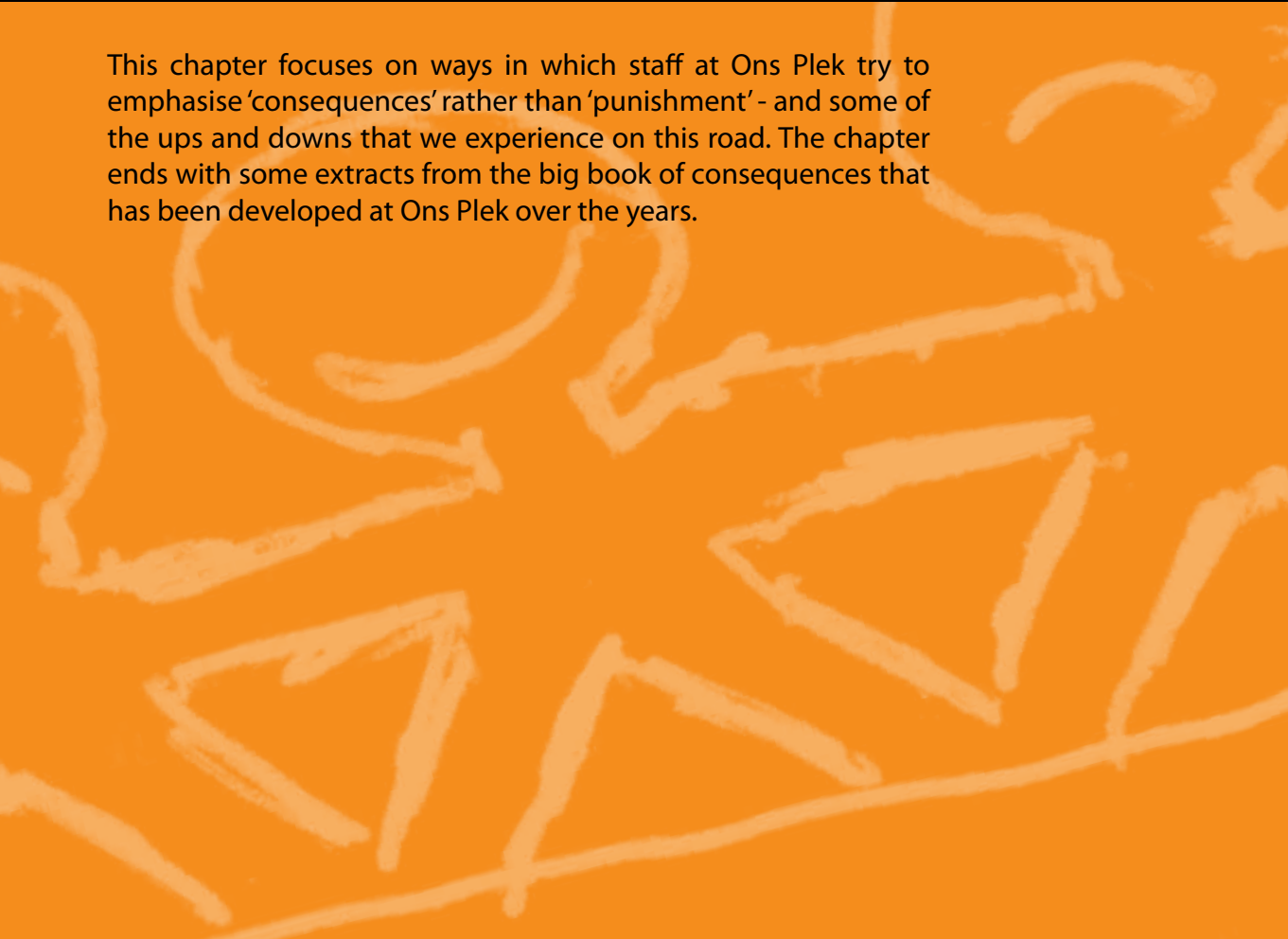


Chapter 8

Discipline through consequences

Pam Jackson

This chapter focuses on ways in which staff at Ons Plek try to emphasise 'consequences' rather than 'punishment' - and some of the ups and downs that we experience on this road. The chapter ends with some extracts from the big book of consequences that has been developed at Ons Plek over the years.



