



Dealing with Inappropriate School Student Behaviour on Buses



Bus Driver Handbook



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Bus Driver Handbook: Dealing with Inappropriate School Student Behaviour on Buses

Why read this handbook?

Incidents of inappropriate behaviour by school students travelling on a bus can arise unexpectedly, creating unsafe, potentially dangerous situations. As a bus driver in that situation you do not have time to read a rule book, or handbook before responding. You have to assess the situation and decide “in the moment”, what action you can take. Having read the practical information and experience reflected in this handbook is intended to assist you in deciding what you should do to keep everyone safe, and deliver your passengers safely to their destination, in a range of different situations.

About the Author

Michael Kennedy started in the bus industry many years ago at age 21. He has worked in and with the bus industry over many years, and is an award-winning expert in road safety. Michael is now a professor at Monash University’s Institute of Transport Studies, where safe bus operations is one of his areas of expertise. He also leads BusVic’s *Safer Student Travel* program, engaging with students at schools across Victoria about their own safety when travelling by school bus or route bus. In writing this handbook Michael engaged with bus operators and their operational and driving staff, to ensure that the handbook is practical in its focus.

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PURPOSE OF HANDBOOK

The purpose of this handbook is to provide *practical advice* to you as a bus driver, when dealing with incidents of inappropriate behaviour by school students, when travelling by school bus or route bus.

While incidents of inappropriate behaviour are relatively rare, they can occur unexpectedly, “out of the blue”, so the challenge for you as a bus driver, in responding promptly and in an appropriate manner, is to have *considered in advance what might occur*, and to have thought about what an appropriate response would be, in a range of differing circumstances.

Before discussing those differing circumstances, there is one very important, fundamental principle that applies in almost all situations:

Your primary objective is to calmly defuse the situation, to ensure that it does not escalate. How you respond, what you say and how you say it, will be very important in that regard.

In providing you with *practical advice*, this handbook is not about

legislation, regulations, rules, policies etc. They can vary widely, and are ‘prescriptive’ (i.e. ‘black and white’) in stating the legal responsibilities of everyone concerned. That detailed information is available elsewhere. Rather, this handbook discusses the range of situations that can arise, and provides *practical advice* to guide you, as you decide, “in the moment”, how to deal with the immediate situation.

It is important to remember that, in almost all situations, *you cannot know* what problem or issue has prompted the student passenger to behave inappropriately, and you cannot possibly “fix it”. It will almost certainly have nothing to do with you, the bus, or their journey. There can be many, many reasons why students behave inappropriately. What you can do, and must strive to do, is **calmly defuse the situation**, so that everyone arrives safely at their destination.

THIS IS COMPLICATED

Providing simple “one-size-fits-all” advice about how best to respond to widely varying situations, with widely varying causes, dealing with very different students, is *simply not possible*. What we can do is outline, as simply as is practical, the range of different situations that can arise, and how those differences should impact on your approach, in seeking to **calmly defuse the situation**.

Students: Emotion, not logic

Human decision-making starts in the limbic brain, based on emotion, not logic, so it is very likely that a student’s inappropriate behaviour will be based on emotion, not a logical thinking process. That is true for adults as well as children, *but it is more complicated for children and young people*. School students’ brains are not fully formed, and our brain’s ‘warning system’ that alerts us to risk (the amygdala) is the last part to develop, *when we are in our 20’s*. That explains risky behaviour by young people, they are simply not aware of the risk, or the

potential consequences. (We’ve all lived through those years!)

So in you responding “in the moment” to a student’s inappropriate behaviour, it is important to appreciate that *they are responding emotionally*, not logically, with little or no appreciation of the downside risk of their actions.

Bus Drivers: Logic, not emotion

When we are treated disrespectfully, challenged or abused, or unexpectedly confronted with a potentially dangerous situation, our challenge is to respond based on logic, not emotion, to **calmly defuse the situation**. The situation may well be complex, and potentially stressful, so *remaining calm*, and *being seen to be calm*, will be very important, and may take conscious effort to achieve. Here are some critical factors to keep in mind.

