



How to respond to a troublesome mother behaving aggressively towards someone else's child? This issue's Leadership Dilemma finds it's far from clear cut

Mrs Granger and her son James had come to the school with a health warning. This was the fourth school that James had attended in his 10 years of life and it wasn't because they were travelling round the country. Mrs Granger had a habit of falling out with each school she sent her son to. It would start off well, although of course she would have hundreds of stories to tell about the terrible treatment she had received at schools X, Y and Z. But after three or four months some incident would spark a whole torrent of complaints which eventually would lead to her withdrawing James from the school and moving on.

As soon as his current school realised that he was moving on again, the headteacher contacted his new, prospective school. Mrs Granger had shouted across the playground only the day before that she would be moving James immediately to Sunbridge. Carol Houghton, the headteacher at Sunbridge, was forewarned when Mrs Granger and James appeared at reception. But with places in Year 6 and falling rolls she was in no position to refuse his admission.

As predicted, the first few months went well, helped along by the fact that Carol used all her newly devised policies and procedures for admitting a child mid-year. The staff knew the situation and the pre-admission interview and buddying system had helped James to adjust quickly. He

proved to be a likeable boy who had suffered significantly from the frequent school changes and whose academic attainment was below age-related expectations.

On being informed of this Mrs Granger, with some hesitation, agreed that James should receive booster lessons and even volunteered to come in and help with readers in Key Stage 1. But this happy situation was not to last. One morning, before school started, Mrs Kemp, an outspoken mother of a child in Year 4, came rushing into school proclaiming that her child Lucy had been told off by another parent on the playground and that she was having none of it. In the middle of the morning rush she demanded that the school take action or she would go to the governing body.

Carol, fortunately, was in her office at the time and on hearing the commotion she came out to calm Mrs Kemp down and took her into her office to hear the story. With Lucy safely seated in reception Carol heard from her mother how she had been playing in the front playground when she had 'accidentally' tripped James up. On seeing this Mrs Granger had stormed over and proceeded to yell at Lucy in front of the others and warned her, loudly and aggressively, that "she'd have her" if she ever touched her son again and that she'd heard about Lucy bullying other pupils.

Having explained her story, the bell had gone and Lucy, now calm, was taken to class. Carol explained that she would

investigate the incident and would ring Mrs Kemp during the day to let her know what her actions would be. Mrs Kemp was adamant that “that woman should be banned from the playground”.

During the morning Carol spoke to several eyewitnesses and Lucy and James themselves. There appeared to be no deep-seated issues between the children, although Lucy did have a reputation for being quite aggressive and it did appear that she had tripped James up. Following the school’s behaviour policy, Carol referred this to her class teacher and Lucy was punished with missing a playtime. But what to do about the parents?

There seemed to be no alternative but to ask Mrs Granger to come and see her, although Carol was aware that these kinds of incidents tended to trigger the beginning of the hostile relationship that had caused so much trouble in other schools. But how far should she take it? Should she follow her meeting with a warning letter and make it an official ‘yellow card’, as Mrs Kemp wanted – or should she take a ‘softly, softly’ approach and make the meeting a light-touch reprimand?

What are the arguments for issuing a warning letter?

- The incident took place in a busy playground in front of many parents, so taking a firm stand would give the message that this kind of incident was not to be tolerated
- Issuing a letter would provide written evidence of what had been done, which might be needed if Mrs Granger continued to cause trouble and made any complaints against the school
- Mrs Kemp is a popular and well-known character; if she is not satisfied with the outcome she will let everyone know about it
- If Mrs Granger feels she has got away with this, her interfering behaviour may escalate
- The incident was serious. Lucy had been very upset and the threats made were completely out of order
- In an incident the year before, Carol had issued a warning letter to a parent in similar circumstances
- Sunbridge has recently announced a policy of tackling firmly and directly the unacceptable behaviour of parents towards staff, so parents may feel undervalued if the same rules of courtesy aren’t applied elsewhere

Tip 1

Whether issuing a formal warning or not, it is advisable to keep a log of all your significant incidents with parents (see the Manager’s Briefcase in this issue of *SLT*). This need not be a complicated method of recording but will provide you with details for future reference. Parents will have a habit of bringing up previous issues, sometimes from months or even years previously, which they feel you should remember in detail. With many more incidents having taken place in between, you will find it difficult to recall with clarity and confidence unless you have made a note for yourself.