As Renée or I or other social workers greet the childcare workers in the morning, we may be greeted with the following kinds of news:

“Nosipho returned late from school yesterday, saying they had extra classes. I phoned the school who reported that she never attended,” says childcare worker Lulekwa Matho.

“Nonkululeko is hiding a packet. She sneaked it into the house,” says childcare worker Zanele Mabina.

“Jennifer cut up my skirt.” a girl reports to the childcare worker.

“Pumla stole my sheets.” a girl reports to the childcare worker.

“Monique refused to do her duties today,” says childcare worker Nomfundo Pilisani. “And Nomhle broke the window,” she adds.

“Ingrid and Mapule were caught drinking wine last night,” childcare worker Roseline Martin tells us.

Many, many conversations begin in this way. News of this kind is a signal to sit down immediately and work out a response. Hearts and minds are searched to understand each child’s action, to plan therapy sessions relating to the child’s behaviour, and in conjunction with therapy to discipline appropriately, fairly, sympathetically, but firmly and immediately.

The response we decide on may only involve counselling, or it may also involve consequences for the behaviour which will contain it, hopefully preventing it from happening again. This disciplinary focus on consequences is one of many crucial building blocks we rely on for creating and maintaining a stable environment in which the children can grow. Without it, our successes would be few. Staff aim to teach children useful, healthy, normal, stable ways of living with other people. The housemother goes through the rules with each new girl who comes, whenever possible in the girl’s mother tongue.

Every rule at Ons Plek follows the policy, philosophy and theory of Dinkmeyer and McKay¹ relating to logical consequences. Over the years, through meetings with the girls and staff together and alone, we have evolved policies, rules and consequences for many behaviours.

When I first came to Ons Plek there was a strong and correct belief among some committee members that the girls needed time to change their “street” behaviour. This belief sometimes became confused with questions of discipline, and meant that no boundaries were set for the girls. I had decided on my arrival to watch and listen in order to learn what was needed (valuable advice on starting a new job given to me years before by a social worker called Margaret Ward-Abel). Every time there was a major incident, like the fight when the house mother was stabbed referred to in Chapter 2, I involved the committee, who were always very willing to come to Ons Plek and who, I sensed, were not yet willing to trust my judgement. I wanted them to learn alongside me so that I would have their support if a major change was needed in policies. This was necessary because the committee members really were very committed, and concerned about every detail.

At that stage the girls were under the impression that they could live at Ons Plek forever.

¹ Dinkmeyer, D & McKay, G. D. 1982. *The Parents Handbook. Systematic Training for Effective Parenting*. Circle Pines, Minnesota: American Guidance Service

The message that they should use the opportunity of being in care to prepare for a future adult life was not being expressed. I convinced the committee that a cut-off age of 18 or 19 years should be set for the girls to live at Ons Plek, to motivate them to prepare for adulthood. Further boundaries and discipline would have to be set in place if we were to really help the girls with long-term effectiveness. The approach that the girls needed time to change their behaviour was valuable, but the changes would not happen without some conditions being gradually and systematically imposed.

When the incident of the girls breaking down three doors (mentioned by Jane in Chapter 2) occurred, the committee were ready to lay down some boundaries.

Jane advised us to repeat an action taken by the Homestead in similar circumstances. We shut Ons Plek for a week, saying that it could not continue to run if the girls’ behaviour was so unruly. Ons Plek was meant to be a safe place for girls, but their actions were preventing this from happening.

We found accommodation for each girl with volunteers. At the end of the week the girls were brought back and were told they could apply to come back to live at Ons Plek. A committee of four people sat behind a desk and heard each girl’s motivation for her application. Rights and responsibilities, as well as each one’s individual behaviours, were discussed, and conditions were set for each girl concerning what we expected from her. The conditions were not too difficult for a particular individual to satisfy, but they involved some effort on the girl’s part.

