



Exclusions

Children excluded from mainstream schools

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Introduction

The Children's Commissioner's Office (CCO) has long been concerned with the high numbers of children being excluded from mainstream schools, including those with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND). A recent report from IPPR, *Making the Difference*, argued that alongside the growing number of official exclusions, there are also significant issues with how unofficial exclusions are being used by schools. It also highlighted that excluded children are often the most vulnerable: *"twice as likely to be in the care of the state, four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have a special educational need and 10 times more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems."*¹

Consequently, the CCO deemed it important to hear directly from children themselves, particularly as there is a gap in existing research of qualitative research with children and young people about these issues. The aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of children excluded, both officially and unofficially, from mainstream education. Whilst the research sought to understand the experiences of all children excluded from school, there was a particular focus on the experiences of those with SEND issues. This is because, as the IPPR research highlighted, these children as a particular group can be managed out of mainstream education, formally or informally, because schools fail to understand or support their behavioural and educational needs. The 2017/18 Ofsted annual report also stated that they had seen a continuing trend of rising exclusions among children and young people with SEND². For example, many children manifesting behaviours associated with ASD and ADHD are currently undiagnosed but excluded from mainstream school as a result of their behaviour. Ambitious for Autism found that there had been a big rise in the number of children with autism being excluded from school across England, with the overall number of pupils excluded from school rising by 4% across England in 2016 compared to 2011.³

The key objectives of the research were to explore;

- > The experiences of children excluded from mainstream school, both officially and unofficially;
- > Reasons as to why children have been excluded;
- > Prior to exclusion, the response of mainstream schools in meeting the needs of children, particularly those with SEND;
- > The impact that these experiences of official and unofficial exclusions have had on children;

¹ Institute for Public Policy Research (October 2017). MAKING THE DIFFERENCE BREAKING THE LINK BETWEEN SCHOOL EXCLUSION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION. Kiran Gill, with Harry Quilter-Pinner and Danny Swift

² Ofsted (2018). The Annual Report of her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2017/18.

³ Ambitious for Autism: <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/understanding-autism/exclusions-of-pupils-with-autism-rocket-in-england-new-data-shows>

- > The expectations and experiences of educational provision for children following exclusion from mainstream education.

It was important that the work focused on not just children's experiences of being excluded, but also on the experiences of children who remain on the school roll, but are being encouraged to attend part time, or who are commonly kept in isolation or prevented from attending certain lessons.

Methodology

We adopted a qualitative approach, carrying out one-to-one depth interviews with children and young people across England. The interviews combined structure with flexibility, with certain key topics covered in each interview but with the interviewer being guided in the main by what the participant had to say. Interviews were therefore responsive and largely based on dialogue in order to ensure they remained open to new areas and unexpected information. We encouraged children and young people to share their experiences of exclusion by taking on a story-telling approach, whilst ensuring we provided enough probes so that children and young people did not feel a sense of burden about knowing what to say.

Where resources and time allowed, we supplemented the information provided by children with a small number of interviews with some of the children's parents. This provided additional understanding of the reasons for exclusions, on the diagnosis (or lack of), on support by schools for SEND issues and the impact of exclusions on both the child and the wider family.

We carried out 16 interviews with children and young people across five different geographic locations in England. Four of these interviews included also speaking with a parent. We used a range of different gatekeepers to assist us in the recruitment of our sample, including the Council for Disabled Children, Ambitious for Autism, parent and carer forums, local authority EHE teams, and particular PRUS and Alternative Provision schools. As part of the sample selection, we liaised with gatekeepers to ensure a range of characteristics were included such as:

- > Age and gender;
- > SEND with a focus on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention hyperactivity disorder (ADHD);
- > Type of exclusion experienced (informal such as isolation and reduced timetables, fixed term and permanent exclusions, and managed moves);
- > Type of education they went on to have following exclusion (e.g. PRUS, Alternative Provision and home education).

