

How strict is too strict at school?

We asked experts, after a Great Yarmouth academy said pupils must smile – and thank teachers after lessons. Tell us what you think below

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An [academy in Great Yarmouth](#) has revised its behaviour guidelines after parents complained they were too strict. A rulebook circulated to staff had said teachers were to be considered “unquestioned authority”. Students were to be told they had to smile, and to thank their teacher after class. “Pupils who do not say thank you as they leave the lesson are choosing to be rude. They will be punished.” Children who said they felt sick would be given a bucket so they could remain in school. New milder guidance has since been issued to parents and students.

A spokesman for the Great Yarmouth Charter academy, part of the Inspiration Trust chain, explained in a statement: “This summer the old Great Yarmouth High [the school’s previous name] returned the lowest GCSE results in the county, and for many years has underperformed compared to other schools in the borough. We don’t believe this is good enough, and we don’t believe it is because our pupils are any less able. What they need is the right environment in which to learn and succeed.

“Children can’t learn in unruly classrooms. Charter academy has a stricter approach to things like behaviour and uniform so that everyone gets the chance to learn.”

How strict does a school have to be to promote effective learning?



**Iain Kilpatrick, headteacher, Sidcot school,
Somerset, a Quaker school**

I'd be concerned about a behaviour policy that focuses on punishing students for what they're getting wrong rather than asking the broader question of why they're behaving in a particular way. Our school's motto is "live adventurously". As a Quaker school we encourage individuals to think for themselves and explore and question – that's fundamental to education. Underlying this debate about strictness seems to be a question about respect, and what respecting someone really means. We take the view that you can question a teacher and challenge why rules exist, and still have a respectful relationship. Some schools seem to take a command-and-control approach. That doesn't sit easily with our ethos. Schools need to be structured places – I would not operate a school where chaos rules – but there has to be a space for dialogue, and dialogue can only take place where there is a sense of equality between the teacher and children.



Stuart Lock, principal, Bedford free school

Good discipline is about having high expectations of conduct and defending them. I don't think schools need, for example, corporal punishment, nor do I agree with any practice that demeans individuals. But I think the more common risk for pupils is from other pupils, because expectations and standards might not be high enough, or when schools aren't clear enough on anti-bullying. My school is strict and prescriptive in the routines we want pupils to follow, and that's to free up their attention for the really important stuff that happens in lessons – learning. We have a clear philosophy behind it: "purpose, not power". Young people respond to routine and structure; it allows particularly those with chaotic home lives to know that they are safe and secure while they learn. And – some would say counterintuitively, but I think it makes complete sense – it allows them to express their personalities.



**Pam Jarvis, chartered psychologist,
grandparent, former secondary school teacher,
Leeds**

Some of the rules in super-strict schools smack to me of coercive control. Ordering a child to smile I would find quite frightening. It's what happens in homes where an abuser imposes their will on a victim, constantly saying things like "Why have you got that miserable face on again?" It's also telling a child you don't care what they're feeling underneath. From a psychological perspective, little ones coming into a punitively strict secondary school would be bewildered because the vast majority will have been kindly treated so far. It's like being plunged into a cold bath. Then they would adapt: some would start studying how to be bullies themselves, some would be emotionally crushed. This will exhibit in different ways over the years that follow, with school refusal, depression and anxiety, and eating disorders manifesting. And some will just go along with it, keep out of trouble and turn off emotionally.



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Joanne Golann Assistant professor of public policy and education, Vanderbilt University, Tennessee

My research into “no-excuses” charter schools in the US demonstrated that super strictness and micro-management of classroom behaviour does not enhance learning. Such methods can help schools establish order, a prerequisite for learning, but at the same time, extreme levels of control have negative consequences. I observed students constantly pushing back against rules or getting frustrated and disengaging from learning. Others became anxious to the point of needing to stay at home. In such a tightly controlled environment, it was also difficult for teachers and students to find the time to establish positive relationships with each other, a key to learning. Finally, I found that students were not developing skills such as taking initiative, expressing an opinion and negotiating with others – skills needed for their future success in college and in professional jobs.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/sep/18/how-strict-is-too-strick-great-yarmouth-academy-smile>



Nick Moss Headteacher, Minchinhampton C of E primary academy, Gloucestershire

We got rid of our behaviour policy altogether last year because for us, behaviour is all about relationships. Rewards and consequences in their traditional sense are no longer part of our practice. We don't want to become preoccupied with control. Efforts at exerting control over children often involve extrinsic rewards that do not help them to appreciate the intrinsic satisfaction learning can bring. Most of my career has been spent in inner-city settings, and though it may be harder where a higher proportion of children are hurting, I suspect our approach can succeed in all schools. Strict behaviour policies can be more for the teacher's benefit. We want the needs of the pupils to remain paramount. The dialogue in our school is about the children and little else.