After these interviews, I introduced the concepts and premises of the STEP programme.²

To introduce and maintain a stable environment there had to be a consequence for each behaviour, which had to be enforced and implemented immediately. Every day from then on, Renée or I or one of the social workers would meet with the childcare workers to look at any troubling behaviour that had arisen.

The STEP programme basically teaches that discipline can be used in an empowering way. Children learn that they have responsibility for their lives; the choices they make on how to behave are their choices, and the consequences of their actions will affect them. It’s their decision. Consequences of an action do not always happen immediately. In order to help a child see that avoiding his homework every day may have a consequence far down the line, parents have to think up an immediate consequence as well. The idea is to make the consequence relate as closely as possible to the problematic behaviour. As with any other person, if a girl breaks a window the logical consequence is that she has to find the money to pay for it, and in the meantime put cardboard over the window to stop the wind blowing through it. Stopping her watching television is not related to the behaviour. This means that Ons Plek staff have to work out an appropriate and safe opportunity for the girl to earn the money. In the meantime, we all suffer the consequences of a broken window.

For children to make a responsible choice, they have to know what the consequences of their actions are beforehand. Soon after their arrival at Ons Plek, the rules and consequences are discussed with the girls. From time to time the girls and staff review the rules and negotiate changes.

Sometimes knowing the consequences in advance helps a girl make a decision we do not agree with, as in the following scenario.

² Dinkmeyer & McKay *ibid*.

Time is money - as Nonkululeko demonstrated

Seventeen-year-old Nonkululeko worked in Ons Winkel, our shop situated next door to Ons Plek at the District 6 Methodist Church. It was a secondhand shop which sold donations of goods we had received but could not use. One day, some apprentice hairdressers offered free hair appointments so that they had candidates on whom to do their exam work. Nonkululeko badly wanted to go with the other girls to the hairdressers. But, in accordance with our philosophy, we said she had to go to work.

In the job market, employees go to work every day unless they are sick. She could not ask for time off because no one else was trained to run the shop and she was not sick. We warned her that the consequence of missing work would be that she didn't get paid her daily wage. Nonkululeko was no fool. She calculated that a hair appointment would cost more than her morning's wage and sneaked off to the hairdresser.

The consequences that we think out do not always have the intended result. Second guessing becomes the name of the game when working out consequences. One of the difficulties we experience is that the children come in with such different standards of behaviour. We try to be fair, but we also explain sometimes that we do not expect the same standard of behaviour from a new girl, just off the streets, as we do from more settled girls.

Nosipho missing school



Having heard the childcare worker's report about this in the morning, we discuss some consequences. Maybe Nosipho avoided school because the children were being horrible to her. If so, a very important discussion on her feelings, and her way of responding to the children, was necessary in her therapy sessions. She would meet many difficult people in her life and could be helped to work out different ways of handling difficult people. A discussion with the school would also be necessary. Our homework could give more focused support if the problem was embarrassment at school because of a lack of understanding of the work.

Whatever the psychological and emotional reasons, Nosipho would also be disciplined. We teach the girls that for every action there is a consequence, something that follows. Our lives are an interplay between our own choices, outside circumstances and how we decide to react to them. Each one of us holds our destiny in our own hands. Sometimes the consequences are natural. If we walk into the rain, we get wet.

We want to empower the girls. We do this by showing them again and again that their decisions impact directly on their lives. Their decisions have consequences (we also use the Xhosa word *izighamo* - fruits). The consequence of Nosipho not going to school is that she will not progress with her education. If she wants an education she will have to put in study time later in her life - as an adult, perhaps. The object is not to punish her with an irrelevant and illogical task. This will only make her do what we want her to do, perhaps resentfully, because she is afraid of the punishment, not because she has chosen to do it. When we are no longer there to enforce our rules, she will do what she wants to anyway. So punishment is out at Ons Plek. Logical consequences, as appropriate and logically related to the deed as possible, take lots of thought and energy to implement.

