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Behavior & Discipline: Working together to promote positive partnerships, strengthen relationships, and support our students

1 message

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Dear Mercer Island Families,

Student behavior is one of the more difficult aspects of the teaching and learning process, especially when the conduct has a negative effect on other students, staff, or the school environment. More challenging, however, is finding the appropriate response that promotes learning, healing, and lasting change. The purpose of this communication, while long, is to inform, teach, provide perspective, deepen understanding, and hopefully build a better partnership between families and the Mercer Island School District. This begins by remembering that no one is perfect.

Discipline serves its greatest purpose in schools when viewed as an opportunity to teach rather than punish. It can neither be discussed nor explained without beginning with deepening our understanding of behavior. We will get to this more explicitly, but let us begin with a scenario we can all probably relate to.

PART I - Broadening Our Perspectives of Discipline and Behavior

Life on “the 405”

You are headed to SeaTac airport, running late, and cutting it close for your flight. A loved one living in Philadelphia was admitted to the hospital and is in serious condition. You jump on the 90 east at East Mercer Way and prepare to merge onto the 405 south. Traffic, as usual, is slow at the 90-405 interchange. You hug the far right lane as if about to get off at Coal Creek, whiz by those early mergers, sneak around more timid drivers, and slip onto 405 looking to quickly get over and contemplate the carpool lane. You get kind of boxed in so make an aggressive lane change and accelerate rapidly but a Toyota Prius is going one mile per hour over the speed limit in the fast lane. Again, you consider the carpool lane but refrain. You start tailing the Prius closely in hopes they will move over or speed up. You finally get to the airport after making some additional maneuvers across lanes as you speed through Renton and into SeaTac. And yes, you make your flight.

Here is how you likely perceive your driving behaviors:

1. You have to make this flight to be with your loved one and are justified to drive more aggressively than you normally would.
2. These people need to learn how to merge. Everyone starts the process way too soon on the 405, which creates the infamous backups.
3. You once lived in Los Angeles, Munich, or Seoul where this style of driving is the norm. If anyone thinks your driving is bad they should try living in these cities.
4. Staying in the Coal Creek exit only lane actually helps everyone out by keeping things moving.
5. At least you used your blinker to make the lane changes.
6. The Prius driver has no business driving in the fast lane and should really not even be allowed to drive.

7. You are justified to drive this way because of the personal emergency and promise to only drive like this for this reason.

Now, let us turn this around and view your behavior through the lens of the other drivers:

1. A driver in the merge line onto 405 thinks you are a complete jerk for not waiting in line to merge just like everyone else. They hope someone sees you come up the right side and quickly moves over to block you.
2. As you cut in sharply just before the Coal Creek exit, the driver you cut off sends up a prayer asking for a state trooper to see your erratic driving.
3. The Prius driver was in the carpool lane and just trying to get over to the slow lane so they could exit the freeway at SR 900 in Renton. They always obey the laws of the road and pride themselves on their impeccable driving record. Your tailgating was uncalled for, as they were not intending to stay in the fast lane for long. You are likely from out of state and they wish you would just go back to California.
4. For many other drivers between Mercer Island and SeaTac, your speeding poses a risk to everyone else on the road and is not appreciated. Though you did not see it, a few impolite gestures were sent your way.

If we look through our own perspective, things are quite simple and probably justified to an extent. However, take a moment to contemplate the view from all parties involved and this is really complicated. You are not a bad person; you just needed to make a flight to be with your loved one. The problem is the other drivers do not know this. The other drivers are just trying to get to where they need to go, following the rules and laws of the road, and expecting others to do the same. Love and the need to catch a flight drives your behavior while compliance and safety drives the behavior of the other drivers.

The Intersectionality of Driving on 405 and Student Behavior in the Mercer Island School District

Our students are your children- the most important people in your life and your most prized possession. You want the very best for them and will do anything to protect them physically, emotionally, and psychologically. When you perceive your child to be a victim of another student's behavior you instinctively come to their aid. If accused of being the aggressor or violating the behavior expectations of the schools, you also instinctively come to their aid. In nearly every situation, you will defend them because you love them.

While you are responsible for the well-being of one or more students in our schools, our staff members are responsible for all 4,000. Every student has a right to attend public school. Whereas those other drivers wanted to kick you off the highway but could not, the same is true with students in our schools. I'll explain more later, but the days of expelling students except under very specific and egregious situations are thankfully long gone.

When informed that their child injured someone or was injured by someone else physically or emotionally, a parent will start making assumptions through the lens of their child because they love and want to protect them. The parent of the accused student typically looks for possibilities that can explain or excuse the behavior. The parent of the victim quickly makes assumptions to cast blame and find ways for the person who harmed their child to experience something negative themselves through some form of discipline or consequence. However, just like all of the other drivers on 405 you sped past and cut off to make your flight to see your loved one, no one has all of the information right there in the moment.

At school, this is where our staff is there to assist. It is up to our teachers and administrators to deconstruct student behavior and respond in the best way possible to support all students, even the ones who may have made a choice that hurts others. The Mercer Island School District students are your children. Just like you on 405, no one is perfect, not even our own children. We are all trying our best; sometimes our intentions and impacts on others are incongruent. And if you are the driver hoping that jerk gets pulled over who just cut the merge line on 405, just remember, that might be someone just trying to get to Philadelphia to see a loved one in a hospital.

Part II - The Interconnectedness of Discipline and Behavior

Behavioral scientists remind us that human behavior is a form of communication. A baby cries in their crib when hungry, toddlers scream in the grocery store when denied gummy bears, an adult throws their arms up and gasps in exasperation at the gate counter when their flight is delayed for yet another 45 minutes because of a "mechanical" issue, and you drive aggressively when needing to make a flight. Each of these behaviors sends, albeit different, a message. When distilled down, human actions can be attributed to one of four basic functions of behavior and the behavior can be both positive or negative:

1. Attention seeking- act in a way that will get feedback, positive or negative, from others.
2. Escaping- avoid acting by either refraining altogether or finding an alternative task.
3. Accessing something tangible or desired- act out or in a way to acquire something wanted.

4. Stimulating senses- act to displace discomfort or experience something more pleasant.

For examples of these four basic functions in our schools, scroll to the "FourFunctions" link in Part IV below.

PART III - School and Level Specific Details, Considerations, and Processes

Student behavior is complex because it stems from a need shaped by individual stories, identities, and life experiences. When behavior violates norms, rules, or expectations - especially when others are impacted by the behavior - the circumstance grows increasingly more emotionally charged for the students involved and their guardians or parents. We know students are not defined by their behavior and there is a need being communicated within a behavioral event. However, when impact or harm is caused, there is a need to respond to that impact through various disciplinary approaches. In our schools, behavior is tied to both learning needs and disciplinary actions. The links in this section describe the way we approach discipline and respond to behavior in our schools.

[Elementary Schools](#)

[Islander Middle School](#)

[Mercer Island High School](#)

PART IV - Guiding Laws, Policies and Procedures

The laws and subsequent policies and procedures governing student discipline continuously change, but the purpose is always the same- ensure our schools are safe, orderly, and preserve the right to an education for everyone.

For a compilation of the guiding documents our schools use when enforcing discipline and responding to student behavior, visit www.mercerislandschools.org/jpp. To learn about the four functions of behavior, visit www.mercerislandschools.org/FourFunctions.

Thank you for taking the time to read this discipline and student behavior message. While it is a bit long, I think it gives our community important insight into everything we take into account when behavior and discipline meet.

Sincerely,

Fred Rundle

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