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## **Initial Action at Incidents in Schools** - exhibit management

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Initial Action at Incidents in Schools  
- exhibit management

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## Topic Outline

There are many incidents that teachers encounter during the school year. Many of these can and should be resolved by applying the School's Code of Conduct and Discipline System with no further action. A small number of these incidents however are serious enough to require the involvement of external agencies to appropriately deal with the issues. This manual is designed to develop the teacher's ability to take appropriate action when dealing with physical evidence that is often found at incident scenes and may afterwards be used by police in a criminal inquiry. It will also give them a deeper understanding of how the actions they take initially can assist external investigators who subsequently become involved in the more serious events.

## Overview

To achieve the objectives contained in this manual it should be combined with a professionally conducted workshop using de-identified case studies sourced from the School requesting the training.

## Objectives

To provide the participant with the ability to:

- Identify correct exhibit handling techniques
- explain the reasons why exhibits need to be secured and handled in a way that limits contamination

## Introduction

The initial action taken by a teacher when they first receive the report of a serious incident and attend the scene can have an enormous effect on the success or otherwise of subsequent investigations undertaken by external investigators.

After safety and wellbeing issues are dealt with the teacher needs to be aware of correct procedures for handling exhibits so that trace evidence such as fingerprints, DNA, hair and clothing fibres are not contaminated or destroyed by the teacher handling them. Wherever possible exhibits should not be altered from their original state.

Ideally exhibits should be left exactly where they are and guarded until the external investigators arrive. Sometimes however this may not be possible or desirable. For example when drugs or a weapon are found in a student's locker and there is concern that other students can access it and

decisions haven't been made by senior staff regarding external involvement.

Some simple procedures involving the collecting and storage of the exhibits if followed could preserve vital evidence. This is particularly the case in incidents involving illicit drugs and sexual assault.

By preserving exhibits in the manner they are found they can provide crucial evidence for external investigators to present to any subsequent court or tribunal hearing.

The general principles used for handling exhibits for serious incidents can equally be applied for less serious incidents to ensure they are handled in a professional manner. This may subsequently prevent complaints from parents and also students about the way an investigation into a breach of the School's Code of Conduct is handled.

It should be noted however that Schools put the wellbeing of their students first and foremost. This may occasionally cause a conflict between the wellbeing of the students and the needs of the external investigators. It is for the School to decide how these competing interests should be managed. This manual should not be considered as a step by step guide in how to handle exhibits unless it suits the school's overall philosophies. Rather it should be considered as a set of guidelines and principles to assist in developing School policy on handling exhibits.

## Definitions

Before we go any further however it is important to explain what is an “incident” and what is a “serious incident” along with some other terms used in this manual.

Even though individual schools may have different definitions, for the purpose of this manual the following are considered appropriate.

**Incident** - An occurrence or event that interrupts normal school procedure **or** precipitates an event at the school that requires intervention by teachers

**Serious incident**- An incident that may require the involvement of an external agency or adversely affect the wellbeing of any student **or** the reputation of the school **and** requires immediate intervention by teachers

**Physical evidence** – any item, in any state (solid, liquid or gas) that may provide proof of what occurred or create a nexus (a connection) between the person responsible for the incident and the offence. **It can take any form.**

**Trace evidence** – very small evidence such as hair, clothes fibres, saliva, fingerprints etc. It may not be easily visible to the **naked eye.**

**Incident scene** – This is the **immediate area** surrounding an incident within which evidence might be found

**Primary incident scene** – This is the scene where the incident was **actually committed** e.g. the toilet block where a child was assaulted, or a classroom where a fight took place or even an area of a park where students smoke or took drugs

**Secondary incident scene** - **Other places** in addition to the primary incident scene e.g. the area that a group of youths parked and waited prior to coming onto the school grounds to assault a student.

## Handling Exhibits

Whenever attending a serious incident scene the first consideration a teacher should have is for the safety and wellbeing of themselves, the students and any others involved.

Once safety and wellbeing is no longer an issue and there is a possibility of the involvement of an external agency contamination of evidence through Locard's principal of exchange becomes a concern.

What is Locard's principle of exchange?

**Every contact leaves it's traces**



Put simply when an incident occurs people who have been in the incident scene leave traces of having been there. Exhibits and the position they are found in are often examples of this as is fingerprints and DNA material. When a teacher enters an incident scene they will also leave their traces. This should be kept to a minimum and recorded in notes to avoid confusing the investigators who will process the scene and try to make sense of how it relates to what happened. This concept also extends to the handling of exhibits. **TRY NOT TO CHANGE OR ALTER THEM IN ANY WAY PRIOR TO HANDING THEM TO EXTERNAL INVESTIGATORS.**

Where possible secure the scene with incident scene tape and have a staff member guard it until external investigators arrive. Be aware of the impact of this type of action on the students not involved. If students see this happening they will rapidly draw conclusions that something serious has occurred. It is usually only a matter of time before they find out the student who caused the response. This can then have an adverse impact on the wellbeing of the offending student if they are to remain at the school.

Should the teacher be in a position where they have to collect the exhibit then the following should be done.

