I need to know what is expected of me. Pictures, symbols and objects of reference help me to do this.

Use of language

I need you to say my name before you talk to me.

Starting and finishing

'Finishing boxes' help me to hand things over or give things up.

Managing the room

I find it hard to settle in a room if the door is open – I want to go out of the door.

Consistency of approach

I need to have the same structure and approach to learning in any classroom I am in. I need you to recognise my anxieties and inform others because I may not be able to. I deal with each of my anxieties in a different way and new staff need to know what helps me in each situation.

Figure 2 Grangewood's golden rules for transition

Wendy Lawson, author and person with autism, endorsed the golden rules for transition while on a visit to the school. She described them as, "Fantastic. Very clear. Gets to grips with what ASD people need to cope with transition and change.

Influencing other schools

The process of developing the golden rules has had a profound effect on pupils and staff at Grangewood. This good practice is now being established in other schools. The school has a busy outreach programme, which includes providing training and support for local mainstream primary schools. The golden rules and rules for transition form an important part of this programme, influencing how children with significant additional needs who are included in mainstream schools.

John Ayres has also been working closely with a special school that is emerging from 'special measures'. "Our first task has been to support staff to change practices in the school, and this began with introducing the 10 golden rules. The very first step was to establish 'Talk to me, not about me'. This can be difficult when talking about children in their presence has become ingrained in staff culture, but it is the first step in moving forward. The golden rules can provide a strong foundation for any staff who have been through a torrid experience such as being in a school that has been placed into special measures. They can help adults to focus on core principles. Once these are established the school can focus on issues such as curriculum, management and governance."

As might be expected, Grangewood's school prospectus is based on the 10 golden rules, and they feature prominently in the school's website. They are a charter for adult behaviour, as well as giving insight into children's needs and how they might see the world. They also provide pointers for establishing practices that promote wellbeing and optimise communication and learning.

As I left Grangewood it occurred to me that it might not be a bad idea if all schools, be they special or mainstream, nursery, primary, or secondary, think about adopting golden rules for adults!

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To find out more about Grangewood School visit
www.grangewoodschool.co.uk