

Why Collective Punishment Harms Students

And what you can do instead

What is collective punishment?

Collective punishment means penalising a whole group for the actions of a few—such as cancelling recess, rewards, or trips. It privileges control over care and obedience over dignity, flattening the needs of individual children.

Why does it feel wrong?

When a child pleads, “I didn’t even do anything,” they are naming a moral truth. Collective punishment erases effort, hides needs, and teaches children that trust is unsafe and silence is safer.

What are the hidden consequences?

Collective punishment reshapes how children understand power, justice, and themselves:

- **Teaches hiding over honesty:** Kids mask to avoid group blame.
- **Breaks trust:** Students feel dignity matters less than control.
- **Breeds resentment:** Peers blame each other, not systems.
- **Glorifies power:** Children internalise obedience over fairness.
- **Undercuts inclusion:** Support feels shameful instead of rightful.

Who does it hurt the most?

Every student suffers when fairness is distorted—but the harm falls heaviest on those already made vulnerable:

- Neurodivergent students are frequently punished for traits that reflect disability, not disobedience. Their need for movement, support, or regulation may be framed as defiance.
- Students with trauma may internalise collective consequences as abandonment or shame—especially when caregivers or staff have already broken trust.
- Girls and racialised students are often praised for compliance, then punished when they speak about injustice. Many learn to mask distress until collapse.
- Students with IEPs face group punishments that ignore or override their accommodations entirely, making disability support feel conditional or disposable.

*You can run a classroom through control,
or you can lead one through connection.*

*You can command silence, or you can
cultivate safety. You can get compliance—
or you can grow trust. What you plant
becomes the culture.*



End Collective Punishment
in British Columbia Schools

What can you do instead?

- **Respond individually:** Address the behaviour of the student involved, not the entire group.
- **Name needs, not threats:** Say “It looks like Sam needs a break,” instead of “You’ll lose Freezies if this keeps up.”
- **Preserve regulation tools:** Recess, play, and sensory movement are non-negotiable supports.
- **Use restorative dialogue:** Guide students to repair relationships without shame or spectacle.
- **Trust that fairness builds respect:** Students will work harder, feel safer, and show more compassion when they believe their teacher sees them clearly.