It's not personal. If a student is being disrespectful, raising their voice, or displaying anger that seems to be directed at you, it can be challenging not to 'take it personally'. Even experienced teachers will at times find that difficult. But objectively, it's not personal. The student is responding, generally emotionally, to some cause, some incident, some anxiety or stress, that you cannot possibly know about, and which the student themselves may not actually be aware of. **You are not their adversary**, and it's important that your calm response reflects that.

Gender, age and stage of development. Boys and girls develop at different ages, in different ways, and each individual's development will be different. We cannot know, simply by looking at a student, or hearing what they say, what their level of development is. What we do know is that teenage years can be very stressful, and that students are very sensitive to criticism, and sensitive to how their peers judge them. Accordingly, when responding to inappropriate behaviour by a student passenger, your words must be chosen carefully, and expressed calmly and

very objectively, so that the student does not feel humiliated.

Focus on the behaviour, not the person. No-one likes being criticised, even when it may be justified, appropriate and necessary. It is important, when responding to a student's inappropriate behaviour, *to focus on the behaviour, not on the student as a person*. This is an essential part of striving to **calmly defuse the situation**. If a student feels that you are criticising them as *a person* their level of stress, which may already be high, will get worse, particularly if they feel that other students are observing and judging them. They may feel humiliated. In addition, if other students observe what they see, rightly or wrongly, as unfair, personal or excessive criticism, the situation may well escalate, to become a bigger issue, where the focus moves from the student's behaviour to your reaction to it.

Student perception of your authority. As you are aware, as a bus driver of student passengers you are entrusted with a very important role: to transport students safely to school, and return them home safely. *You have a duty of care which you no doubt take very seriously:* in how you drive the bus, in how you oversee students boarding and alighting, and in how you deal with students' behaviour, towards each other and towards you and other passengers.

In interacting with you, *students may never have thought about the importance of your role*, or be aware of your duty of care, and the responsibilities you have. Students will see their parents, their teachers, and police, as 'authority figures' who exercise control over them at different times, who must be "obeyed". They may not view their bus driver in the same way, which can add to the challenge of dealing with inappropriate student behaviour.

Is there a relationship? Another factor that will impact on how a student who has behaved inappropriately will respond to you is whether you know the student and the student knows you. If you have driven a student to school and back on a regular basis over a long period of time that will be a different situation to needing to engage with a student that you have never seen before.



SCHOOL BUS OR ROUTE BUS? VERY DIFFERENT SITUATIONS

The inappropriate behaviour “challenges” you may face, and the support available to you in responding to those challenges, will be very, very different when driving a school bus or a route bus. Very different. For the following reasons:

School rules, expectations and consequences

Students travelling on a school bus see their journeys to and from school as a *part of their school day*. Their 'school day' starts when they board the school bus in the morning, and ends when they get off the school bus in the afternoon. Students' behaviour on the school bus will therefore be largely based on the standards and rules set by the school, with an expectation that there may be consequences of inappropriate behaviour, which will be determined by the school.

This assists the bus driver in two ways. First, inappropriate behaviour is much less likely to occur, because of the expectation of consequences. Second, in the event of inappropriate behaviour, the school will play a key role in dealing with it, according to established processes. The role of the bus driver is therefore a simpler and easier one, compared to the driver of a route bus, discussed below. On a school bus there will often be a 'bus captain' on the bus who will play a role in dealing with student behaviour, plus inappropriate behaviour can be reported to the school on arrival or next morning, for follow up by the school.

