

School Discipline - Occasionally asked questions

It is important to note that serious misconduct by students is rare; and many of the procedures detailed below might only be used a handful of times a year, if at all. They are important to ensure that the school remains a safe community to be in. It is understandable that parents of students in trouble may feel a little bit in uncharted territory; and procedures which are well understood by schoolteachers and intimately understood by senior staff may seem at first sight overly prescriptive, intrusive and even dogmatic to an anxious parent. We have tried to address some concerns here.

Why are the procedures so prescriptive?

In some case procedures are set out in statutory Government guidance, in others the procedure have been developed over years of experience to safeguard all those involved, including students. We recognises that students, and even some staff, may find some aspects of such procedures daunting but the school must be able to demonstrate that it has been fair and equitable to all concerned whilst be rigorous in establishing the facts of a situation as accurately as it reasonable can.

I live around the corner. If my child is in serious trouble, why cannot I come in and sit in when he or she is interviewed by staff?

By choosing to send your child to St. George's you are placing your child under the authority of the school and the rules of set down by the Governing Body. Staffs are professionals working within the school's 'Staff Code of Conduct'. They are experienced in dealing with teenagers, and are well equipped to carry out an investigation, even a complex one, in a proper and correct manner.

Where the matter under investigation might lead to a permanent exclusion from school students directly involved are always seen with a note-taker present and a second member of teaching staff to act as the student's supporter and adviser. This formal process is to protect the investigating staff and alleviate parental anxiety. The school is not doing a criminal investigation; but serious incidents can be complex, involving multiple students, and sometimes students need to be seen more than once. It would be unmanageable and unrealistic to have a parent sat around all day so that they are to hand at the points where their child is seen; and given many parents will be at work, possibly many miles away, or their child is a boarder, it may be considered unfair for some to have parents present and not others. Ultimately this is also about trust in the staff to do their work in a professional manner and if parents do not feel they can trust staff to do this aspect of their work professionally then they need to reflect on their choice of St George's for their child's education.

My child has had their phone seized because school staff believe it may contain evidence related to an investigation. Can staff do this? When can my child have it back? What about their safety in the meantime?

Yes, this right is established by DfE guidance and is written into the school discipline policy. The school will not do this lightly, but may do so if staff have reasonable cause to believe that there is evidence of crime or serious misconduct on the phone – imaging or messaging, for instance. Phone contents will be reviewed, and that review will be limited to the concern which is being investigated. Sadly, if the school has got to the point of seizing phones or other devices, it will tend to be in a complex investigation which may involve the police or other agencies; the investigating senior teacher will do their best keep you informed, but it may be some days before the device can be returned and this may not be until the investigation has been concluded. This would particularly be the case where the school is not permitted to copy or download the evidence from the phone or where the student has refused provide a code to allow the contents to be investigated.

If parents feel it is vital that their child be contactable on their own mobile phone, then they will have to make alternative arrangements. Boarders without a mobile phone would be allowed to use school landlines or skype to stay in touch; and on the day a phone is seized, students can use a school line to make any necessary arrangements.

Is it right that the school can seize property belonging to my child and not return it?

Yes in certain circumstances— this is adopted from DfE guidance. It is not the same as confiscation, which carries the implication that the item will be returned. The most common seizure would be where a student was eating a snack around the site. Students know they may not do this and the reasons why, so the item may be seized and put in the bin. Other items which would be seized and not returned would be illicit or dangerous items such as (but not exclusively): fireworks, knives, BB guns, catapults, alcohol, or cigarettes. These would be seized and safely destroyed. Illegal drugs would be seized, and the police contacted to dispose of them or they would be disposed of as directed by the police. Regulations allow that a phone or other electronic device which had been used to commit very serious misconduct could be seized and destroyed. This would be exceptional and the reasons for taking such actions explained to the owner.

Staff have asked my child for the pass code for his/her mobile phone or other electronic device. Does my child have to give it over?

