

# **Effective behaviour management via moral development within strong moral contexts:** **Researcher-Practitioner development of SATNAV, a comprehensive new programme of change for schools**

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## **Justifying SATNAV: a new programme of change for schools**

Education professionals will recognise the age-old debate about behaviour management, which has re-ignited recently in a polarised culture war waged across professional publications, school staff rooms and of course print and social media. On one side there are those who espouse the central importance of sanctions; on the other, those who have experienced first-hand the role that personal development and a strong school ethos can play in effective behaviour management. Now, a new and growing evidence base suggests that the latter side are right to be sceptical of 'draconian' punishment regimes and an over-reliance on controls.

Cutting edge research evidence pioneered by the Centre for Analytic Criminology at the University of Cambridge shows that pro-social and rule-following behaviour is driven primarily by the strong moral rules of individuals, which are developed and adhered to in strong moral contexts. Moreover, related research in schools is increasingly showing that controls (such as supervision, sanctions and deterrents) are only conditionally relevant. That is, controls are relegated to a failsafe in situations when individuals are forced to deliberate about their actions. Such deliberation only occurs following conflict between their own moral rules and those of their immediate context, i.e., when the moral rules of either the individual, or the school context (such as classrooms, corridors, and other students within), are weak. Thus, when students with strong pro-social values are in school settings that are also pro-social, sanctions and deterrents are simply not relevant to their behaviour.

This internationally growing evidence-base is counter to the majority of prior academic and pedagogical approaches that posit controls (such as sanctions) as the most fundamental aspect of rule-following. Instead, research findings strongly suggest that **effective behaviour management should be built on a comprehensive strategy for personal moral development within a strong moral context.**

Importantly, this new evidence-base is grounded in theory that provides strong and specific recommendations for not just school behaviour policy, but also for guidance about school climate and targeted interventions. Now, through the collaboration of researchers and practitioners, this theory and evidence base is being translated into a wide-ranging programme of changes to policy and practice that can be adopted by individual schools under the guidance of those who have developed it. The overall programme is called SATNAV, which consists of components that target individuals (SATNAV: Compass)<sup>iii</sup> and school-wide changes (SATNAV: Global; which includes support elements that promote longevity of the changes). This programme is now being trialled in three English schools with the support of academic researchers who are evaluating the impact of the various changes. *If you are interested in trialling SATNAV or The Compass Project at your school, please contact Dr Beth Hardie (bnh20@cam.ac.uk) or Dr Neema Trivedi-Bateman (n.trivedi-bateman@lboro.ac.uk)*

This article, written collaboratively by a school leader at The Commonweal School and a researcher from the University of Cambridge Centre for Analytic Criminology, summarises the theory and evidence that underpins the SATNAV approach and the implications for schools that the SATNAV programme aims to address.

Our initial practitioner-academic dialogue was rooted in three shared assumptions. Firstly, that schools can and should influence both short-term behavioural and long-term developmental outcomes. Secondly, that “good behaviour” means both the absence of disruptive behaviour and also positive engagement with learning and personal development. Thirdly, that we are preparing young people to show this good behaviour at school, outside of the school environment and beyond into adulthood.

On our journey to develop SATNAV, our early discussions were based around Situational Action Theory (SAT).<sup>iv</sup> This empirically-validated theory brings together individual-focused and environment-focused explanations for human actions, including rule-breaking and crime. Strong SAT research evidence suggests that, primarily, young people’s actions arise from the interaction between their own moral values and those of the environment they’re in. In addition, but only under certain conditions, adolescent behaviour can be influenced by their own self-control and external deterrents and rule enforcement.

## Theory and Evidence

Individual young people have their own moral rules about what actions they believe are right and wrong, but contexts (schools, classrooms, corridors etc) have moral rules too. This includes the school culture, and also the moral rules of other people present (staff and other students). To enforce these moral rules, individuals and contexts each have their own controls: individuals have self-control abilities, and contexts have levels of enforcement (supervision, sanctions, deterrents). Importantly, research shows that controls are only necessary when individuals are forced to deliberate due to conflict between their own moral rules and those of their immediate context. Obviously, there is nuance in this, but there follows the simplified theory (summed up in Figure 1) that is increasingly validated by cutting-edge empirical evidence.

**Figure 1: SAT’s Principal of moral correspondence and the conditional relevance of internal and external controls.<sup>v</sup>**

Transgression of moral rules?		Moral rules of context	
		Conductive <i>(Encourages)</i>	Not conducive <i>(Discourages)</i>
<b>Personal moral rules</b>	Conductive <i>(Encourages)</i>	Moral correspondence  Transgression is likely <i>(controls are irrelevant)</i>	Moral conflict  Transgression depends on <b>external controls</b>
	Not conducive <i>(Discourages)</i>	Moral conflict  Transgression depends on <b>self-control</b>	Moral correspondence  Transgression is unlikely <i>(controls are irrelevant)</i>

When the moral rules of the person and their context are in agreement, behaviour results in a straightforward manner. For example, if a student truly believes it is wrong to climb up on the tables and disturb others’ learning, and the school culture and the peers and staff present discourage that response, that student is unlikely to even see that course of action as an option (no deliberation is needed). This is the most fundamentally effective way in which to avoid rule-breaking behaviour. Alternatively, if a student thinks it’s perfectly acceptable to disturb others’ learning by clambering on tables, and the moral context (school culture, peers, even staff) does not discourage that action and may even encourage it, the student not only sees it as a viable action, but is again unlikely to even deliberate as

they engage in the act. The same process applies to all rule-breaking behaviour regardless of the severity. In some schools this can lead to endemic problem behaviour.