Nosipho would have to spend the same amount of time that she had missed at school doing some school work, which we would give her, on her own on Saturday, as well as continue to attend homework lessons on weekdays as usual. A combination of therapy, school intervention and relevant consequences meant that she would get appropriate problem-solving attention, but the attention did not become a reward for skipping school. The effect of our consequence, we hoped, would be that she would realise that if she avoided a necessary part of her responsibilities towards her education, she would have to make it up later.

Nonkululeko, the packet and the fight

Nonkululeko was found walking up the stairs with a packet. For weeks we had suspected her of stealing goods, or storing her boyfriend's stolen goods. Inside the packet was a single brand new shoe. Aha! at last we had her. Nonkululeko insisted that she had bought it and could tell us where. In accordance with our belief in being fair and just, we telephoned the shop to check out the story, despite our certainty that this was a fabrication of Nonkululeko's. Ask who had to slink out of the room with embarrassed faces. Unbelievably, the shopkeeper assured us that he had had a sale of all the left shoes in his shop (the right ones having been stolen over the years, when displayed singly outside his shop).

Are we successful in our methods of discipline? Quite often we are. But many are the times we are outsmarted. We remained sure that Nonkululeko was stealing. We had just caught her on the wrong occasion.

Nonkululeko was also the child whose behaviour underlined the most important aspect of any disciplinary method. One day she and another girl got into a fight. The fight started downstairs. Childcare worker Joyce Mateta separated the girls. Within minutes they had found each other again; this time they were separated by the other girls. Both girls bided their time and attacked each other fiercely and voraciously, this time upstairs, one with a broom and the other with a broken light bulb as weapons.

Joyce and I sprang into action simultaneously. She took hold of one girl and I held the other. This is important - if the person who intervenes holds only one girl, she is usually sure you are on the other girl's side. While I was holding Nonkululeko she begged me, beseeched me with intense feeling to release her. In her voice I heard her anguish and dilemma. She wanted to take revenge on the other girls, but she respected me too much to hit me to make me release her so that she could do so. It is only respect, and the relationship one has with a child, that will have even the most rebellious and independent child submitting to discipline. And for that to happen, one needs to discipline with respect.

But what is a consequence?

And now follows the other half of the story of how to work out a consequence.

"What are consequences?" childcare worker Ncebakazi asks the girls when we are discussing some very destructive behaviour with them one day. "Consequences are punishments," is the answer.

Ntombentsha Pongomo explains:

A consequence is something that happens after something else, as a result of something else. You don't go shopping, so the consequence is you don't have food in the house. It's not a punishment; it's something that happens logically. You chose it, you know when you throw a stone at the window, it will break - that's the consequence.

We don't want to punish you, we want you to decide yourselves if you are going to do something or not because you know the consequences. If we punish you you will act from fear.

The difficulty with consequences is that if they are implemented in an angry voice, they can be seen as punishments. We always ask the girls if what we are doing is fair, and we try to think of a consequence which is logical and connected to what they have done. We also explain that our aim is not to punish but to empower them, through holding them responsible for their actions. Nevertheless, some of them still feel punished.

Jennifer and Nuni's skirt

So when Jennifer cut up Nuni's skirt, she had to give up her pocket money of R10 a month for three months to contribute towards the cost of a skirt. In addition, because R30 doesn't go far, we confiscated all her clothes except for two changes of clothing for a month. Leaving her two changes of clothing was not unduly hard, it gave her a chance to learn the value of clothing, and the period of the consequence would eventually come to an end. We were able to monitor that she did not circumvent the consequence by bullying others into lending their clothing, because we were very aware of the two outfits she was allowed to wear.

This very destructive action would also be a priority topic in her therapeutic counselling, to see what had prompted it.

The girls, like all children, are adept at circumventing their consequences. We have to be four steps ahead of them when thinking of a consequence.

Pumla and the sheets

But even our experienced team is hard put to it to foresee everything. Pumla really put us through our paces.

