

Dear Parents and Whanau of Silverstream School,

'It takes a village to raise a child' but when it comes to children with behaviour issues it can be easier to turn a blind eye. Yet it is these children, probably more than most, who need you to understand them to bolster their self-esteem and their self-worth.

School is bound to protect the privacy of all students; however, I have found myself in the unenviable position of parenting a child with behaviour issues and feel it would be helpful to share some of these experiences, in order to create some empathy for the journey we, many parents like us and our children are on.

It can be easy to judge others and it can be easy to cast aspersions, but it's pretty hard to walk into the playground when you are the parent of a child with behaviour issues. You never know what you're going to be greeted with or whether the unfamiliar parent approaching you is going to inform you of yet another incident involving your child, and that you are expected to respond to graciously. I think we all need to appreciate that life affects us all in different ways and at times it's not particularly easy, but despite the challenges, we're all doing our best.

Our son is impulsive and struggles with processing, so he doesn't work things through or consider consequences. When our little boy has a feeling, be it anger, sadness, frustration or joy, it's all about the feeling and he cannot recall appropriate responses to the situation he finds himself in and cannot make good choices at this time.

Tackling a behavioural issue takes time and we have had to be incredibly patient and persistent to establish support systems that can help him. Initially we were just hoping the bad behaviour was 'just a phase', then we tried all the usual strategies according to behaviour gurus, and then we came to discuss the issues with teachers and have been trying to implement strategies within the classroom. This is where our journey has us right now, realising that we fall into a void in the health and education systems, needing support for our son within education but being entitled to nothing that fully provides him the support he needs to achieve his potential. We have been fortunate enough to be referred to the 'Resource Teacher Learning and Behaviour' (RTLB) service but it then takes another term to process this and have assessments made so despite the application being submitted in February we are just teasing out the nuances of his particular needs within the classroom now. This is no fault of the RTLB, again it's the unacceptable spin-off of an overloaded and under resourced system, the consequence of which is unsupported teachers and parents trying our best to help our son to be focused and engaged, and not deregulated in this environment that he finds so incredibly stressful and overwhelming.

Our son is a beautiful, loving, fun and smiley kid. He's lucky enough to have a loving home but this hasn't been enough to prevent him struggling socially and behaviourally at school and in other social situations. If you meet him you would notice that he's a bit uncoordinated, he runs with an awkward gait, and if you talk to him that he is slow to give verbal responses and doesn't always appear to hear you. These issues cause him enough problems as it is as he can't keep up in a game of tag, can't engage in a game of soccer and can't keep up with the playground banter making him less appealing to his peers and exposing him to ridicule. His coping strategies have been pretty unappealing too and he has been known to graffitiate school property, urinate in inappropriate places, swear and occasionally lash out at others. These are his responses to stress and anxiety about how he feels in the noisy, ever changing, fast paced school environment, and to the frustration of 'not fitting in'. Some of these behaviours when witnessed by peers are also highly entertaining and therefore he has also been encouraged by peers to repeat these behaviours, which for the socially challenged child is interpreted as friendship.

We are focused on our son's behavioural problems because we believe if you've got a way to connect with others then you'll get through life OK and being connected is well known to keep us emotionally buoyant. However, with these behavioural issues have come struggles with learning, so we also face the challenge of trying to support him to keep up academically with the goal of him having something positive to contribute to society and ultimately, to support his self-worth. This is just one of the myriad of difficulties associated with parenting a child with these issues.

So please, if you come across a child behaving in an amplified fashion in the playground, at a sports field, in New World or in the classroom, don't be angered or offended, please speak gently and kindly and encourage this child to do the same or guide them to someone who can help them regulate their behaviour. Or if you feel uncomfortable or offended by the behaviour then walk away but don't judge the child's parents and don't judge them. Please use your encounter as an opportunity to explain to your child that everyone's brain is different, and works in different ways, and sometimes people are still learning to find a different way of being and a way to respond to the overwhelming feelings within them.

So, thank you for listening to me, one day our child will be able to advocate for himself, and talk about his difficulties and the coping strategies he has learnt, but for now I am his voice and I will, as any parent would, do what is needed to make his world a more understanding place for him. We are grateful to live in this community, but do receive judgement and this saddens me as we need this village to support us in raising our child. Please open your minds and your hearts to him and others like him.

Finally, let's not just reserve our compassion for those whose disabilities we can see but let's try and remember that there are many other kids out there who are disabled by trauma, mental illness, neurological conditions or neurological injuries and these things are not visible until you get to know a person. Take a risk, get yourself out of your comfort zone and give these people a chance because ultimately it will result in a society with less problems and less excluded individuals.