A number of other factors also reduce the likelihood of inappropriate behaviour on a school bus:

- Students know each other, have friendships, see each other regularly, and have shared experiences that reduce the likelihood of serious inappropriate behaviour
- The school will have rules and behavioural standards which

students will be required to comply with, including remaining seated, and wearing a seat-belt if fitted

- The state government has specified behavioural and other requirements that are required to be entitled to qualify to travel by school bus
- When the school bus is driven regularly by the same bus driver, there is a connection between the driver and the student passengers, who are less likely to “do the wrong thing” with the driver who regularly takes them to and from school. They are travelling on “their” bus, with “their” bus driver.
- Known ID. On a school bus, the identity of each student passenger will be known, they will not be ‘anonymous’, as student passengers can be on a route bus.

This is not to say that there will not be inappropriate behaviour on school buses, but it will likely be less frequent, less serious, and more easily dealt with, compared to on route buses.

Student behaviour on route buses

Inappropriate behaviour by student passengers on route buses is more likely, potentially more serious, and much more difficult for the bus driver to prevent or control.

- The identity of student passengers will generally not be known to the bus driver, students will potentially be ‘anonymous’, and so less concerned about consequences
- The mix of students will potentially be widely varied, from a range of schools, with widely varied behavioural expectations, and with the potential for conflict between students from the same or different schools, cultures, genders etc. There is no common, agreed standard of behaviour accepted and supported by all schools’ students
- There is the potential for conflict between student passengers and adult passengers, relating to conflicting behavioural

expectations, access to seats, noise levels etc

- Buses will potentially be more crowded, with some student and other passengers being required to travel while standing, with school bags on the floor, adding to the potential for friction
- Student passengers board and alight at multiple locations, creating potential conflict in boarding and alighting
- Instances of graffiti, vandalism and other inappropriate behaviour will be very difficult to detect on crowded buses with students boarding and alighting continuously
- Actions like pressing the 'Next Stop' button at every stop will be difficult to detect and prevent
- The bus driver will not be seen as an 'authority figure' by student passengers
- The temptation for students to compete with each other, and to 'play to a wider audience' will be greater, with little expectation of being caught and there being consequences.

There is a further difference between addressing inappropriate behaviour on a school bus or on a route bus. A school bus has a schedule to run to which impacts only on the school students, and potentially waiting family etc, whereas a route bus operates to a published timetable, carrying members of the public, who have connections and commitments, so the impact of a delay will have broader consequences. Addressing a risk to safety will take precedence, but a delay to address what is not seen as a safety risk will cause concern.



DO YOU NEED TO RESPOND?

As a bus driver, your main priority and safety duty to your passengers is to concentrate on driving safely, to deliver your passengers safely to their destinations. If you believe that inappropriate or unsafe behaviour is or may be occurring on your bus, the key question for you to think about is whether the behaviour is of sufficient concern for you to need to stop the bus and address it because:

- The potential for safety risk or distress to passengers warrants intervention (or)
- The distraction impact on your ability to concentrate on driving makes it unsafe for you to continue driving.

That will depend on the nature and seriousness of the inappropriate behaviour, and how the situation can best be addressed, as discussed below.

CATEGORIES OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR

Inappropriate behaviour by student passengers can take many forms, from minor offences, which may be irritating or unpleasant, through to dangerous or even highly dangerous or life-threatening behaviour. Your response must reflect your assessment of the level of seriousness and potential consequences of the behaviour.

Inappropriate behaviours may include:

- Being disrespectful or rude, to the driver or to other student passengers
- Loud noise or playing loud music
- Not remaining where seated
- Being disruptive and not cooperative
- Verbal threats, intimidation or harassment
- Fighting with other student passengers
- Physical assault and spitting
- Throwing objects or projectiles

- Damaging property on the bus
- Intoxication - drinking, smoking or drug abuse
- Bullying and violence

Inappropriate behaviour could be categorised as

- Category 1: Highly dangerous or life-threatening
- Category 2: Potentially dangerous
- Category 3: Challenging, irritating or unpleasant

As discussed earlier, it is not possible to provide simple, “one-size-fits-all” advice when circumstances can be widely variable. Having provided guidelines, as the bus driver “on the spot” you will need to *exercise judgement* in determining *whether to respond*, and *how to respond*, based on your

assessment of whether this inappropriate behaviour will impact on the safety of any person, or potentially make it unsafe to continue the journey.