Interviews were audio recorded with participant permission and fully transcribed. The interviews were then thematically coded and analysed. Firstly, key topics emerging from the data were identified and an analytical framework was devised, after which data from each interview was summarised under the appropriate heading. The timescale for the project meant that only higher-level analysis was possible, however there was a focus on drawing

out the range of views and experiences and on identifying similarities and differences across the sample.

Throughout the report we use quotes from both the children and young people and their parents to ensure their direct voices are heard. However, since the analysis was necessarily high-level and thematic, we could not always do justice to the nuanced experiences of individual children and their families, particularly since each story is complex and context-specific. We therefore decided to include three standalone case studies to illustrate the nuanced and multifaceted nature of these experiences.

The project was subject to rigorous ethical scrutiny. The CCO Research Advisory Group reviewed the project against key ethical guidelines and provided feedback and comments. A number of ethical considerations were considered and carefully managed, such as confidentiality and anonymity, informed consent, and safeguarding. Informed consent was collected from all participants. Measures were put in place to ensure the safety of research participants and researchers was maintained at all times. These included: ensuring researchers had Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance and ensuring a disclosure protocol was in place should any concerns arise during interviews.

There were a number of limitations to the project. The sample is not representative of the wider population of children excluded from mainstream education, particularly as we chose to focus on children and young people with SEND. Due to the short timescales for the analysis and reporting, – it is also worth noting that analysis was light touch and that further analysis of the data would be useful and worthwhile.

Voices of children

Max's Story

Max, aged 8, liked the first school he attended. However, his parents soon became concerned that older children in year 6 were being asked to look after reception children at playtime due to staff shortages. The children would sometimes lock Max in the toilets because they did not know how to support him or respond to his behaviour. Max's parents eventually decided to move Max to a new school because they felt this was not appropriate. At first Max enjoyed his new school and was happy to go every day.

Max's parents were contacted by the school as they felt he was presenting autistic traits. His previous school had also raised this but the SENCO at the time didn't think he was autistic so no official assessment had taken place. However, with his new school raising similar concerns, Max was referred for an assessment following an appointment with his GP. Whilst an initial consultation with a Paediatrician confirmed that Max was autistic, a formal assessment and diagnosis would need to be undertaken by CAMHS.

The school reported issues with Max's behaviour in class, despite the fact that he seemed to be happy at home and happy to go to school. Teachers began to report to Max's parents that Max was often shouting in class, refusing to comply with instructions, being aggressive towards other children and leaving the classroom whenever he wanted to, saying that he was bored.

Max felt that none of the teachers listened to him and when he felt he was being picked on in the playground he wouldn't tell a teacher as he thought no one would believe him. Max's parents explained to the school that Max had difficulty with social cues and understanding friendships. Max started going out less and less at playtime, even though playing with other children was his favourite thing to do. Instead Max would spend time in the library playing with Lego. Sometimes other children would break the Lego structures he was making and that would upset Max a lot.

"My favourite thing at school was mostly being able to play with other children. I've not done that for like, for almost a year."

Max started to spend more and more time out of class, often being told by teachers to go and sit in the library; the school said they had no other 'calm space' to send Max to due to it being a small school. Other times Max would be sent home from school, including when staff availability was a factor, and he was eventually placed on a reduced timetable only attending school for half a day.

In an attempt to help the school respond more effectively to Max's behaviour at school, his parents suggested certain tools that staff could use. For example: an ABC chart to help Max talk about what was upsetting him or making him angry during the day; ear defenders to help block out noise; and a behaviour and reward plan. They also stressed the importance of giving Max more time and space to calm down when needed. Max's

parents felt that none of these suggestions were taken up by the school and instead they were made to feel as though it all rested with them to support Max.

The school had said it would be unlikely that Max would be given funding through an EHCP as he was excelling academically. Max therefore had no contact with a SENCO or an educational psychologist. The school, whilst aware he was being assessed for autism, provided Max with no day-to-day teaching support in class.