Sixteen-year-old Pumla wet her bed every night. In the morning she was too lazy to wash her sheets and clean the mattress. Sometimes she made her bed so that no one could see that the bed was wet. The smell in the house was terrible.

The childcare workers waged a daily battle for some months to get her to wash the bedding. They also took her to the hospital, and various treatments were tried. The social worker had done a thorough history of the child's experiences and had become increasingly sure that the bedwetting was not a result of emotional trauma.

Some months later, Pumla continued to hide her wet sheets from staff. She did not wash her mattress unless supervised. She swapped her wet mattress with other children's dry ones. The house stank of urine. We noticed that she herself was very neat. Her clothes were always washed and ironed, but the house sheets were still stinking. It was very

unpleasant for everyone else in the house.

We had tried every possibility for helping her. Not drinking after supper; being woken up at night. Children often can't stop bedwetting but it is a rule in the house that they must still take responsibility for cleaning their bedding.

In our weekly case discussion we brainstormed various consequences for the behaviour of her not taking responsibility for her washing. Logically, the blankets were dirty and not looked after - so should we remove them from her after giving her a warning?

This consequence was directly related to her actions so it was a logical consequence. Stopping her watching television would not be logical; it would be an arbitrary decision and therefore would fall into the category of punishment. However, we did not want her to be cold at night. This decision would also go against the Minimum Standards outlined in the Transformation of Child and Youth Care System in South Africa, which states that children may not be deprived of basic rights and needs such as food, clothing, shelter and bedding.

Finally we called Pumla into the room. We explained to her that what we did mind was that she was respecting herself but not anyone else. She kept her clothes clean but she did not keep our sheets clean. We reminded her of the many things that we had tried together to help her. We stressed that we did not mind the bedwetting, and many children did wet the beds, as she knew.

Everyone else was experiencing the consequences of her behaviour. She was not taking responsibility for it because she and her clothes were okay. We had decided that she could only wash her clothes if she first washed the sheets. This was logical, it was fair and it should teach her to respect both her own and others' possessions.

But it did not work, because she bullied other children into lending her their clothes and hid her dirty ones. The housemother couldn't remember which clothes were hers, and so was not aware when she wore the clothes of others.

We called her in again and said, in very calm, neutral, non-accusatory tones, that she was still not respecting our items and was bullying the other children, which we could not allow - and she was learning how to manipulate society's rules to her own advantage. The consequences of all this were that we would take all her clothes away so that she was left with only two outfits. If she wasn't wearing them we would know that she was borrowing clothes from other girls.

The immediate result was that Pumla had an incentive which was important to her. She took responsibility for her bedding at once, and within a week had all her clothes back.

Rules, reasons and consequences: Some examples from Ons Plek's file

Ons Plek has a file of Rules, Reasons and Consequences, developed over the years. The examples below have been selected from the file to give some insight into the experience of staff and girls over the years. The file has similar sections on: coming late from school; not attending homework sessions; keeping medicine in the house; house duties; behaving very rudely to staff; watching television or using the phone at wrong times; going to the shop without permission; missing meal time; stealing food; not

I am 14 years old
I live in Woodstock number
17 York Road

returning from school holidays and weekends at the right times; begging from people through the gate; boyfriends coming onto the premises; weapons; fighting; outings; pocket money; breakages; donations and visitors. Some of the rules are written in very colloquial 'speak' and give voice to the strong feelings of the staff about the rule. In some cases the arguments between staff and girls are implicit in the way the rule is written.

Sleeping out

Rule: Girls may not sleep out. They must be in at Ons Plek by 6 p.m. every evening at the latest, unless they have permission to be late. At Siviwe, a girl who sleeps out may be told to go back to living at Ons Plek any time she stays out and does not have permission to be anywhere else - this includes sleeping on the streets, and sleeping at friends or family without permission. Girls who sleep out without permission can only come in at 6 p.m. the following night, unless otherwise decided.

Reason: It is physically and morally dangerous for girls to be out at night at places that we have not arranged for them to be. It is also important that girls are at home for supper, and to prepare themselves for the next day's activities.