Any behaviour that has the potential to be dangerous or worse, which will generally be very rare, will always require a response, while striving if possible to **calmly defuse the situation**. Let’s discuss first the more serious, but less common, forms of inappropriate behaviour by student passengers, and then those forms which are less serious, but more common.



Category 1: Highly dangerous or life-threatening behaviour

As the most serious category of inappropriate behaviour, highly dangerous or life-threatening behaviour requires an immediate response, if possible, with the objective of seeking to have that behaviour cease. Clearly it is not the responsibility of the bus driver to apprehend offenders etc, only to try, as far as is practicable, to have the behaviour cease. As discussed earlier, it is not possible to provide a “one-size-fits-all” recommendation, but pulling over, opening all the doors of the bus, and dialling 000 will likely be the appropriate response to a life-threatening behaviour or a highly dangerous situation.

Depending on where the bus is located, and whether a brief delay in pulling over would better locate the bus in accessing assistance, or safely exiting the bus, that may be an option.

E.G.

Two students were engaging in a physical fight that was quite violent, with the potential for serious injury. The bus driver pulled the bus over at the first safe place, opened both

doors of the bus, and stated that he was dialling 000, which he did.

Category 2: Potentially dangerous behaviour

The challenging issue in dealing with *potentially dangerous behaviour* is attempting to *estimate the likelihood* that the behaviour will actually become dangerous. Many student behaviours as simple as sitting on the floor of the bus could be considered *potentially dangerous*, as the need for the bus to brake suddenly could result in a head injury, if the student passenger’s head strikes a seat corner, but the likelihood is low. This is where thinking through the likelihood of an action, and its potential impact, are the key considerations.

E.G.

An argument between students, or between a student and another passenger, which appears to be escalating has the potential to turn into a physical fight, which in a moving bus could certainly be dangerous. At the very least, such an incident will distract the driver, which immediately poses a risk, as we will discuss below.

Category 3: Challenging, irritating or unpleasant behaviour.

By far the most common type of inappropriate behaviour by student passengers will be challenging, irritating or unpleasant behaviour, rather than highly dangerous or potentially dangerous, which will likely be very rare. It is the type of inappropriate behaviour that you are most likely to encounter, but it can come in many forms and in many circumstances and, as discussed earlier, there are no simple, “one-size-fits-all” responses that cover all situations. Here are some of the things to consider in deciding how you might respond:

- Who is being impacted? Just you, as bus driver, other students, other passengers?
- What type and level of impact?
- Do you know which student is doing it?
- Do you know their identity?
- Do you have a relationship with them?
- Are they calm, or possibly emotional, angry or upset?
- School bus or route bus?

- Is this behaviour a ‘one-off’, or part of an ongoing pattern that you have observed on previous days?

And most importantly:

- Is this behaviour distracting you from safely driving the bus? If so, there is a risk to your passengers and yourself, and potentially the public, and *you cannot simply keep driving.*

Two very different ‘real-life’ examples:

E.G.1

A school student sitting towards the back of a school bus thought it would be amusing to roll a tennis ball down the floor of the school bus (coach). It rolled to the front, and under the driver’s feet, worrying him about his ability to apply the brakes as required. In being distracted, he looked down at his feet, just as a woman in a parked car opened her driver’s door. The bus struck and removed the door, and if the incident had happened a second or two later, she may have been killed. Driving distracted is dangerous.

