

Backchat



SPTC Newsletter

Scottish Parent Teacher Council, the independent voice for parents, is a national organisation. It has been serving parents' groups in schools for 60 years.

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Bouncy Castles - IMPORTANT INFORMATION

In the light of the recent English case where sizeable damages were awarded following an accident on a bouncy castle, we thought you might find it helpful to know that SPTC members with insurance are fully covered for the use of bouncy castles. However, we always advise of the need for proper supervision and offer the following checklist.



It is important to ensure

§There is adequate supervision at all times of those using the bouncy castle and of those waiting to get on

§The bouncy castle is never left so that children can use it unsupervised

§The number of children allowed on at any one time is no more than the capacity of the bouncy castle

Children using the bouncy castle are not of vastly different sizes e.g. large teenagers with small primary children (unless the older child is clearly there in a supervisory capacity).

Keeping Children Safe - NEW LEAFLET

The recent conference on *Anti-Bullying and Child Protection: have we gone too far?* raised some interesting questions about whether adults were more interested in protecting themselves than in protecting children and whether, in the process, we are de-skilling children and making them less able to look after themselves. One of the speakers, Tim Gill showed maps of activity across the generations. Starting with the great-grandfather, aged eight, and his six miles square roaming area, we went through the generations, so the area shrank until, for the present eight-year-old it was no more than a dot.

This reminded us of the wise words that the purpose of the Green Cross Code is to teach children to jaywalk safely. As children grow up they will start to take risks, so it is important to teach them how to take those risks safely. In the spirit of this approach we have produced the enclosed leaflet of positive advice, so that, when children find themselves alone in a difficult situation, they have a checklist of positive actions, rather than simply a list of "don'ts". This is just a starting list so please add your own suggestions and send them back to us.

Changes to SQA exams

The Minister, Fiona Hyslop, recently announced her intention to scrap Standard Grade General & Credit and the Intermediate 1 & 2 exams/qualifications and replace them with a single new qualification at each level. The working titles for the new qualifications are General (to replace SG General and Int.1) and Advanced General to replace SG Credit and Int.2.

The new qualifications will still be offered in different subjects and at the end of S4. Youngsters will sit either the General or Advanced General according to the level they are working at. The new qualification will combine the best features of Standard Grade with the best features of the Intermediate qualifications, so courses are likely to be divided into units and there will be a process that ensures all students get credit for what they have achieved.

However, this change to qualifications will come on top of a major change to the curriculum in secondary schools. Unlike at present where youngsters tend to move through secondary school in two-year blocks - S1 & 2, S3 & 4, S5 & 6 - now they will move in three-year blocks.

From S1 to S3 youngsters will enjoy a more general and cross-curricular education. The aim is to teach more than just subjects and help youngsters to develop the four capacities outlined in the Curriculum for Excellence - to be Confident Individuals, Successful Learners, Responsible Citizens and Effective Contributors.

The second three-year block - S4 to 6 - will be the years when youngsters study for their qualifications. The details of the new qualifications are still being decided and in mid-June the Minister is due to launch a consultation asking for views. It will run until October. Children currently in P6 are likely to be the first ones to sit the new qualifications and so, whilst it is secondary parents who are most able to comment, it is the children of primary parents who will be the first affected.

However, not everything will change; the Highers and Advanced Highers are staying although they will be modified to ensure that they fit with the format of the new General Qualifications. Similarly, the Access and Skills for Work courses will remain.

In an attempt to make the process more flexible, the consultation will propose - and seek views on - a winter exam diet and an option to run Higher courses over 18 months and/or two years as well as over the current single year. On the surface both these suggestions sound very attractive, but they could be quite difficult to organise in schools.

The last piece of the jigsaw is the Government's determination to have new literacy and numeracy qualifications which will be offered in S4 and available at Scottish Credit & Qualification Framework (SCQF) levels 3 to 5 (equivalent to the Standard Grade levels, Foundation to Credit). The details of these are also still being worked on.

When the consultation is out, we will discuss our response and make this available online. Meanwhile for information on the current exam system, including SCQF see our leaflet *The Qualifications Mystery Tour – a simple guide for parents*.

HPV Immunization Programme - Important information for the parents of girls

In September 2008 a new programme of immunisation will start in schools in Scotland, England and Wales. This new vaccine will protect girls against the two types of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) that cause 70% of cervical cancers.

The vaccine will be offered on a routine basis to all girls in S2 (aged around 12 - 13) and it will become a normal part of the childhood immunisation cycle. In addition, there will be a one-off "catch-up" campaign which will start in September in Scotland, one year ahead of the rest of the UK. This will run over a three-year period and will include girls aged 13 to 17, born on, or after, 1st September 1990.

The vaccine will be administered three times over a six month period and it is important that each girl has all three injections to get the best protection. Although this offers good protection against types 16 and 18 of HPV, it won't protect against all other types; your daughter will still need to go for routine cervical screening to check for abnormalities from the age of 20.

Thousands of girls in the USA and Australia have already had immunisations and follow-up studies have shown that the vaccine has an excellent safety record. More information can be found at www.fightcervicalcancer.org.uk

Watch out for the public campaign which will start in August with television, radio, online, press and cinema advertising, posters and a dedicated website. Girls will also be given a leaflet targeted at their age group when they return to school after the summer holidays, with younger girls also receiving a Q & A booklet for their parent and carer.

