

From Toxic to Kind Buses: Proven Recipe for Success

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Bus rides** to school are often the most unsafe school climates for students. And, most unfortunately, these rides begin and end their school days. Usually, in an effort to make bus rides kinder and more pleasant, cameras are installed, monitors are placed on the buses and other similar measures are taken. Often these desperate remedies follow teacher directed formal lessons on bus behavior. Unfortunately, these solutions are only marginal stopgaps and the buses continue to present seeming unsolvable problems. There is however a “recipe” that yields marked improvement. What will be explained is a series of strategies that *when used in concert* can make a huge positive difference in practice. This “recipe” is based on the theory of personal responsibility and using ‘carrots’ rather than ‘sticks’ as motivation. Because, in truth, the only way to solve the toxic bus problem is for every person riding the bus to take personal responsibility for his or her own behavior and treat others on the bus appropriately.

The following series of components are described in linier fashion, even though they must all be accomplished simultaneously when launching the effort. With this in mind, consider the individual pieces and understand that cherry picking some of these pieces and putting some, but not all into practice will not result in the desired outcome.

Letter with Contract Sent Home to Parents/Guardians

A formal letter must be drafted and sent home to parents/guardians. In that letter, the tone must be very positive...”In the interest of allowing each and every child to travel safely and happily to and from school on the bus...” Also, an explicitly clear description of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate bus behavior should be outlined. It is not adequate to say merely, “children will treat each other kindly,” or “everyone will be nice to each other on the bus,” and so on. The specific allowable behaviors (inside voices, hands to oneself all the time, walking down the aisle, staying in your own seat, etc.) as well as those not permitted (do not touch anyone else’s belongings, no throwing, kicking, tripping, hurting anyone’s person or belongings, no hurtful or mean names and language, etc.) must be included. Every school administrator knows exactly what kind of behaviors have resulted historically in “bus referrals” and it is from that contextual knowledge that the clear description can and should be created.

Another piece of this letter is the description of the process and procedures for using assigned seats on the bus. Refer to that section below in this document and include that procedure in the letter home.

This letter should be in the hands of parents/guardians well in advance of the start date of this bus plan in order to give sufficient time for them to read, digest and return the “tear-off” portion of the letter, which turns it into a contract of sorts. So, for example, if a school/district wishes to institute this plan toward the beginning of the school year, then this letter should be sent home by the middle of August. School personnel should follow-up to insure that *every* child’s parent/guardian has signed a copy of the tear-off contract and it has been placed in the student’s file.

The “Contract” Tear-Off Portion of the Letter

Whether on a separate sheet of paper or at the bottom of the letter as a “tear-off” portion, there ought to be two boxes that are possible for parents/guardians to “check.” The first box would say something like, “I’ve read this contract and agree with the conditions and understand that this bus procedure goes into effect on XXXXXXXX(date).” The second box would say something like, “I have questions/concerns about these bus procedures and wish to speak to someone at the school before I sign this.” If this box came back “checked,” then a designated educator would proceed to contact the parent/guardian with the goal of eventually receiving support and a signed “contract.” In addition to these two boxes is the parent/guardians’ name that they print and that they sign. There should also be a place on this “contract” that allows the parent to list his/her child(ren). This sheet/tear-off portion comes back to school and is placed in the child’s “cum” folder. (If there are multiple children in a family, it is advised that the *school* photocopy additional signed contracts and place them in each of the children’s files rather than requiring the parent/guardian to sign more than one contract for each child).

Class Meetings and Contracts Signed By Students

Simultaneous with the descriptive letter/contracts going home, all children in the school are engaged in detailed discussions about what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior on the buses. These discussions should be developmentally appropriate and the goal of them is that all children fully understand what appropriate bus behavior looks, feels and sounds like. There should be no misunderstanding. Part of the discussion revolves around the piece that has to do with “assigned seating.” Again, this portion is described below and is a central feature of making this a successful system. When students are sufficiently clear both about what their behavior ought to be and the bus assignment procedure, then each student is asked to sign an individual student contract that will go in his/her file, along with the one that is signed by that child’s parent/guardian.

Assigning Seats On the Bus

This is the “lynchpin” of a system that creates safer and more pleasant bus rides. Every child is assigned a seat on the bus. These assignments should be done strategically so that any student-desired seat locations and pairings would not be what these assignments would look like. In other words, assigned seating does not reflect what their free choice seating arrangements would be. ***Importantly, however...students are allowed to choose their own seats on the bus and sit with whomever they want as long as they treat one another appropriately as outlined in the parent/guardian letter and in the student discussions.*** This is the incentive for children to behave on the bus, and it works. This is the critical piece that must be included in the letter home and in the student discussions. Only when students act inappropriately will the assigned seats be used, and then, only for a relatively short period of time (one day, three days, one week, etc.) This length of time is entirely up to the school to determine. If assigned seats do have to be used for this designated period, the school personnel should make it very clear to the students that they will have another chance to get this right ***after*** they have sat in their assigned seats for that determined length of time. The children must learn that whether they are allowed to sit in unassigned seats is entirely in their hands. It is their choice to behave.

Dealing with Mishaps: Three Scenarios

The question now becomes, what if the “inappropriate” happens and there is unacceptable bus behavior? The three main possibilities of behavior infractions are played out below in the interest of guiding practice. Importantly, when this bus system is put into place, *there are no chances*. In other words, once this process begins, it is not allowable for a student to be inappropriate on the bus and get away with it, even once. Doing so would in essence nullify the system by communicating that it is OK to be inappropriate before getting serious. This aspect should be included in letters and discussions. *Once the system begins it is never OK to be inappropriate on the bus.*

1) Children Being ‘Mean’ to Each Other with Successful Peer Intervention

If a couple of children “forget” and engage in inappropriate behavior (throwing a back pack around, calling someone a name, yelling, etc.), and the children around that couple are successful in reminding them that if they continue to misbehave that everyone will lose the privilege of free choice seating on the bus and the inappropriate behavior stops, nothing happens. The children intervened on their own behalf and it worked; that is the consequence.

2) Children Being ‘Mean’ to Each Other with Unsuccessful Peer Intervention

If a couple of children “forget” and engage in inappropriate behavior (throwing a back pack around, calling someone a name, yelling, etc.), and the children around that couple are *not* successful in reminding them that if they continue to misbehave that everyone will lose the privilege of free choice seating on the bus and the inappropriate behavior continues, those two children alone must be placed in the front row of bus, nearest the bus driver, but no one else is affected because the children attempted to intervene. Those couple of children who must sit at the front of the bus (with closer supervision by the bus driver), will also get a chance to “try again” after a designated period of time. As with the previous case, their incentive is to sit where they want (tomorrow, in three days, next week), and this is the most powerful consequence.

3) Children Being ‘Mean’ to Each Other with Escalation to Other Bus Riders

If a couple of children “forget” and engage in inappropriate behavior (throwing a back pack around, calling someone a name, yelling, etc.), and this behavior escalates without peer intervention and more children begin to be inappropriate, then this is when everyone must sit in their assigned seats for a set designated period. As with the cases above, this must be for a finite length of time to enable everyone to “try again.”

Any time there are mishaps and children are not behaving appropriately for any reason, it is highly advisable that parents/guardians be contacted, as a point of information and (one hopes that) help and collaboration can be received from home. Similarly, reminders and conversations with individuals and/or classes are conducted as well. No matter how old students are, reminders and teaching lessons *again* are essential. The goal is for everyone to understand fully and thus act appropriately and be able to choose a seat!

****To be most successful, collaboration and full understanding with the Bus Company and drivers is highly recommended (if not required!)**