

My Child Got in Trouble at School Today: What Parents Need to Know About School Discipline

The Dreaded Phone Call from the Principal

One day, while at work, you receive one of those dreaded phone calls that only happens to someone else. It is the school Principal and he is informing you that your child was involved in a fight with another student. He is requesting that you come to the school to discuss the situation. Your mind reels. "This can't be possible", you think to yourself, "My child gets good grades and usually respectful. Our family upholds good values and we don't drink or smoke and we have always campaigned against drugs and violence."

Yet, all kids are capable of making mistakes. Part of growing and learning is from making mistakes. We only need to concern ourselves if we keep making the same mistake over and over again. However, sometimes parents compound their child's mistakes by refusing to believe they did something wrong, by looking for loopholes in the case, or by blaming the problem on someone else. Parents need to understand that it is really important to focus their attention, care and concern on their own child when they get in trouble at school. A potentially harmful message is sent to their child when parents focus the blame or attention on the other student as opposed to their own child, and that message is, no matter what you do and no matter what mistake you make, it is never their fault. By saying 'what about the other guy?' the parent minimizes the role of their own child, and when this happens over and over, the child never really learns to accept responsibility for their actions.



Often referred to as "enabling", this teaches kids not to accept responsibility for their actions. By not working with the school to address the real issue, the enabling parent does not allow the child to learn from their mistakes. "I did it. I'm sorry. I will never do it again", are words seldom spoken by children of enabling parents. In the long term, the child will repeat their mistakes and get into more and more trouble. Sometimes well-meaning parents attempt to be supportive but end up enabling the child. The long term result can be disastrous.

If your child gets into trouble at school, a supportive parent might consider these tips:

1. **Stay calm and listen carefully with an open mind to all sides of the story.** The school isn't always right but usually their information is objective and based on thorough investigations. All schools must follow school board policy and procedures on matters of discipline. Principals do not get to make arbitrary decisions.

Make sure you are aware of the established procedures, which can be found on the school website:
(<http://www.rle.sd23.bc.ca/About/CodeConduct/PublishingImages/RLE%20Code%20of%20Conduct.pdf>)
2. **Express genuine disappointment in your child's behavior, but don't overreact.** Also, express your unconditional love and support in the face of adversity (I love you, but I disapprove of your behaviour).
3. **Don't get hung up on what the other student involved is 'getting' as a consequence.** Focus on your child. Fair is not always equal. Every student is unique, and each offense will be dealt with individually depending upon its severity, frequency, student's age and maturity, circumstance, discipline history, special needs, if any, and other factors (is the student interested in changing, do they show remorse, are they respectful of the process and school etc.).

If your child was involved in a verbal or physical altercation with another student, and he/she feels that the conflict was started 'by the other student,' don't buy into this line of thinking. Reinforce with your child the wise advice that we can't control what other people say and do, we can only control what we do.

Every report of misbehavior, no matter how small, has a consequence, and every report is documented. You may not be privy to that information as matters of discipline are confidential and under the Protection of Privacy laws, schools are only able to communicate confidential information with a parent or guardian of the student involved.

Consequences

Possible consequences may include, but are not limited to:

- Verbal or written reprimand
- Problem-solving discussion
- Time Out
- Think sheets (summary of what happened and what they will do differently)
- Letters of apology
- Community service: grounds clean up – garbage detail, wash desk tops, clean floors, chores
- Discipline notes home
- Phone calls home
- Parent meetings
- Isolated work areas
- Restrict play and eating time at lunch and recess
- In-school suspension
- Out of school suspensions
- Counseling
- Anger management course
- Pay for damage or cost of replacement
- Loss of privilege to ride bus
- Loss of privilege to stay for lunch
- Time in Target Room (Behavior Support Room)
- RCMP contacted in serious matters

The following factors are considered when assigning discipline and suspensions:

- the student's age and maturity level
- the intent of the behavior – was it malicious or designed to inflict harm (a formal threat assessment protocol may be used)
- the severity, intensity and frequency of the behavior
- the student's previous record involving similar behaviors
- the student's level of cooperation in the investigation
- the student's level of remorse
- the student's cognitive functioning – were they aware of what they were doing and the possible impacts to others and the school? Is the student a designated special needs student?
- were previous school-based interventions implemented (counseling or in-school suspension)

4. It's all About Trust and Relationships

At the end of the day, you need to trust the school. All discipline processes are laid out in policy and schools do not 'turn a blind eye' to discipline matters.

5. Understand the schools position.

This isn't always easy. Sometimes you and the school may not be in complete agreement. Discuss this without the child present and try to come to a resolution which can involve the district appeal process if necessary. In the end, let your child know you support the school's decision. It will help your child in the long run, if you model respect for the school system. Use this teachable moment to revisit lessons of right and wrong and reinforce your family values.

6. Allow the Child to Learn from Their Mistakes

As school Principals, Vice-Principals and teachers, we regularly deal with children making mistakes. They come from all age groups and from families in all walks of life. Our goal is for kids to learn from their mistakes so they don't repeat them. We want kids to acknowledge their mistakes and face consequences honestly, apologize sincerely, and make a commitment not to repeat the mistake. Working with the school and remembering the four tips listed above will help ensure any mistake is a one time learning opportunity and not the beginning of many turbulent years ahead.