Local Authority Funding

For many Parent Councils who, in the early days wondered what they should do, there is suddenly an issue – cuts in school budgets. These cuts are not just in the money for books and equipment; they will also mean cuts in staffing. One of the reasons for the cuts is that the overall settlement (i.e. the money given to local authorities by central government) is “tight” – that’s the official language – whilst another reason is the new funding agreement between local and central government, the new “Concordat”. This has given local authorities more control over how they spend their money in return for an agreement that they will not increase council tax. Those authorities that had set low council tax levels prior to last year’s elections have been hard hit.

Local authority funding is notoriously difficult to understand, so we asked Reid Hutchison, one of our directors who has specialist knowledge of this area, to provide an explanation and, in the process, indicate how local authority spending decisions relate to central government decisions. The following is based on what he said.

In the past, local authorities were funded from five different sources – Revenue Support Grant from government, Specific Government grants (all of the spending on schools came from this source), Council Tax, Business Rates and Charges for services (e.g. school meals).

However, the Scottish Government had said from the outset that it wished both to freeze Council Tax (eventually replacing it) and micro-manage local authorities less, thereby ensuring that decisions on priorities and spending were set at a local level. Therefore the Government began negotiations with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the representative body for all local authorities in Scotland, on a new funding regime.

The Concordat

The result was the “Concordat” which established the general ground rules/context for separate agreements by each individual authority with the Government. Some of the key areas of the Concordat are:-

- Agreement with the Government’s 15 national outcomes as the basis for priorities in public services
- Greater local freedom for local authorities
- Reduction in the number of “ring-fenced” grants to councils which restrict spending to specific purposes
- Reduction in reporting and monitoring, replaced by a single annual report setting out progress and achievements against the SOA

The Single Outcome Agreement (SOA)

Each local authority then negotiated a Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) with the Scottish Government on its spending priorities within the context of these ground rules, (for example, each has to agree to abide by the Government’s 15 national outcomes, although it can give them a different priority). Moreover, local authorities do not have total freedom in what they do as they still have to meet their statutory obligations. In terms of schools this means they have to abide by agreements on teachers’ pay and conditions, on class sizes and statutory obligations for school transport etc. Each SOA has to be signed off (agreed) by the Scottish Government.

If the process is complicated this year, by next year it is expected to be even more complicated. The SOA will not be agreed simply between the local authority and central government but by the Community Planning Partnership and central government.

The Community Planning Partnership is led by the local authority but includes other public sector agencies like the police, private sector bodies and, in some cases, voluntary sector representatives. The precise membership varies from authority to authority but the intention is to help public agencies to work together with the community in order to plan and deliver better services.

Each of the agencies in the Community Planning Partnership naturally has different priorities. For example, those dealing with vulnerable adults will have different priorities from those dealing with schools and parents. For Parent Councils and PTAs it will be interesting to see what is the impact of having this wider group of “stakeholders” engaged directly in the development of the SOA for their area.

What parents can do

These are complex and difficult matters, but Parent Councils and PTAs should make a point of asking questions of councillors and officials to understand what is happening locally, what the priorities are for their authority and how they can influence them.

News from You

We've been out and about recently and, as always, have come back amazed at the level of energy and inventiveness displayed by parents. Anyone who complains that there is a lack of enterprise in Scotland today should go and talk to their local parents' group!

Look Ten Years Younger

The first stop was Falkirk where my usual question, "what did you do that worked?" prompted the response, "a *How to Look Ten Years Younger* night". Parents have often been good at adapting popular television programmes into fundraising evenings, particularly programmes like *Stars in their Eyes* which allow youngsters to perform and shine. However, a programme which features cosmetic surgery and major dental work seemed a little more daunting. I need not have feared. The night used the services of a local hairdresser, a makeup artist and colour adviser. Tickets were flying out the school as fast as they could be printed and people were phoning from far and wide to see if there were any still available. A great night was had by all – even if, not surprisingly, it was a ladies only night!

Clairvoyants

In Ayrshire my standard question got the response "have a clairvoyant". It would seem that clairvoyance is big in Ayrshire as several schools had had the same two clairvoyants who similarly attracted folk from far and wide. Apparently the evening is run from a stage with the audience sitting in rows and, again, everyone enjoyed themselves.

Rural Fund

In Lanarkshire, the discussion turned more to what people spent their money on and with rural schools this seemed to be mostly transport. The Parent Council of one small rural school had provided the money for transport to take all the children to a local town for training in how to cross roads safely. Other rural schools emphasised that for their children everything required transport, so not for them the luxury of spending cash on whiteboards and the like; money was always needed first for transport. There was a general feeling that equity demanded that authorities have a special fund to support the transport needs of rural schools.

And finally – two hours PE sorted!

My favourite story concerned a parent's report on their new school. Apparently it had been fitted with energy efficient sensors – rather than good old fashioned light switches – to control the lights. The sensors responded to movement and so, in theory, the lights should be on when the school was occupied.



Scottish Food Fortnight

Scottish Food Fortnight runs from 6th to 21st September and focuses on the quality and variety of food available in Scotland. It hopes to change the habits of what we eat and where we buy it. There are a number of activities that schools can get involved in ranging from discussing the "food miles" used in transporting out-of-season vegetables from other countries to making a scarecrow (looking like someone the children know!) out of locally grown fruit and veg.



Schools are also being invited to enter the "Smoothest Smoothie in Scotland" competition – and think what fun children can have with practice shots. The rules require that each smoothie is made from at least two locally grown items. This is definitely a competition for all those schools that have their own gardens and grow fruit and vegetables. For more information, including on how to enter the competition, go to:

www.scottishfoodfortnight.co.uk