Traveller Boys

Strategies for Success in School

Guidance for Schools
Corporal punishment as a means of discipline at home is not uncommon. Some Traveller boys are used to being ‘smacked’ for poor behaviour.

Bare-knuckle boxing is a source of legend and admiration within some Travelling communities, and matches continue today. From an early age, Traveller boys may be exposed to sports involving violent aggression. Pupil may try to emulate what they have seen and what is respected within their culture.

Extended family plays an important and integral role in Traveller life. Traveller children spend a lot of time in adult company and are comfortable conversing with adults as equals. Pupil may seem over-familiar and perhaps disrespectful when interacting with staff members.

Traveller parents may have experienced prejudice and hostility from the settled community during their own schooling, and may have ambivalent feelings about education and school. Parents may find it hard to trust members of staff or other adults from the settled community. Pupil could be aware of this barrier and find it hard to confide in school staff. On rare occasions parents may encourage their child to deal with any issues himself, rather than rely on the school system, and may give the advice, ‘If another child hits you, you hit him back’.

Highly mobile Traveller pupils may be introduced to a class during term-time. Pupil may feel isolated from his peers. Traveller pupils may stick together on the playground. This may be viewed as intimidating, or as an inability to interact with children from diverse backgrounds, when it may be no more than a form of peer support.
**Suggested Strategies for promoting good behaviour**

- Ensure time is taken to explain the Behaviour Policy to both parents and pupil
- Discipline measures should be firm, fair and above all consistent; changing strategies too quickly may send the wrong message

- School expectations should be clearly explained to Traveller pupils
- Value this element of Traveller culture by allowing the pupil to share his knowledge of the subject. Encourage ‘project’ work and parental involvement.
- Encourage ‘letting off steam’ through physical activities such as midday or out-of-school sports clubs

- Do not presume the pupil is being disrespectful if he is outspoken with adults
- Speak to the child in a concise, adult manner. A condescending or belittling approach is likely to have the opposite effect of what is intended.
- Ensure the pupil understands what language and methods of communication are and are not acceptable in school

- Remember that first impressions count. Administration and non-teaching staff play an important role in ensuring a family feel welcome and valued.
- Take the initiative to maintain contact with Traveller parents. Meet parents at end of the day for a ‘casual’ chat as often as possible. Share the positive aspects of the school day.
- Traveller parents are as anxious as any parent that their child is happy and making good progress in school. Do not misinterpret any lack of interaction as a lack of care or interest.
- Be aware of prejudice and name-calling (“gyppo” and “pikey” are the most common epithets) and deal with any occurrence as a racist incident
- Encourage parents to become involved in different areas of school life, such as governor, class helper or lunchtime supervisor
- Ensure midday staff have an understanding of these issues, and of Traveller culture. Arrange for the TES to carry out an informal training session.

- Adopt a ‘buddy’ system for each new Traveller pupil to ensure they assimilate as quickly as possible
- Monitor friendships to avoid isolation from peers
- Establish a sanctuary area where pupils worried about bullying, harassment, or who are overwhelmed by school pressures, can retreat
- Identify a key adult within school for the family and the child to approach with any problems or misunderstandings
What Next?

Consider your relationships with Traveller families and take time to reflect upon the following questions:

1. How well does your school understand Traveller culture and lifestyles?
2. Are you confident that your Behaviour Policy is consistent and yet flexible enough to respond fairly to the sort of situations mentioned previously?
3. How would you respond to Traveller parents who may be suspicious of and perhaps hostile towards school?
4. How do you celebrate diversity within your school and in what ways are Traveller culture part of the curriculum?

Can you think of displays or other projects that could help in this way?

What Headteachers say...

“Adopting a flexible approach has benefited the child a great deal. We have modified the daily timetable to make it more manageable for him and practice a range of anger management strategies. Close liaison with his mother and the TES has enabled us to jointly agree and carry out support strategies to promote positive behaviour.”

Mrs Helen Anderson, Kents Hill First School

“As a school we have made an effort to reflect Traveller culture within the curriculum and have found our efforts beneficial, for instance, our traveller boy was very engaged in his presentation work on Stow Fair.”

Bob Brookes, Lovat Middle School

For further information on any Traveller-related topic contact Milton Keynes Traveller Education Service.

Prepared by the Milton Keynes Traveller Education Service with assistance from the Milton Keynes Primary Behaviour Support Service.

This publication is available to schools in Milton Keynes at no cost. Copies are available for organisations outside Milton Keynes at £2.50 each.