In contrast, when the moral rules of the person and their context are in conflict, individuals are forced to deliberate about their action, and this is where controls become relevant. For example, when the student thinks it is wrong to climb on the tables but all about them is encouragement to do so (e.g., peer pressure), the student must exercise their self-control in order to act in accordance with their own beliefs. In adolescence, this developing capability to exercise self-control can fail. Alternatively, if the student thinks that it is no problem to climb on tables, but the school climate and immediate context says otherwise, then the student must deliberate and it is at this point that external controls such as supervision, deterrents and sanctions can play a role in their decision about how to behave.

### **The role of schools**

Schools are key agents of influence on young people, but this impact is made in a number of different ways. The logic of the SAT theory clearly delineates these different impacts. First, schools can influence young people's behavioural outcomes via impact on both their long-term development and also the short-term in-the-moment process that affects their choices and actions. Second, schools can act in ways that either guide or control. Guidance refers to the fostering, impelling and guiding of development and behaviour from the outset; whereas control refers to the inhibiting, constraining and controlling of development and behaviour after its inception.

Over time, school-based guidance can contribute to the development of strong moral rules. This is effective in influencing behaviour in the long term and this effectiveness is not dependent on supervision or controls, particularly if the school (or later, other contexts) has a strong moral climate. Once young people develop strong moral rules, they will police themselves and guide each other. In schools with strong moral contexts, the enforcement of rules through direct supervision and the application of rewards and sanctions becomes increasingly irrelevant for students with strong moral rules.

## **Theory and evidence case studies**

Strong personal morality and strong moral contexts are a school's first line of defense against poor behavior, while effective controls are the second, a failsafe. Young people develop strong morality through effective "guidance" within strong moral contexts, while effective "control" involves supervision, sanctions, and other meaningful deterrents.

There is a raft of empirical evidence to support the theoretical assertions of SAT (for a review study, see Hardie & Rose, 2024). Here, we spotlight three recent SAT studies that were conducted in schools (open access links below).

### **Study 1: Explaining cheating in schools (Ernst & Gerth, 2021)**

This study of cheating behaviour in schools interviewed approximately 3,800 students across c.50 schools in 5 German cities when they were aged 15 and again a year later.

- *"In line with SAT's principle of moral correspondence, we find that in classes where students' morality is in correspondence with the class moral norms, they are likely to follow their own morality. Students with a rule-abiding morality in classes where cheating is uncommon do not cheat often. On the other hand, students with a rule-breaking morality in classes with a high share of cheating classmates cheat more often than when they are in classrooms that discourage cheating."*
- *"In line with the principle of the conditional relevance of self-control, the ability to exercise self-control has an impact on cheating only when students' morality and the moral norms are in conflict. When exposed to norms that encourage cheating, students with a rule-abiding morality and high self-control can stick to their morality and cheat less, whereas students with a rule-abiding morality and low self-control cheat more often."*
- *"Comparing students within different classes in the same school allows us to draw a very practical conclusion from our findings. Students with rule-breaking morality may cheat when exposed to many others who cheat, but not when exposed to fewer others who cheat. This suggests that moving students with rule-breaking morality into classes with cheating-discouraging moral norms would be an effective way of reducing individual cheating behaviour. Moreover, this supports the creation of moral norms in schools in which deviance is deemed unacceptable."*

### **Study 2: Disentangling School Climate: Analysing the causes of problem and criminal behaviour in schools (McSharry, 2022)**

This study of 34 varied schools across Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and 9 boroughs of North-East London, UK, assessed the interacting role of individual student propensity and school climate in the levels of problem behaviour in school.

- *"The influence of rule-breaking propensity is tempered by the perception of a strong moral context. The majority of high propensity pupils who perceived a strong moral context did not criminally offend in school. Most low and medium propensity pupils do not engage in criminal behaviour under any conditions. Therefore, criminal offending in schools occurs at the highest rate under the convergent contextual conditions of pupils with high rule-breaking propensity who perceive their school to have a weak moral context."*
- *"The findings suggest... a couple of avenues through which schools can be a part of the wider crime prevention project. The first obvious route and the one over which schools likely have the most control is the prevention of crime on campus by creating strong moral contexts. The*

*second route is likely more difficult but may make a larger contribution to the wider crime prevention project, and that is to reduce their students' propensity."*

### **Study 3: Prioritise Propensity: A multimethod analysis of peer influence and school-based aggression** (Kennedy, 2023)

This study of school aggression utilised methodological innovations to capture the micro-dynamics of peer influence and aggression in school contexts. The study sampled 396 13-14 year olds in 6 schools across Peterborough and Cambridgeshire, UK.