The school also started to exclude Max for a certain number of days, often in response to his behaviour in the classroom and outside in the playground. In a six-month period, Max received 5 fixed term exclusions, and was then permanently excluded based on the school's behavioural points system in spite of the fact that this should not have been applied to a child on the SEN register. The very same day that Max was permanently excluded from the school he received his ASD diagnosis and as a result is now struggling to get assessed for an EHCP as he is no longer attending a mainstream school.

Not only has the experience significantly impacted upon Max, it has also had an impact on family life. Max's mum has had to give up work in order to provide the flexibility needed to pick Max up during the day or have him at home following either a fixed-term or now permanent exclusion. The family has also had to limit their social activities both because Max requires a stable, daily routine to manage his behaviour and so that they are available for the phone calls and meetings required as part of the EHCP assessment process.

The local authority is currently funding Max to have a tutor to teach him at home for 12 months which Max doesn't like as he is unhappy that his home has now also become a space where he needs to do school work.

The family are facing lengthy delays, with limited information on the progress of their EHCP assessment. In the meantime, Max's parents have found a special school which they think will support Max, however they are unsure whether the local authority will fund a place for Max at this school.

As a result of Max being out of school for so long, he has become incredibly anxious about starting school again and not being with his mum. As Max gets very upset when not with her, there are concerns as to what how this will affect him being able to settle into a new school.

"One of the reasons why I don't like school. Why can't there be, why can't you just pay £1 more to have your parents be in the school, to be able to be in the school with their child."

Early experiences of school

Children were asked to reflect on their early experiences of school. Some of the children we spoke to were still in primary school while others were on the cusp of adulthood so reflections varied hugely.

For some, primary school stood out as a more positive experience than secondary school. Children spoke about feeling happy, safe and secure during their early schooling. They remembered warm, caring teachers and fun lessons. The structure of the primary school day, particularly being in one classroom with the same teacher for most of the day, added to their feelings of security. Children also valued the flexibility that primary school allowed and spoke about how their primary school teachers were responsive to their needs and able to work with them to help them manage their behaviour.

“If I was having a bad day at [primary] school they’d understand, and they’d take me out and let me just go play in the sand and in the mud until I felt better and then I’d just go back to my lessons as normal.” – 15 year old girl

However, others had more complex memories of primary school. These children spoke about finding primary school difficult and struggling to manage their behaviour. In some cases, where a diagnosis was yet to be given, children had clearly grappled with SEND needs and found primary school challenging. In one example, a child spoke about knowing that there was something different about them and being conscious that others recognised that too. They described this as feeling both difficult and scary.

“...If the school had applied for me to get tested things would have come up, things would have been different but they never actually put that effort in. I don’t know if that was a lack of care or a lack of staff writing notes down and proving it, yeah but it was a difficult time. So the first year was probably ... the most terrifying year, I got shouted at by teachers a lot, I cried a lot because of them.” – 19 year old male

As children progressed to secondary school things often became more challenging for them. For some, **the increase in school work and homework** was difficult to manage. Children spoke about finding the leap from primary school especially hard in this respect. The challenge was not just about the volume of work but about finding it difficult to do school work in a home environment.

The difference in the structure of the school day was also a challenge in some cases. Children spoke about needing to walk between lessons, navigate larger school buildings and engage with multiple teachers. All of this led to them feeling less secure than they had at primary school.

As they moved through their school journey, some children also **became more aware of being different**. In one example, a child spoke about always feeling different through their early years at school and not accepting who they were until they reached college where

they finally started to have greater acceptance of themselves and their differences and stopped feeling as though they needed to change.

Getting a diagnosis

Among the children we spoke to, not all had SEND, and some who did had not yet been diagnosed. For those families who had received a diagnosis, it was clearly a more salient process for some than others. This section explores some of the key themes that emerged around diagnosis from the small sample of parents we spoke with, with additional reflections from some of the children.

