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INSIGHTS

Standing behind difficult decisions

Johan and Harry were both suspended from school for a day after willingly watching a schoolyard fight. Their school had a zero-tolerance policy toward fighting and believed that those who watched a fight were as complicit in the conflict as those engaged in the fighting.

The reactions of both sets of parents to the boys' suspensions differed greatly. Johan's parents supported the school's actions and made the necessary changes to their work schedules to accommodate the suspension. Privately, they thought that the suspension may have been harsh, but as they agreed with the school's zero tolerance approach to violence, they knew they had no option but to accept the suspension. They counselled their son against similar behaviour in future and made sure his time away from school was spent doing schoolwork.

Harry's parents weren't quite so supportive. Thinking that their son's suspension was unfair, they contacted the school's principal asking to have the suspension removed. The principal listened to their concerns however she didn't remove the suspension. She reminded Harry's parents of the reasons behind the school's zero tolerance approach to fighting and urged them to support of their policy. Disappointed but obviously not deterred, Harry's father took time off work to take his son on a fishing trip on the day of the suspension. This action showed little regard for the school's efforts to encourage a culture of respectful relationships, as well as scant respect for the principal's authority.

Make the most of learning moments

Both sets of parents thought that the suspension of their sons was harsh. However, only one set saw the situation as a learning experience for the son. Johan's parents discussed with their son the place that bystanders play when violence breaks out. They reinforced the message that although it may take courage to stop a fight or bring it to the attention of teachers, it's these sorts of actions that constitute positive leadership.

Harry's parents couldn't see past the injustice of the suspension and missed a great opportunity to teach their son any number of lessons. These include what he may do next time a similar incident occurs, how he might respond when he sees someone being bullied or even how to nip conflict between peers in the bud before it escalates. There are many discussions they could have had with their son due to the suspension. From an educative perspective, this was an opportunity missed.

Trust the process

Arguably, the bigger issue in this story is that just as Johan's parents did, we parents need to trust the processes that teachers put in place at school, even when we don't always agree. Family-school partnerships are strongest when parents stand behind the difficult decisions that teachers make, even though the wisdom behind them may not be immediately evident. Sometimes, we all have to stand back and trust a process that's been in put in place, particularly when it's been implemented after a great deal of thought and diligence.

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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation,* and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.