- *"high propensity adolescents are situationally vulnerable to the influence of aggressive peers and low propensity adolescents are situationally resistant."*
- *"The primary recommendation to emerge from this study is that strengthening aggression-relevant propensity (morality and the ability to exercise self-control) may be more fundamental for preventing aggression than reducing exposure to aggressive peers...Whilst it is unrealistic for adolescents to avoid affiliation with aggressive peers entirely, educators and parents can protect adolescents from the influence of aggressive peers by strengthening their morality and ability to exercise self-control."*
- *"The second practical implication is the need to limit association with aggressive peers and this is particularly the case for aggression-prone adolescents. This strategy would directly reduce aggression by strengthening the moral contexts of settings in which adolescents participate by (i) decreasing aggression-relevant motivation, (ii) strengthening anti-aggression moral norms, (iii) increasing levels of perceived deterrence associated with aggressive behavior, and (iv) reducing social sanctions for not engaging in aggression. As the peer context is critical for shaping adolescent development, this strategy would also indirectly reduce aggression by preventing the development of the propensity to engage in aggressive behavior."*

### **Implications for Schools**

Firstly, control, as defined above, is a necessary and important part of day-to-day behaviour management. We recognise that some students will, at times, need a system of supervision, rewards, and sanctions to ensure good behaviour.

The second implication is that rewards and sanctions do not directly lead to personal development. Some students are not positively engaged with learning and may engage in disruptive behaviour. These young people need guidance, as defined above, to effect personal change and break the pattern of behaviour. Therefore, just as schools need systems of rewards and sanctions, they also need on-going systems of restorative work. Behaviour sanctions should be followed up with dialogue and programmes to build strong moral codes. We need to talk to students when they don't show good behaviour, discuss the moral implications of their actions, and provide clear guidance on how they should behave and why. Without this they won't make the right choices when we are not there to supervise them.

However, guidance must not just be a reaction to poor behaviour when it arises. It also needs to be reflected through the school's curriculum and culture. Guidance is not just delivered to individuals when they transgress the rules. It is also delivered to the whole community through explicit teaching and learning about the moral basis of codes of

behaviour. This should cover school codes and also societal ones. Community is a key word here.

The final implication therefore is that we need to build strong and inclusive school communities and wider communities. Young people need to feel they have a stake in all the communities to which they belong. Everything a school does should embody and articulate the values that underpin good behaviour. This includes the role the school plays in the wider community. When they are developing their moral values and are unsure of the moral response, young people will look to their community to show them. We need to ensure that they see the right values, not just the right behaviours, reflected in the adults and other young people around them.

These implications underpin the design of the SATNAV programme for schools.

## **Conclusion**

Research findings within this framework strongly suggest that effective behaviour management should be built on a comprehensive strategy for personal development within a strong moral context. The challenge for the education system is to develop those strategies in collaboration with academic researchers so that they are grounded in empirical evidence. This is the aim of SATNAV, a new programme of change for schools that is currently being developed and trialled by academic researchers and school leaders. SATNAV encompasses a range of measures including a small-group targeted intervention programme aimed at helping young people develop the beliefs and skills required for appropriate decision-making around their behaviour, and school-wide programmes aimed at improving the moral climate of the whole school.

The SATNAV programme supports schools to influence young people's behavioural outcomes via impact on both their long-term development and also the short-term process that leads to their momentary actions. Under the programme, the personal development of students within an inclusive pro-social school climate is inseparable from behaviour management. In contrast to reactive and punitive controls in schools, the SATNAV programme aims to support schools to develop empowered young people who will continue to make the right behavioural choices both after 3pm and also post-16 when we aren't there to supervise them.

*If you are interested in trialling SATNAV at your school, please contact Dr Beth Hardie (bnh20@cam.ac.uk) or Dr Neema Trivedi-Bateman (n.trivedi-bateman@lboro.ac.uk)*

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<sup>iii</sup> For more information about 'SATNAV: Compass' see: [www.lboro.ac.uk/research/compass-project/](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/compass-project/). The Compass Project has been developed and trialled by Dr Neema Trivedi-Bateman, see [www.lboro.ac.uk/subjects/social-policy-studies/staff/neema-trivedi-bateman/](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/subjects/social-policy-studies/staff/neema-trivedi-bateman/).

<sup>iv</sup> For more information about Situational Action Theory (SAT) and the Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study (PADS+; the empirical study designed to test SAT), visit the website of the Centre for Analytic Criminology, University of Cambridge: [www.cac.crim.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cac.crim.cam.ac.uk).

<sup>v</sup> Figure 1 is specifically adapted for this article from various depictions of the principles of moral correspondence and the conditional relevance of controls presented by Situational Action Theory (SAT). For more information see: [www.cac.crim.cam.ac.uk/resou/sat](http://www.cac.crim.cam.ac.uk/resou/sat).