You may wish to take a photograph of the exhibit in the position you found it in. This will preserve the evidence

visually. (See workbook on Initial Action at Incidents in Schools for the reasoning behind this)

To avoid or minimize contamination with your own DNA or fingerprints a [mask](#) and [rubber gloves](#) should be worn. If necessary, protective clothing may be needed but this is unlikely in the school environment. If unable to do this or unwilling due to wellbeing issues for students at the very least handle the exhibits minimally by the edges or corners if possible and make of note of where you touched them.

If prepared to [wear a mask and gloves](#). Put them on prior to picking up an exhibit. The mask should be put on first and then the gloves. Care should be taken when handling the gloves to minimize transferring your DNA onto the outside of the gloves. Only then should the exhibit be carefully picked up and secured in a bag of some type if possible. This may also protect you from biological and chemical hazards associated with item you are collecting.

## Collecting Exhibits

**All exhibits should be collected, packaged, transported and stored in such a way that their original condition remains unchanged.**

Ensure you know how to appropriately bag your exhibits. A variety of plastic and paper bags and even storage containers is suggested.

Store exhibits properly in the bags to guard against them [falling out](#).

For e.g. fresh cannabis when sealed in plastic bags will sweat and rapidly become mouldy. If stored too long in paper bags it can dry out and become an **airborne biological hazard**.

Neither of these issues should become a problem if the exhibit is to be promptly handed to external agencies, destroyed or returned to parents (not that you would return cannabis to parents).

List some exhibits that you have taken from students in the past and how you packaged and stored them. Were they kept in their original state with regard to trace evidence?

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You must ensure that all of these exhibits are appropriately bagged to prevent any tampering with them. Too many people just love to handle exhibits belonging to someone else's investigation if they are left lying around the office.

## Receipts

External agencies should always issue receipts when handed any type of property / exhibit whether it is abandoned or an exhibit.

**ALWAYS REQUEST A RECEIPT FOR ANY PROPERTY / EXHIBITS YOU HAND TO EXTERNAL AGENCIES. MAKE NOTES OF THE DATE, TIME, PLACE ,THE NAME OF THE PERSON, AND THEIR ORGANISATION.**

## Labelling

Ensure you label any exhibits that you take possession of. This will allow you, another teacher or an external agency to know where the exhibit comes from and how it is linked to the scene if it somehow becomes separated from the rest of the exhibits.

Minimum detail on a label is:

- Name of the teacher who took possession
- Brief description of incident e.g. drug / assault
- Brief description of exhibit e.g. green leafy substance believed to be cannabis, gold colored chain etc (do not record it as being something that you are not qualified to identify)
- Time date and location of discovery

A variety of labels should be maintained by the investigator. As well as stick on labels (which should **NEVER** put on the actual exhibit) some tie on labels are often invaluable for larger exhibits that can't be put in a plastic or paper bag.

## Describing the Exhibit

When describing an exhibit or property it is important that you don't make assumptions about what it is that you are taking possession of. If you make a wrong assumption this can lead to later accusations in court hearings that the exhibit has been tampered with. Some examples are listed below:

- Cannabis –green vegetable matter believed to be cannabis
- Amphetamine – white powder substance believed to be amphetamine or white powder substance believed to be an illicit drug
- Gold bracelet – gold coloured bracelet
- Silver chain – silver coloured bracelet
- Gold ring with diamond – gold coloured ring with clear stone in same

## Continuity

External investigators will want to have all exhibits connected to the incident scene by photographs, sketches, diagrams, written descriptions and oral testimony. It is important that all staff taking possession of any exhibits make notes of what they did. They should then give a copy of their original notes to the senior staff member collating all the paperwork for the incident. The staff member should always keep their original documents for production at any court of tribunal if required.

The chain of custody (CONTINUITY) of the exhibit must be

maintained from the time of it's collection at the scene to the time of it being handed over to any external investigating agency.

**Notes of changes of possession must be maintained in all instances.**

Failure to do so could allow defense counsel in court to make allegations that the exhibits have been tampered with, are not the same as in the originals or have altered in some way that lessens their evidentiary value. If however you do break the chain of continuity for certain exhibits, that are usually distinctive in nature, provided they can be identified by the person seizing them this problem can be overcome. For drugs however this is not the case and continuity of them is extremely important.

**Office Storage of Exhibits**

Most external investigators' offices have an exhibit storage room that is managed by a full time "exhibits officer".

Schools should not have to go to that extreme however one of the senior staff members should have an exhibit storage area that can be locked and to which access can be restricted.

Practically this can be as simple as having a lockable drawer or filing cabinet in the office of the senior staff member that only that person has a key to. **Notes should** then be kept about any access made to the exhibit and the reason for same.

The general standard for external investigators is to have an "exhibit book" where the investigators upon their return from the scene will record the exhibits seized in the book (or computer) and then hand them over to the "exhibits officer" for secure storage until they are required for either court purposes or expert examination.

The main features of this system are:

- A secure storage facility that minimal people have access to,
- A detailed recording system of who accesses the exhibits and why

## Conclusion

The proper handling of exhibits appears on face value to be relatively simple however in practice it is amazing how many professional investigations have suffered because of errors made in the proper handling and storage of exhibits.

Don't you be the cause of one of these errors.