

Summerhill General Policy Statement (Community life)

This document arose from the need to define certain practices which are necessary parts of the Summerhill philosophy, but which might be considered contrary to some traditional childcare customs outside the school.

One of the unique and valuable experiences, which Summerhill offers its students is living as equal members in a democratic community. This includes staff, boys and girls. The Summerhill experience enables pupils from diverse cultural backgrounds to grow in a family environment; free from the usual social prejudices found in most other schools, in particular, gender-based prejudices. The result of this is that throughout the school there is a marked confidence and friendship between the sexes, and between all age groups.



Freedom for the individual is considered of primary importance at Summerhill. There is a clear definition between “Freedom” and “Licence”. Members of the community are free to do as they like, provided it does not interfere with the freedom of somebody else. Thus, you can wear what you like, eat what you like, attend lessons if you like – but you cannot play your drum kit at three in the morning or pee on the lounge floor. The school laws (at present about four hundred!) protect individuals and also protect the welfare of the school, the property, the school’s reputation etc.

Self-government at Summerhill covers all areas of everyday life at the school. It does not cover:

- ❖ Staffing
- ❖ Pupil intake and expulsion
- ❖ Finances
- ❖ Some safety issues

Community members may bring up businesses pertaining to any of the above in the school meetings for discussion. Changes will frequently be implemented following such discussion. The community has occasionally carried motions in the meeting which demanded the expulsion of a particular child or staff. This event would be taken very seriously and the Principal would take the community’s opinions into full account.

Any member of the community, pupil, or staff, has the right to charge another or bring up a business in the General Meeting or call a Special Meeting about anything they wish to. Thus, both pupils and staff are answerable to the whole community. Nobody in the school is exempt from this, and no subject is beyond the community’s discussion. There is an appeal process available in all Meetings.

Since Summerhill was established in 1921 it has been the policy to allow the younger children, in the ‘San’ to share mixed sex accommodation, just as they would within their own families. This lays the foundation for a more natural and equal relationship between the sexes, which will last throughout their school years and on into adult life. The rest of the school have single sex rooms but in mixed sex corridors.

The accommodation arrangements are an important part of the Summerhill experience in which students live as equal members of a democratic, self-governing community. Naturally, where children share a bedroom, they are able to express a preference with whom they share. This is usually done via an informal conversation with the house-parent or the adult with whom they feel most comfortable. Further, the presence of girls on the same corridor as boys brings a greater equilibrium to the whole area and, as A.S.Neill wrote: 'One sex will not grow up with any illusions or delusions about the other sex.' Staff accommodation may be situated within the children's sleeping areas, regardless of sex. Any conflicts, which may arise within these areas, are resolved through ombudsmen or the school meeting.

All toilet and washing areas in the school can be used by either sex, or by staff. Rules covering this subject are open to change in the General Meeting. If one sex or age group in the school want to be exempt from sharing, then it can be passed by democratic vote. There have been several occasions in the past when certain groups have carried proposals excluding other groups from the use of their toilet area, mainly due to boys peeing on the seats!

Summerhill has a different attitude towards physical contact and friendships between staff and pupils to that of other schools. Hugging, sitting on laps and other physical displays of affection are an accepted and much valued part of community life.

Summerhill pupils have freedom to take part in what may be considered by some as risky pastimes, such as climbing trees, building dens, racing on bicycles, etc.

The school has many safety laws such as a ban on younger children having knives or matches, no climbing on roofs, only supervised use of the swimming pool, laws governing who can go downtown (visit the local shops), when and at what age etc. These safety laws, in one form or another, often come up for discussion in the school meeting with the result that the meetings are a risk assessment forum. This makes risk assessments not an abstract, adult driven concept but something which is very real for the pupils and adults alike. Some risk taking, both emotional and physical, is considered an important part of discovering one's own, and other people's boundaries.