The school expects students to co-operate with investigations. Refusing to provide staff a code is considered defiance of staff direction and possibly the deliberate obstruction of an investigation and may be dealt with as such. Students know that they are strictly liable for what is on any device which they have in school. Schools are required to protect the welfare of others and to carry out proper investigations. Therefore, it cannot be the case that a student could decline to give the code without consequence. For instance, if you imagine a situation where a student had been reported to be showing others an indecent image on their phone, it would be essential to establish this one way or the other. You could not be in a position where the investigation ground to a halt for lack of the access code. Students may refuse to give the code; but in such circumstance the device will be confiscated until the school can satisfy itself that the device does not contain information pursuant to an investigation involving serious misconduct. Staff do not use other technical means to access phones or devices; if it became that important to pursue the investigation, it would be passed to the police.

Do staff have the right to search my child's clothing? Bag? Locker? Bedroom in boarding?

The answer is yes; but there are many procedures which have to be carefully followed. Lockers and furniture are school provided, and therefore may be searched without permission of the student or parent. (This includes the forcible removal of a padlock or other locking device.) In most instances the student and a second member of staff will be present, but this does not have to be the case.

Students can be directed to turn out their pockets, and take off outdoor coats and blazers/jackets so that they can be checked. They can be asked to allow staff to look through their bag. This would always be done with a second member of staff present, and one of the two staff will be the same gender as the student. A refusal to comply with this direction would be sanctioned as defiance of staff direction and possibly the deliberate obstruction of an investigation

Can I decline to allow my child to be kept in detention?

No. School staff have the right to set a detention and require it to be completed. Should you disagree with a sanction being set, it is not unreasonable to look to discuss the matter further; the school may decide postpone the sanction while this dialogue is completed. If there is an issue with logistics and transport, the school may extend the notice given, or substitute a different sanction. However, staff are not bound to do this. Punishments have to be “reasonable”, and it would be the Head, at the last resort, who would have to decide if this was the case. Students also need to understand that actions have consequences, often beyond themselves. This can cause considerable inconvenience and cost to their parents who may have to make alternative transport arrangements to collect them on completion of a detention.

My child has had a fixed term exclusion from school. Will this mean they cannot possibly be a prefect or other pupil leadership role? Will it be mentioned on a reference for College or UCAS?

We work in the knowledge and understanding that teenagers make mistakes, accept the consequences, and we move on endeavouring always to do better. Pupils are considered for senior posts, such as prefect on their merits. An individual's behaviour record, positive role-modelling and compliance with school expectations are factors to be considered. However there are examples of students, who following an incident or short period of poor behaviours have made exceptional efforts to improve and the school would seek to acknowledge this appropriately, which might include appointment to a senior position. However, there is just as much merit to be found in those whose behaviour is beyond reproach.

Disciplinary issues are never mentioned on UCAS references. They would be mentioned in a College or employment reference if the reference request specifically asked about such issues: some do, others do not. Even where we have to answer a specific question, the school will always ensure a properly balanced picture was painted of the individual, balancing any negative aspects with positive qualities and improvements that have been achieved. In reality few institutions or employers ask such questions as most understand that misbehaviour in a school environment during teenage years is not a wholly reliable indicator regarding future behaviour.

The one exception to this principle is the reporting of concerns relating to the welfare of others, which we are required to disclose if asked. This is exceptionally rare and the individuals concerned will be aware that such information will be shared.

As a Christian school shouldn't the principle of forgiveness play a more significant role in dealing with pupil behaviour?

Forgiveness in the Bible is one of the greatest blessings that God has given us, and one of the greatest blessings we can give to others. If we all lived by the mantra "an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth," we would all be blind and toothless. Instead, we must forgive others who wrong us.

Forgiveness does not however absolve us from our responsibilities and the consequences of our actions. Poor behaviour which disrupts learning, good order or harms others is a breach of the rules to which, as a member of our community the individual agrees to when they join. The consequences of breaching these rules are also a part of that agreement.

If as a community we value good conduct and relationships. These are established and maintained when the agreed rules are observed and the consequences of them not being observed are administered fairly and consistently. None of this stands as a bar to forgiveness, on the contrary it aids forgiveness through a recognition that whatever harm has been done there has also been some restitution. The forgiveness of our sins was not simply given by God but redeemed through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.