

The Sikh Kirpan: guidance on allowing it in schools

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to schools in Ealing regarding the wearing of the Kirpan by Sikhs. This advice applies to teachers, members of staff and pupils / students who have gone through the Amrit ceremony (i.e. who have been initiated into the Khalsa.).

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) guidance advises that *“It is ultimately the responsibility of school governors to develop policies on dress code or the wearing of religious articles”*.

Guidance on the wearing of Sikh articles of faith in the workplace and public spaces, EHRC (Adobe pdf file)

http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/documents/publications/sikh_articles_of_faith_guidance_final.pdf

Aims

The guidance also aims to:

- Ensure religious tolerance and harmony within schools serving diverse religious and ethnic communities
- Encourage and value pupils’ religious and cultural practices
- Ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of all pupils.

Background

Guru Gobind Singh, the founder of the Khalsa (community of Sikhs), instructed its members to wear five special signs to show that they were Sikhs. Known as the five Ks these signs are:

- Kesh (uncut hair),
- Kangha (comb),
- Kara (steel wristband),
- Kaccha (short trousers or underpants) and
- Kirpan (sword).
- Some Sikhs regard the Keski (Turban) as being one of Ks.

Each sign has a particular significance.

- Kesh is a symbol of spiritual strength and power and an acceptance of ‘good will’.
- Kangha is a symbol of cleanliness and of a well-ordered life.
- Kara is a symbol of strength, unity, equality and justice and is worn by any child of a Sikh family.
- Kaccha is a symbol of high moral character, modesty and sexual morality
- Kirpan is a symbol of respect, justice and authority; it is a reminder that Sikhs are warriors. However, the Kirpan is never used for offensive purposes.

A high level of loyalty and sacrifice for Sikhism is demanded from those wearing the five Ks. Self-discipline is considered to be of the utmost importance and a member of the Khalsa is expected to observe a strict code of conduct.

It is not generally considered appropriate to wear one of the five Ks without wearing the other four. Schools need to be aware of the significance and importance of these signs of an initiated Sikh. At the same time, issues relating to the wearing of the Kirpan may need to be addressed

Guidelines

[Offensive Weapons Act 1996, section 4, legislation.gov.uk](#) creates the offence of having an article with a blade or point (or offensive weapon) on school premises, etc. Under Section 4, subsection (4), a person has a defence if the article in question is worn for religious reasons or as part of any national costume.

- There should be no objection to the practice of wearing the five K's, including the Kirpan.
- Members of the school community – pupils, parents, staff and governors – should be aware of the significance of the five K's.
- Members of staff should be informed of the school's policy and guidelines on the wearing of religious symbols including the Kirpan, where appropriate. This information should be included in the school's Human Resources Policy.
- Parents or religious leaders should be asked to authorise the wearing of the Kirpan by confirming that a young person has been through the Amrit ceremony of initiation, and is therefore expected to wear the five Ks at all times
- Under health and safety legislation schools will need to be able to satisfy themselves that the wearing of the Kirpan does not present any health and safety risks. The Kirpan should not be more than 6 inches in length (including both blade and handle) and the blade should not exceed 3 inches in length; the Kirpan should always be sheathed and worn out of sight.
- School staff will expect to remove the Kirpan from any student not wearing all five K's and to contact the student's parents at the earliest opportunity to discuss the situation with them.
- With regard to the wearing of the Kirpan during PE, then each school should make a decision based upon the particular circumstances present at the time. However, the LA's advice to schools would be that the Kirpan should not be worn during physical education. Before the lesson begins, pupils will be expected to hand the Kirpan and Kara to a teacher or place them in a secure place e.g. a locker or other secure place.
- *If a school did decide to adopt a policy banning the Kirpan*, it would need to be able to show it had consulted appropriately before creating the policy. The school should also be prepared to have the policy challenged in front of the EHRC by individuals (e.g. members of staff or parents of students who had gone through the *amrit* ceremony). For this reason, it is advisable to keep a record of all consultation activities, including conversations with individuals.

Other source of information and further reading

<http://schoolgovernors.thekeysupport.com/curriculum-and-pupils/pastoral-care/equality-inclusion/equality-act-2010-what-does-it-mean-for-school-governors>

Equality Act 2010: what are the governors' responsibilities?

<https://schoolgovernors.thekeysupport.com/curriculum-and-pupils/pastoral-care/equality-inclusion/equality-act-2010-what-does-it-mean-for-school-governors>

School uniform, GOV.UK – DfE (Adobe pdf file)

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/269113/school_uniform_guidance_2013.pdf

Network of Sikh Organisations

<http://nsouk.co.uk/contact-us/>

The BBC website explains that the Amrit ceremony is an initiation undertaken by Sikhs who are old enough to understand the commitment that they are making.

Amrit ceremony, Religions – BBC

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/sikhism/ritesrituals/amrit.shtml>

Sikh pupils: wearing of the Kirpan, Bedford Borough Council (Adobe pdf file)

<http://www.councillorsupport.bedford.gov.uk/documents/s6730/Item%209%20Sikh%20Pupils%20Updated%20draft%20advice%20May%202010.pdf>

Page 5 of the behaviour policy from Villiers High School, in Ealing, says that Kirpans will only be permitted for baptised Sikhs and will be "small and locked".

Behaviour policy, Villiers High School (Adobe pdf file)

<http://www.villiers.ealing.sch.uk/uploads/policies/Behaviour%20Policy.pdf>

Produced by:

Stephen Dunham, Team Leader, Schools' Health and Safety (DunhamS@ealing.gov.uk 0208 825 7418)

Nora Leonard, SACRE consultant (NLeonard@ealing.gov.uk 0208 8825 7329)