Summerhill School has a long history of not filtering the internet and allowing children to make their own choices about what is and what is not appropriate with guidance from the school meeting when problems or issues arise. However, in the school meeting on March 24, 2017, the community decided to introduce an electronic filtering system. This system, which operates in conjunction with our school law, is policed by the whole community through the school meeting. (For more information, see *Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy*)

Summerhill is a place where children can be left alone. Staff are available and supportive when children want to talk, but they will not pursue children and offer assistance unless this is an action decided in a staff meeting. The staff at Summerhill are practical care-workers – they are not counsellors, social workers, or agony aunts. Although we believe that children should be responsible for finding their own answers whenever possible, the adults at Summerhill are sensitive and responsive to the children's needs. (See section 4 – *General Policy Statement*)

Summerhill is a non-religious community. It does not preach for, or against, any religion. Important values such as tolerance, understanding, compassion etc are learned through living as equal members of a self-governing community.

The school policy is to be supportive and to offer advice and information about sex and sexuality whenever it is needed. The school aims for children to feel comfortable and supported so that if sexual problems arise, they will be able to talk openly to the adults and seek help. Parents may be informed if we have concerns, though we will try to comply with a child's wish for confidentiality when possible. Although it is legal for children over the age of 16 to have sexual intercourse, it is of course not allowed whilst they are at school.

The smoking of cigarettes is not permitted on the school premises. Neither is vaping. The rule applies to adults and pupils. Any sanction for breaking this rule is decided by the community in the school meeting.

There is a rule of no drinking among pupils, though 18-year-olds can have a small drink at the pub or in staff's rooms with Meeting permission. We have mild alcoholic punches from time to time on special occasions such as our Christmas mulled wine, or when we lick the government in court, celebrate our 100th birthday, etc. - served age appropriately – e.g. the little ones mostly get just lemonade with perhaps a sniff of the alcohol so that they do not feel left out!

Of course, drug taking of any sort is not allowed. We do not have a drug problem at Summerhill – any incidents are dealt with easily and it is very rare.

The usual penalty for drinking or drug taking is being sent home for a minimum of four weeks and past experience has shown that being excluded from the place you love is a successful sanction. However, individual circumstances are taken into account so the penalty may vary, and we always reserve the right to permanently exclude a child. Under normal circumstances, no refund is given on time spent at home. Still on the subject of sanctions etc., the school is required to provide written confirmation that it rejects, (and indeed has always rejected), the use of corporal punishment.

There is no restriction on the use of language at Summerhill, though swearing outside the school is prohibited by the school meeting. Of course, this, like all other issues, can be changed in the General Meeting by majority vote.

Child-on-child abuse (bullying), both online and offline is dealt with by the school meeting. Ombudsmen are available instantly to mediate and provide support between meetings. Special Meetings can always be called at any time, day or night.

At Summerhill we have a very 'open' attitude to our bodies, nudity and bodily functions, and strongly separate nudity from sexuality. We pride ourselves on being prepared to talk about anything. As Neill wrote: 'At Summerhill, nothing is unmentionable, and no one is shockable.' Having an 'open', unrepressed, approving attitude to these things is very important for a child's emotional development. This positive attitude to our bodies is becoming ever more important as we live in a

society obsessed with body image; a society in which most people, especially teenagers, don't feel positive about the way they look and often engage in forms of self-harm because of it.

The freedom to attend lessons or otherwise is genuine. There are no hidden pressures from the adults in the community. There are always times during the course of their stay at Summerhill when students will be non- attenders. This depends very much on their experiences in other schools prior to joining Summerhill. If staff have concerns about the motives for not attending (possible classroom phobia, shyness, etc.) the child will remain on the Special Attention list for regular monitoring and will be offered support. However, non-attendance of classes on its own would not be considered a problem but more often a sign that emotional development is following the usual route. (See *General Policy Statement*) We recognise that some children have special needs, and we provide appropriately for them.

Summerhill does not send school reports to parents. If they are needed for college entrance etc., they can be sent upon request, with the pupil's involvement. The Principal will answer any queries about general welfare, or particular worries which parents may have, but the children's lives at school are considered their own business – to share, or not with their parents as they wish. The pupils at Summerhill value this aspect most highly, it gives them a feeling of responsibility to themselves and of independence. (See policy on *assessment, record-keeping and report writing*)



Summerhill recognises that its approach might be considered unusual and that some people may look upon it with disapproval. However, these things are part of the philosophy of freedom and self-government, which is considered essential to the development of the pupil's emotional growth and well-being, and which for 100 years has proved to be successful.

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Document history

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