**Rules in crisis**

BY N E D A M U L J l 2021-04-05

RULES are only as important as the purpose they serve and, like most other significant lifestyle changes, they must evolve with the times.  
  
Children have had to put up with stringent protocols during school hours due to the pandemic. From a no `food sharing policy` to keeping masks on in the heat, from little or no play due to the risk of physical contact, to keeping vigilant at all times, they have had to adapt very quickly to new ways. Needless to say, their freedom, selfexpression and connection with peers has been severely compromised. Whilst these rules cannot be relaxed, we can help mitigate their severity by allowing flexibility in other areas. For example, how important is it to take a child to task for shoes not polished, or for arriving at the school gate 10 minutes late? Kids don`t generally come late to school out of choice -it is usually the adult responsible for taking the child to school who might be running behind schedule. Many households are in general flux for a host of reasons and perhaps adults are unable to optimise their time or stick to schedules as they once did. The idea is not to condone late-coming or overlook the importance of rules of behaviour but rather the prioritisation of them as children struggle with the emotional stress of the pandemic. Relaxing stringent rules may be a lesson in compassion at this point, a valuable aspect of learning that children might mirror as adults.  
  
It is not just rules but also the prevalent reward systems that may need reflection.  
  
As the nature of learning changes, so should the pracdces that govern the learning. More than chasing grades, a system of rewards at school that celebrates children helping out each other may perhaps work better than applauding high marks, for which the child feels intrinsically proud anyway and will get positive reinforcement f rom home.  
  
A reflective activity at the end of the week to write about how they helped each other out might develop a sense of community, contribution and self-worth in children.  
  
Anything from wiping a friend`s tears to helping a classmate with homework or listening to a peer`s personal narrative might be recorded in these renecdons. These might be pandemic memories that children could carry along as a reminder of how they braved the crisis and used the circumstances to evolve in healthy ways kind of like preserving a boxful of photographs.  
  
It might prepare them for potentially tougher times in their adulthood. Safety and hygiene are topics that deserve attention in schools, and perhaps awareness of how our sense of hygiene, or the lack of it, can havespillover effects on multiple people.  
  
Sometimes, observation alone can teach a whole lot of lessons better than rules can. If children were asked to look closely at social norms and behaviour in public places and document it in writing or in pictures, there will be a host of things that will come to their notice things they can learn simply through observation such as public spitting and how it is anathema to respectable citizens and particularly harmful during the pandemic. They may also consider children`s interaction in public parks and point out the ways in which it could be made more socially constructive, inclusive and empathetic.  
  
The beautiful thing about rules is that they are made to structure activity and behaviour in particular contexts, and they are not very useful in other contexts.  
  
Handshakes may have been a professional expectation in pre-Covid times they are inarguably a hazard now. Similarly, polished shoes may have been a priority in preCovid times, but clean hands and social sen-sitivity are particularly significant at this time.  
  
Children can easily study online without shoes on, but they cannot avoid washing hands if they wish to keep themselves and others safe. They must alsolearn the skills to help, comfort and equip each other in these times as collaboration and teamwork are required to weather any storm.  
  
As we leave behind our traditional `chalkand-talk` ways to encourage remote learning, self-regulation and independence in children, we might want to consider waiving some old rules that were put in place in normal times, as these times are anything but normal. In fact, every era brings with it new challenges and in these unprecedented times, as educators, we may want to consider keeping only those rules that safeguard the physical and mental well-being of our children and ease the difficulties that social isolation has caused.  
  
Sometimes, even with the best of intentions, we end up hindering more than helping. As Virginia Woolf wrote in To the Lighthouse, `[she] praise[d] his boots when he asked her to solace his soul`.  
  
The polished boots can wait.  The writer is senior manager, Oxford University Press, Pakistan.  
  
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