

Student conduct – what do you want and how do you get it?

There was a time when boarding supervisors just wanted student compliance or obedience. If they asked a student or a group of students to do something they would want it done immediately without any fuss or argument. When the cane was phased out of schools and boarding residences, there were dire predictions of chaos and anarchy. Twenty years on we can see the world didn't end but priorities changed and now boarding practice focuses on student growth and development, students choosing positive behaviours for the right reasons, and developing self-reliance and self-determination. But how does this happen and what do we do when a student will not comply or follow instructions?

The overall aim for behaviour in the boarding residence is to create a positive, harmonious, ordered environment where all students can flourish and develop; an inclusive environment where students feel secure, comfortable and valued, and where boarding staff also feel valued and respected. Is this just a dream or does it actually happen?

As we travel around Australia delivering the Certificate IV training for Boarding staff, we have the privilege of visiting a very broad range of boarding residences and schools. We frequently observe boarding environments that are positive, harmonious and ordered.



There is a range of factors that contribute to this including;

1. Intentionally developing a strong current of positive behaviour and practice in the boarding residence,
2. Focusing on positive and mutually respectful relationships between students and boarding staff,
3. Coaching students to choose positive behaviours for the right reasons,
4. Creating an environment that goes beyond supervision and duty of care, to focused student development, so that students leave the residence prepared for the challenges of the post school world, self reliant and self determining.
5. Agreed boundaries with an expectation of compliance, and strategies to enable compliance,
6. Processes that empower students and allow ownership,
7. Policies and procedures that are clear, unambiguous and support the boarding supervisor in their role to respond effectively to any situation that may arise.

This paper will look specifically at developing a strong current of good practice.

A strong current of good practice.

Boarding residences aspire to be an environment where there is a strong current of good practice, with positive behaviours and attitudes. This current of good practice is a function of;

- strong leadership
- staff consistency and good relationships
- a positive 'tone' and effective behaviour management strategies
- firm boundaries

- the majority of students going with the flow
- good modelling by student leaders
- careful student screening

1. Strong leadership

Strong leadership in the residence or Boarding school is critical to developing good tone and a strong current of good practice in the residence.

Visionary Leadership

A visionary leader is clear about what he or she believes and knows what is best for students in the residence. The leader's individual beliefs have developed in collaboration with other stakeholders and articulated into some kind of vision or mission statement.

Community Builder

The leader of a residence or boarding school who is a community builder knows that he / she cannot implement the vision alone. They know that high-functioning teams are essential. They know that a healthy community (for students and staff) will contribute to stability, retention, and investment. They know that human beings crave connection and deep bonds with other human beings and they know how to create these connections and bonds.

You'll know if you're entering a healthy boarding community by the way you are greeted as you arrive, by office staff, students and boarding staff. Just register how many



smiling faces you see. That'll give you a big insight into the health of communities at the residence.

Emotional Intelligence

The third quality of a great leader is one who is emotionally intelligent.

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to understand and manage your own emotions and recognize, understand and manage the emotions of others. An emotionally intelligent leader is usually calm and grounded, empathetic, and is able to deal with conflict between people. Another important quality of an emotionally intelligent leader is the ability to take care of themselves, to manage stress, health, relationships, and so on.

You'll recognize an emotionally intelligent leader if you feel listened to and understood. He won't be distracted, seemingly impatient, or offering what might feel like rote responses to your questions. (<http://www.edutopia.org>)

2. Staff consistency and good relationships

Author Eric Jensen says "when staff members aren't on the same page, odds of success drops off dramatically". If a residence is to attain a strong current of good practice there must be a unified, harmonious team who work well together and support each other. There must be consistency across the team, particularly in areas such as addressing student breaches of boundaries or codes of conduct. It doesn't work when one staff member addresses the breach in a completely different manner to the rest of the team. Students become aware of inconsistencies very quickly and will take advantage of staff differences.

3. A positive 'tone' and effective behaviour management strategies

Boarding staff should focus on establishing a positive harmonious tone in the

residence. It is important that behaviour facilitation strategies are not seen as draconian or punitive. There should be a 'restorative justice' type approach to behaviour breaches rather than the traditional 'blame and punish' routine. There should be a focus on consequences rather than punishment. The behaviour facilitation process should have as a goal the 'long term changing of behaviour' rather than an instant application of a punishment that may have only short term effects on the students' behaviour or attitude.

4. The firmness of boundaries

Boundaries, codes of conduct, or residence rules are necessary to retain order and provide duty of care. Where possible it is good practice to try to establish some sort of student ownership of boundaries in the student code of conduct, and this can best be done at student induction. In most residences it may not be possible to have student input into the formation of code of conduct, but it is possible to get some ownership by having a discussion with students, asking how they feel about the boundaries, and are there any boundaries that they feel are a problem for them personally. Enabling students to see the need for boundaries and for the particular boundaries that will affect their boarding journey, is a way of getting some ownership.

It is important that that the boundaries are very clear and unambiguous; that students know what they mean, and how they are interpreted in daily practice. This provides security and consistency in practice.

5. The majority of students are going with the flow

If you have students in your residence who commence in year seven and spend the next six years in your residence then you have an opportunity to establish good practice early, so that these long-term students are

maintaining good practice and contributing to the positive tone of the Residence. This means that student retention is important and we should be proactive in retaining students. If you have a constantly changing group of boarding students it is difficult to establish a strong current of good practice.

6. Modelling of student leaders

Strong positive student role models will be crucial to establishing and maintaining a strong current of good practice amongst the students in the residence. Boarding staff should proactively develop and empower leaders. Leaders should be appropriately recognised for their role and where possible rewarded. That might be something as simple as a leaders dinner each term.



Some students may not see themselves as leaders or even want to be recognised as a leader but they are strong role models for good practice in the residence. These students should be made aware of their contribution as role models and how important they are to the positive tone and practice in the residence.

8. Student Screening

Student screening is critical to establishing a strong current of good practice. The residence should have very clear parameters for enrolments and a very well set up process for screening new students so that each student meets the enrolment parameters. The screening process should not be driven by

the budget or by administration enrolment goals. It is a mistake to admit students who do not meet pre-agreed screening parameters because enrolments are down, or the residence has not met an enrolment target. There are numerous sad stories about how inattention to screening, or a lax screening process allowed a student to come into the residence who was not appropriate for the program. These students can change the tone in a residence, breach boundaries and even commit illegal acts. An elite school in France allowed a student to attend, who had just been released from prison for sexual assault offences. The student subsequently murdered another boarder.

If the screening process is ineffective then the residence becomes a place where parents are reluctant to send students. It is also very difficult to maintain a strong positive boarding culture or a current of good practice.

