

INVESTIGATION OF THE CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS OF EXCLUSION FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Sometimes it feels like schools would rather send a child somewhere else rather than try and make themselves an appropriate place. It doesn't take much effort and we're often not asking for much to change.

Member of the Autism Education Trust Young Person's Panel

This was one of the most stressful times for our family. I cannot express how isolating and alone this made us feel. The stigma surrounding SEND kids is already an isolating experience, but add exclusion into the mix and it can break a family apart.

Parent of an autistic child

I still feel excluded and my self-belief is low due to not being accepted for who I am.

Autistic adult excluded during primary school

Schools are asked to achieve outstanding practice with inadequate funding and training. As long as ranking schools by exam results exists, and as long as funding is not fit for purpose, truly inclusive practice will elude us.

SENCo from a primary school

BACKGROUND

According to figures from the Department for Education in England, autistic children and young people are approximately twice as likely as non-SEN pupils to receive a fixed-term exclusion from school. This is despite there being legislation and statutory guidance that should protect autistic pupils because of the requirement for schools to make reasonable adjustments. One of the striking issues, which is hidden from DfE figures, is the use of unofficial or unlawful exclusion practices in English schools. The 2018 Ambitious About Autism report "We Need an Education" estimated that a little over half of parents with autistic children in the UK have experience of unofficial or unlawful exclusion.

The project outlined here was the first of its kind to take a comprehensive look at some of the causes and impacts of excluding autistic children and young people in England. We conducted a literature review; asked autistic adults, parents and teachers to complete a questionnaire; consulted with the Autism Education Trust Young Person's Panel; looked at challenges and best practice with the Communication and Autism Team from Birmingham City Council.

As part of our consultation, the Autism Education Trust Young Person's Panel (AET YPP) called for the perspectives of autistic CYP to be at the centre of research design from the outset and in shaping recommendations. More specifically, research engagement should involve those who have a current and personal understanding of the issues. They highlighted the importance of mixed methods in the design of this research to accommodate different preferences in terms of responding to questions and for researchers' communication to be clear and avoid jargon. Key for the AET YPP was that this field moved forward and that this wasn't just another data collection exercise. They asked that there was an acceptance by teachers and policy makers for practical strategies and training to be adopted, rather than a call for further research.

OUR FINDINGS

The reasons schools give for permanently excluding or giving a fixed-term exclusion to an autistic CYP (child or young person) often centre on the child – e.g. violent behaviour or a failure to comply with rules. It is true that schools must protect the wellbeing of all students and staff, and as

aggression is often given as the reason for exclusion, it does put school leadership and the governing board in a difficult position. However, the exclusion of autistic pupils can equally be perceived as a failure of staff to make reasonable adjustments, inadequate systems and policies, or budgets being cut in the areas of pastoral and mental health support. It was clear that this is an area of tension between educators (and possibly policy makers) on the one side and autistic CYP and their families on the other.

Many of the autistic adults and the parents of autistic CYP who responded to our surveys reported being excluded prior to getting an autism diagnosis. In some instances, exclusion was a catalyst to them or their child being referred to diagnostic services. Cutbacks in mental health services means that it is more challenging for families to receive a timely diagnosis and access psychological services. There are significant pressures on school resources and cuts to their pastoral services, leaving autistic CYP feeling unsupported and exposed to the daily toll of bullying (a clear risk factor for exclusion). Indeed, some autistic CYP purposefully look to get excluded and see it as a way to retreat to the safety of home.

Improvements in policies and systems were identified by many of the contributors as being necessary. Communication was highlighted by parents as being inadequate and often cursory. A failure to include the voices of autistic pupils and parents during the exclusion process was particularly lacking. The school behaviour policy was often not visible enough, with 1 in 10 teaching staff reporting that it was only shared at the time of a pupil's exclusion. The reliance on an individual (the head teacher), sometimes without challenge, in making such life-altering decisions was also questioned. The teachers who responded to our survey, identified more support, training, funding and resources as being vital for them to implement change. There was also a recognition that prevention was key, rather than having to respond to and manage a behaviour that leads to exclusion.

The impact of exclusion on autistic CYP is profound and lifelong. Many of the autistic adults we spoke to were still emotionally affected, even in their 40s and 50s. It left for many a sense of injustice and anger. For some autistic respondents, being excluded had impacted on their later successes or they were having to work even harder to catch up. Parents spoke about the emotional impact of exclusion for their children and how they felt stigmatised and let down by the education system. The most common responses were:

- Impact on their self-esteem (83%)
- Isolation from their friends (58%)
- Feeling let down by the education system (54%)
- Impact on academic performance (50%)
- The child feeling stigmatised (48%).

Perhaps most worrying was that autistic adults and parents reported very little changed when they or their child returned to school after exclusion, which may explain the high number of autistic CYP who are excluded multiple times. Clearly many of the lessons that should be learnt from an exclusion event, are not.

