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## **POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR SUPPORT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT SYSTEMS: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

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*This resource provides a guide for Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) teams who wish to review and refresh their acknowledgement systems. The questions to consider are informed by PBS traditions of inclusion and person-centered values, together with trauma-sensitive practice. The questions below are offered in recognition that acknowledging appropriate behaviour is an area of debate among both researchers and educators (Smith, Fisher & Frey, 2015; Tyre, Feuerborn, Beaudoin & Bruce, 2020).*

Trauma-sensitive practice prioritises experiences of nurture, attunement, and empathy. The primary goal is to provide a felt experience of safety. As Kim Golding et al. suggest, “learning to understand what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour arises out of the experience of an empathic, attuned relationship” (2013, p. 78). Similarly, a person-centred approach emphasises unconditional access to experiences which increase quality of life, and interactions which convey a sense that “I understand you, I value you, I care about you” (Weiss, 2005, p. xiii). Two questions for teams to consider are a) where

do they sit with these values? And b) to what extent do they believe these values form the foundation of a whole school acknowledgement system?

It is important to note that the unconditional positive regard at the heart of PBS and trauma-sensitive practice does not imply that any behaviour is acceptable. On the contrary, PBS provides tools to assess and monitor students' social learning needs, so we can see if the supports we've put in place are effective. At each tier of PBS there are research-based practices, tools for data-based decision-making, and systems to support staff implementation. I suggest that the intention of trauma-sensitive PBS is to provide both "high boundaries and high warmth" (Golding, et al., 2016, p. 128).

How then to design a school-wide system for recognising appropriate student behaviour, which aligns with person-centered values and trauma-sensitive practice, is consistent with school pedagogy, and which emerges from each school's unique context and culture? The questions below are offered as a starting point.

#### **Trauma-sensitive questions:**

- What might a child or young person learn about *themselves* from this acknowledgment system:
  - a) If their behaviour is noticed and acknowledged?
  - b) If their behaviour is not yet appropriate and is not yet acknowledged?
- What might a child or young person learn about *adults* from this acknowledgment system:
  - a) If their behaviour is noticed and acknowledged?
  - b) If their behaviour is not yet appropriate and is not yet acknowledged?

- How might risks of doing harm with the acknowledgment system be mitigated? (e.g. risks of shaming, damaging trust, increasing social isolation or stigma could be reduced by guidelines for staff. For instance, acknowledgements can be given but not removed; acknowledgements are reviewed by SRC and family representatives at least twice a year, including voices of students with a disability and/or history of developmental trauma).
- Other questions?

**Person-centered questions:**

- How do children and young people experience the acknowledgement system?
  - What do they think about it?
  - What do they feel about it?
  - In what ways has it strengthened relationships and identity and increased enjoyment?
- Which children and young people might this acknowledgment system advantage/disadvantage?
- Who might design/review the acknowledgement system? Would these voices represent the complexity of your school community, e.g. a *diverse* selection of students, family and staff?
- How culturally sensitive is the acknowledgement system? How do you know this? Whose voices have been heard? Whose voices might still need to be heard?
- Other questions?

### **Pedagogical questions:**

- What is your whole school approach to feedback on learning?
- How do staff beliefs about feedback in other areas of the curriculum align with beliefs about feedback for social and emotional learning? What similarities and differences are there?
- What concerns might staff have about a whole school approach to acknowledging appropriate behaviour?
- Why have a whole school acknowledgement system to recognise appropriate behaviour?
- What data will you use to assess your acknowledgement system's effectiveness?
- What language are staff most comfortable with and least comfortable with e.g. feedback, praise, recognition, reward, acknowledgement?
- What different perspectives does research have about acknowledging appropriate behaviour? What other perspectives are there, beyond PBS, which might inform decisions about acknowledgement systems, e.g. restorative practice, trauma sensitive practice, attachment theory?
- Is the acknowledgement system *directly aligned* to the school-wide value (or social skill or behavioural expectation) which was explicitly taught and modelled by staff?
- Can students describe what the feedback was for?
- What adjustments might need to be made to the acknowledgement system to consider developmental age (either as a result of trauma or disability)?
- Other questions?

### Pragmatic questions:

- Do students appreciate the acknowledgement system?
- Do families appreciate the acknowledgement system?
- Do staff appreciate and consistently use the acknowledgement system, across all settings?
- Other questions?

### References

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**If you're interested in professional learning about Positive Behaviour Support, or just an initial conversation about the needs of your school or team, you can contact me at [sonja@sonjavanderaa.com.au](mailto:sonja@sonjavanderaa.com.au)**