If a girl comes back in the morning having slept out all night, she could sleep the whole day and be ready for going out again in the evening. Therefore if she sleeps out she must also stay out the following day until 6 p.m., or until the housemother lets her in.

In the case of young children, mentally challenged children or other very vulnerable children, the housemother can let the girl in earlier and give another consequence. She must explain to the other children that she is doing so on this occasion only because of the child's special circumstances.

Girls staying at Siviwe are more settled than girls at Ons Plek, who may still be getting used to obeying rules. Better behaviour is expected from Siviwe girls. If a girl from Siviwe sleeps out, she may not be ready to be there.

Consequences: If a girl sleeps out overnight she must come in the next day at 6 p.m., or when the housemother lets her in, and clean the whole house. The staff meeting then decides if further consequences are necessary, depending on whether, for example, it is the first time this has happened.

Swearing in the house

Rule: Girls are not allowed to swear at each other, and are especially not allowed to insult each other's family members; most especially they must not talk about each other's mothers.

Reason: We all want to stay in a place that is safe and warm and where we can learn to get on well with other people and solve problems in good ways. We need to find ways to not make each other sad.

Consequences: The childcare staff will solve this in the most appropriate way for the child's age and level of understanding.

Making a noise and running around on purpose

(when they have been asked to calm down, for example at bedtime)

Rule: We allow the children to play and be happy and spontaneous as far as possible.

However, girls must respect the neighbours and all the staff in the house. Girls must also respect bedtime.

Reason: We need to create a good environment for everybody to be in.

Consequence: Girls must stay in a separate room until they have calmed down and are willing to cooperate well. Some girls may be taken to cool down separately from the others, at the childcare worker's discretion. The girl must stay in the room because the staff member told her to stay there. The door of the place the girl is in must never be locked.

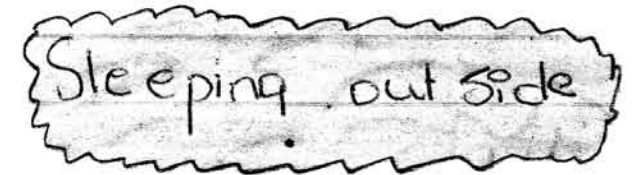
Bullying

Rules:

- No girl may hurt or threaten or hit any other girl in the house.
- No girl may do anything to another girl when that girl says no.
- No girl may ask any other girl to do her duties.
- No girl may ask another girl to do her laundry or fetch anything for her or take messages to anybody else.

Reason: The house must be a safe place for all the girls.

Consequences: When a girl bullies she will get very strict consequences. If she keeps on bullying she may have to leave Ons Plek. Staff will decide on consequences. If a girl feels she is in a bad mood and she thinks of bullying, she must feel free to come to the housemother and discuss her feelings. If counselling does not change the bullying behaviour, the staff may call the girl for a disciplinary meeting and draw up a consequence in a contract with her which will then be followed.



Smoking and fire (such as candles)

Rule: Smoking is bad for your health, stops you from growing properly, shrinks your brain, and so on. We strongly disapprove of children smoking. We discourage smoking, and do not like the girls to smoke in front of us. But we do not want them to have to hide the fact that they smoke from us.

Smoking may never happen inside the house! (Ons Plek has been re-built twice as a result of fires inside the house and we were lucky that no one died in the fires.) However, if a girl is already smoking we may allow her to smoke outside, but only in the yard at Ons Plek. Girls may not smoke in school uniform. Smoking times at Ons Plek are 7.30 a.m., 2.00 p.m., 4.00 p.m. and 6.45 p.m.

Reason: Girls may not smoke or play with matches, lighters, candles or anything else that can cause a fire inside, because of the danger of fire. If Ons Plek or Siviwe burns down everyone will be on the street again.