Tip 2

It helps to have a clear procedure to follow with mid-year new arrivals. It can be easy in the middle of the year to miss out a stage in the admission process and this can cause problems later on. Where possible try and ensure that all new enquiries are followed up by a phone call to the previous school so that you can arrange to meet any particular needs the pupil might have. This call can also help with choosing a class or group (again, for more guidance and materials see the Manager’s Briefcase.)

What are the arguments for a light touch reprimand?

- This was the first time that an incident like this had happened with Mrs Granger at Sunbridge
- Lucy did have a history of aggressive playground behaviour – also witnessed and commented on by other parents
- Mrs Granger had a tendency of responding to assertiveness from schools with acts of retaliation, so a letter at this point could well trigger this kind of reaction
- The relationship at present with Mrs Granger is quite co-operative and she may well listen to a calm explanation of concern in a far more responsive way, while a letter may spark hostility
- Mrs Kemp made demands of the school and, although she needs to see that the issue has been addressed, she shouldn’t be encouraged to think she has determined the outcome
- There is no specific policy in the school on how an incident of this kind should be handled, so Carol can explain to anyone who raises the question that each incident is tackled according to individual circumstances
- With Year 6 SATs coming up, the last thing James needs is any more significant disruption to his education

The decision

Carol decided that she would take the light touch this time. She felt that she had to give the foundling relationship with Mrs Granger a chance. James needed some stability and she felt the priority was to try and maintain a line of communication with his mum in order to be able to do that. This didn’t mean that she wasn’t aware of the seriousness of the incident. She would need to talk to Mrs Granger and hope that with a sensitive approach she would be prepared to moderate her behaviour in future.

The dialogue: Carol speaks to Mrs Granger

Carol: Thanks for coming in to see me.

Mrs G: What have I done now?

Carol: We need to have a chat about how things are going.

How’s James getting on, do you think?

Mrs G: Isn’t that your job to tell me?

Carol: Sometimes it’s useful to hear from the parent’s point of view.

Mrs G: Do you do this with all your parents?

Carol: We do have settling-in conversations. Yes. So how is he?

Mrs G: Seems alright. He doesn’t say much. Not like that...

woman the other day, came in shouting the odds. That's what you want to see me about isn't it? She says you're going to ban me from the playground.

Carol: I do need to talk to you about that incident, yes.

But I make the decisions about who is or isn't in the playground and I'm not going to ban you.

Mrs G: I'd have been complaining to the local authority if you had. I know my rights.

Carol: Well, there's no need because you're not banned. But I do have to remind you that it is important that if there's



a problem out there, you let me deal with it. Parents are not allowed to discipline other people's children in the playground.

Mrs G: I wasn't going to let her go around bullying my James...

Carol: No, of course not. But we have procedures for dealing with these things. If anything like that happens again then you must report it straight away and I will make sure it is dealt with. Because I have to let you know that if that happened again I would have to give you an official warning.

Mrs G: And what about that... woman. Will you be giving her and her daughter a warning?

Carol: We have dealt with the incident and her daughter has lost a playtime because of it. If she does it again she will be kept in over lunchtime. I will see to it that she does not cause any problems for James.

Mrs G: I've heard that one before.

Carol: And just to make sure, perhaps we could meet at this time next week with James just to check that everything is OK.

Mrs G: Don't you worry, you'll know if there's been a problem.

Carol: So, I'll put that date in my diary. And perhaps we could also use the time to have a look at some of James' school work.

New NCSL programme: Developing Senior Leadership Teams

NCSL is launching a new programme for developing secondary school senior leadership teams (SLTs) in September. The programme will be tailored for each school, to meet its particular needs. This programme offers space for SLTs to constructively think about how to address key challenges.

An experienced facilitator will work closely with the SLT over six to nine months to address the priorities for development that they have identified in their School Improvement Plan.

Further details are available at www.ncsl.org.uk/dslt or to express an interest in registering for the programme please email dslt@ncsl.org.uk.

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