The impact on parents and siblings was also troubling. Previous research described families being in a “perpetual crisis” and this was echoed by many of the parents we spoke to.

I had to give up a career to care for my son. He couldn't understand why school weren't letting him back, he got sad as he couldn't see friends. I still can't work as my marriage broke down, so I'm on my own now.

Parent of an autistic child

Many parents spoke of the stigma of their child being excluded, the constant feelings of stress and the whole family coming under pressure. The most common responses that parents reported on in terms of impact were:

- Stress (97%)
- It led to having to take time off work (76%),
- The financial impact (47%)
- Problems for siblings (42%).

We know from DfE data that families who have autistic children in school are more likely to be on free school meals. The financial and employment stresses of educating an autistic child who is excluded, or frequently being reprimanded, may be one reason for the high rates of free school meals.

In terms of what can be done to improve the situation, there was a recognition that these are particularly unusual times in terms of restricted budgets (n.b. since we conducted our research the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown has exacerbated this issue) but that if interventions were not provided and staff didn't become more knowledgeable that the educational experiences and outcomes of autistic CYP would remain poor. It takes a coordinated and concerted effort by school leadership, staff, specialist services and families to help children stay in school and progress. This has proven successful in other UK nations and educational exclusion is notably rare in most other European countries. It is time for policy makers and educators in England to secure the educational experiences and outcomes of autistic children in England.

We have listed a set of recommendations based on our findings below:

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are made for the Department of Education:

- Make it a legal requirement for schools to use a specific code for recording absence due to pupils being on part-time timetables.
- Parents are encouraged to contact their Local Authority Education Welfare Officer to highlight instances of unlawful or unofficial exclusion.
- In order to achieve greater clarity when it comes to recording reasons, provide an open response to which schools can record what they classify as 'other'.
- Capture the number of autistic children in home education (this may be even more important as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic) and the parents reasons for that decision
- If a child or young person is permanently excluded, gather data on whether that child had been temporarily excluded previously.
- Provide clearer guidance to schools as to the decision process they should be undertaking when making exclusions (i.e. justifying their reasons).
- Provide clearer guidance as to how schools should be informing families about the exclusion process and the reasonable adjustments they put in place for a child prior to exclusion occurring.
- Provide guidance on how senior leadership should be including statements on SEND and autism within school behaviour policies and how to train their staff on the matter.
- Provide national and individual school guidance on exclusion policy related to autism and more broadly on SEN and SEMH.
- Create good practice guidelines on how and what to communicate to families and pupils at each stage of the exclusion process, to ensure essential information is passed on at appropriate times.
- Conduct research to understand the "profiles" of pupils at risk for exclusion (including those on the autism spectrum) and make sure schools are using these data to guide early intervention and school awareness policies.

The following recommendations are made for Local Authorities:

- Collect data on part-time timetables and informal exclusions in order to develop a system for challenging exclusions.
- Track data on how many autistic children and young people are being excluded within each Local Authority. Those LAs who are particularly struggling with exclusion and autism could be signposted to the AET for training.
- Improved LA data collection on their autistic pupils. Information around specific need is important in order to target local authority support and generate a response to it. If LAs do not know the needs of the cohort that are being excluded, they are unlikely to put the right provision in place.
- Introduce greater independent monitoring of schools' exclusion processes and interventions when illegal exclusions occur.
- Facilitate the fast delivery of EHCPs for those children who need it given their risk of exclusion.
- Set up local SEND youth panels to provide advice to schools. For example, Birmingham City Council (BCC) have set up a SEND Youth Forum that meets 4-6 times a year. It consists of secondary age young people who have a disability or SEND and the aim is that they should

have a say in influencing policies across the city. Seventeen have been appointed (among many applicants). It is a neuro-diverse group with a high proportion of autistic young people.

Professional Development

- Professional Development is needed on the legal processes around exclusion. This must include understanding of the Equalities Act.
- Guidance should be provided to schools about how to transition autistic CYP back after a period of exclusion, in particular to secure and maintain peer relations.
- School leadership need to encourage staff to attend de-escalation training to manage behaviours that challenge in the classroom.
- Training – and particularly for school leadership – should include a whole-school approach to reducing stigma around school exclusion.
- There needs to be more consideration of how Initial Teacher Education courses can learn about the particular risks for autistic pupils regarding exclusion.
- Professional development should include how to reduce the frequency of unofficial exclusions or when they occur, to ensure they are recorded in the data.

Interventions

- The development of preventative interventions to reduce the exclusion of autistic pupils.
- Unpicking what the reasons are for an EHCP being a protective factor for exclusion (e.g. it is a consequence of teachers taking a different approach to children with an EHCP).
- Use of mindfulness training for students at risk of exclusion, especially at times of significant stress (e.g. exam periods).
- Use of reflective practice and mindfulness for staff who are feeling under significant pressure and making decisions about behaviour and exclusion.
- Enhanced transition planning and support – particularly from primary to secondary school.
- The importance of working with colleagues in other agencies and in AP to share skills.

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