E.G.2

Students on a school bus on an afternoon run at the end of the year decided to 'party' a little on the way home, just sharing soft drinks and snacks, but not seated, and moving around the bus as it travelled on an 80k rural road. The driver, concerned about the risk to the students, pulled over in a safe place, and joined the students for a few minutes, talking with them in a friendly manner. After 5 minutes or so, the students said they would like to get home, and the driver said that to get them home safely they would need to sit down and put their seat-belts on, which they happily did, and their journey home continued.

These are just two examples of dozens of examples of the wide range of situations that arise, where the bus driver has to consider all of the factors impacting on them deciding what action, if any, they can take, to try to keep everyone safe.

Deciding what to do, or not do.

As stated early in this handbook, providing simple "one-size-fits-all" advice about how best to respond to widely varying situations, with widely varying causes, dealing with very different students, is *simply not possible*. So the objective of the handbook is to outline, as simply as is practical, the range of different situations that can arise, and how those situations should impact on the bus driver's approach, in seeking to **calmly defuse the situation**, and to focus on driving safely, delivering your passengers safely to their destination.

Unfortunately, the reality is that, in some circumstances, *there may not be a lot that the bus driver can do*, in dealing with challenging, irritating or annoying behaviour that may be unpleasant for the driver, or even for passengers on the bus. In some situations the potential safety risk of intervening may be worse than tolerating some unpleasant behaviour, for a relatively short time.

For example:

- A group of students is being rowdy, making a lot of noise, showing no concern for other passengers' comfort
- Someone, unknown, is repeatedly pressing the 'Next Stop' buzzer, but no-one is getting off.
- Two culturally different groups of students are exchanging comments that appear to be racially charged.



In these unpleasant situations, the driver must exercise judgement. If the driver is unable to address and resolve the situation, and it is not serious enough to warrant dialling 000, continuing on may be the 'least worst' option. That will always be subject to deciding whether, as stated above, this behaviour distracting you from safely driving the bus. If so, there is a risk to your passengers and yourself, and potentially the public, and *you cannot simply keep driving.*



FINAL REMINDERS

As we said at the start, the purpose of this handbook is to give you some practical advice about dealing with inappropriate behaviour by school students, when travelling by school bus or route bus.

Given the very wide range of different behaviours and different situations, it's just not possible to provide "one-size-fits-all" instructions for every individual circumstance, so the objective is to provide practical advice to guide you as you decide, "in the moment", how to deal with any of a range of different situations. Here, as simply as possible, are reminders of some key points:

- As a bus driver, your main priority and safety duty is to concentrate on driving safely. If a passenger's behaviour is such that you may be distracted, it may be unsafe for you to continue the journey.
- You *cannot possibly know why* a student is behaving inappropriately, and you *cannot possibly "fix"* whatever the problem is.
- In most circumstances, your primary objective is to **calmly defuse the situation**, so that everyone arrives safely at their destination.
- Students may well be driven by emotion, but the bus driver needs to be logical, even when under stress.
- Focus on the behaviour, not the person, they are not your adversary, even if it feels like it.
- School bus and route bus situations are *very different*, with route bus situations more challenging and difficult to deal with.
- Do you need to respond? Does the safety risk or distress to passengers require that you respond?
- Inappropriate behaviour can be categorised as:
 - Category 1: Highly dangerous or life-threatening
 - Category 2: Potentially dangerous
 - Category 3: Challenging irritating or unpleasant
- Response will be related to the level of risk, distress, and potential distraction from safe driving

Given that inappropriate behaviour can arise suddenly, “out of the blue”, and that you may need to respond quickly, having thought in advance about the types of behaviours and the types of situations that may arise will assist you in responding appropriately, consistent with your safety responsibility to your passengers, the broader community, and yourself.

YOUR EMPLOYER’S SAFETY REQUIREMENTS

This Bus Driver Handbook has been produced for all bus drivers, regardless of the size and type of bus business you work for. Each bus operator will have its own safety requirement and procedures, and your employer will clarify any issues that arise from the advice provided in this handbook.





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