Consequences: Any girls found smoking or involved in anything else to do with fire will have a very serious consequence, as the staff decides. The consequence tries to simulate the real consequences of a fire, which would be that everyone is homeless again. People in townships who lose everything in a fire sleep in community halls. For that reason, girls will sleep downstairs without beds and duvets for at least one week. They may sleep on

mattresses and use blankets. They will be given two sets of clothes, one of which will have to be washed every day since a real fire will have burned their clothes. They will not be allowed to go upstairs at all, since that too will have burnt down. If a girl persists in endangering everyone's lives, she may be asked to leave on a temporary or permanent basis for the safety of the other children.

Girls who are not permitted by the staff to smoke, especially the very young ones, will get consequences for smoking, like extra study time to grow the brain they are shrinking! Girls who smoke in school uniform will be sent to school without their uniform, and their teachers will be told the reason.

Taking walks

What is a walk: A walk is a WALK, on one's feet and legs. It is NOT a walk in a car, or taxi, or train, or any other form of transport.

Rule: Girls may take walks with the housemother's permission. They must be given a time to be back, and they must be back at that time.

Girls may not use drugs, drink alcohol, go to clubs, Mr T, jukeboxes, smokkelhuise, shebeens, or any other drinking spots such as Ladies Bars or hotels.

Reasons: Ons Plek exists to keep girls safe. Therefore staff must always know where girls are, so that they can rescue them if anything goes wrong. Girls can obviously not do dangerous things and go to dangerous places while in our care.

Consequences: Girls who come back late from walks can be refused walks for a period of time, since they cannot be trusted to come back at the right time. Girls who do wrong things on walks will be discussed in the meeting. Girls can always be given housework to settle them down after a walk they should not have taken.

Bunking school

Rule: Girls may not bunk school.

Reason: They lose valuable learning time.

Consequences: The girl who did not attend school must catch up on her school work by sitting with her books for the same amount of hours that she missed at school, on weekends and not on weekdays. The reason this should not be done on weekdays is that she is supposed to be doing her homework on weekdays. The payoff for missing school should not be missing homework as well. Girls who bunk must not do extra housework, they must do extra homework. Education for education is our slogan. And they must still perform their other duties.

Getting into trouble when out without permission

Rule: Girls wishing to go out must ask permission to leave the premises. Anybody who is caught by the police, while out without permission, will not be assisted by the staff.

Reason: Ons Plek cannot take responsibility for actions carried out without staff even knowing where the child was.

Consequences: The girl will have to get through the experience herself.

From Directions for Staff

These brief extracts also allow one to read between the lines about life at Ons Plek!

Food and meals

- Watch the beef stock, and just give enough for each pot of food. Girls are fond of keeping their leftover food and warming it up with lots of beef stock.
- Girls must make a school lunch of 4 slices of bread and butter and peanut butter. They may not eat their school lunch instead of their breakfast porridge.

Fights between girls

- Show that you are listening to both sides.
- Do not speak to one party only.
- When separating them ask experienced staff for advice.
- Watch for knives and use a cushion to protect yourself.
- Stand apart from girls and call their names out loud.

Bedwetting

- The girl must be treated with kindness, but she must wash all the things that are wet early in the morning, before she goes to school. If the bedwetting is regular, the girl must be given a rubber sheet to use.
- If you suspect that someone is wetting her bed and is denying it, check her bed early in the morning without embarrassing her in front of the others. Some girls who wet their beds swop the mattresses and sheets around...

Postscript

The last word on this subject comes from social worker Yumna van der Schyff, after reading just these few rules. "It looks like we really keep the girls on a tight rein, but despite that, they still get away with murder." Yumna reminds us of the following story:

Childcare worker Nontobeko is making entries into the girls' files in the office. She hears another staff member saying, "Josephine, you look very pretty." Josephine is wearing a lovely loose sky-blue dress with golden buttons. Nontobeko looks up.

"Josephine, where did you get my shirt!!!!?" she cries.

The other staff member now recognises Nontobeko's sky-blue shirt with the gold buttons which she wears to formal gatherings.

"What shirt, Auntie?"

"YOU ARE WEARING MY SHIRT!!!!!!!"

Josephine puts her hands on her hips, wiggles herself, and says in a drawn-out, exaggerated manner, "Y o u l i e."