Challenges with receiving a SEND diagnosis

Challenges with diagnosis were consistently raised throughout the interviews. Families described how teachers had raised concerns about a child's behaviour or suggested that autistic traits were present, yet these concerns had not necessarily led to contact or assessment with the SENCO or provision of further support from the school. Some of the parents we spoke with assumed that nothing had been done because nothing could be.

"You assume with any school, they're professionals, they know what they're doing..... as far as I know there was other autistic children there, not like [name of son] but, you assume they know the procedure to get educational psychologists involved, to get this, that and the other, to have TAs work with them and all things like that. So, we just thought, well if nothing's happening, then there isn't anything they can do." – Parent of 8 year old boy

When further support was sought by the school, the assessment process was often delayed because a children's needs were not deemed to meet CAMHS thresholds.

"It's underfunded, their criteria are ridiculous in that they have to be, they have to basically have completely fallen out of society before they'll see them and do anything about it. That's been my experience with CAMHS. We've now got some support which has been entirely because I have battled, and I have pretty much had a mental breakdown trying to do so." - Parent of 8 year old boy

Once a referral had been made, the assessment experience was often frustrating with parents recollecting the inconsistent communication they received from the relevant services coupled with a feeling of being passed around many different professionals. This resulted in some feeling as though no one was taking responsibility for supporting their child.

Another common challenge was the delay in receiving a diagnosis and the resulting impact this had on the support that children received. For some families we spoke to, diagnosis was still an ongoing process, whilst for others it had taken years before a formal diagnosis was given.

"No, my mum.... knew there were something wrong with me ...but....it took her seven years to find out that I had ADHD." - 15 year old boy

“So it took three and a half years from my first request for him to see an Ed Psych until that actually happened, three and a half years...and that was over three different schools.” - Parent of 8 year old boy

Children spoke about the impact that delays in diagnosis could have on them. In one case a child had struggled with feeling different for a long time and felt that a diagnosis would have helped their experience;

“Throughout the whole of primary I had, people knew there was something different, medical wise, or something, how did they put it, not right. But I never got diagnosed by them, they said there was something but they also mentioned that they couldn’t do anything which was a lie... if the school had applied for me to get tested things would have come up, things would have been different but they never actually put that effort in. I don’t know if that was a lack of care or a lack of staff writing notes down and proving it, yeah but it was a difficult time” – 19 year old male

In another case, a child felt that not having a diagnosis had given the school licence to not provide them with the support that they should have had. This had far-reaching effects for the child including creating trust issues between the child and schools generally;

“My diagnosis, I didn’t have it, it wasn’t on a piece of paper. Yeah, we knew it and that but it wasn’t on a piece of paper to go, you have to provide this kid support. Because if it’s not on a piece [of paper], everyone can go, no we don’t. Because you’ve not got a legal binding document to go, you have to provide me with support. So they didn’t provide me with support. They let me down in that sense, so I was just kicking off, messing around and that.”. – 17 year old boy

When a diagnosis was finally received, this could have a massive impact on families including helping children to understand their own behaviour;

“...because it’s just helped me a lot, because from being an angry miserable child..... as soon as I found out the diagnosis I realised yes, there is something wrong with me, but that’s part of who I am. I’m glad I know what it is, because rather than thinking ‘what is wrong with me’, I actually know what’s wrong with me, and I can find ways around it to help myself. And others can find ways around it to help me.” – 18 year old male

Process of receiving an EHCP

Many of the challenges raised in relation to a SEND diagnosis also extended to the assessment and provision of an EHCP. Similar inconsistencies in the involvement of professionals and their understanding of a child’s needs had resulted in delays with assessments. Parents also spoke of the difficulties in getting updates on the assessment process, often having to chase professionals to determine whether progress was being made.

Delays were especially challenging for those who had not been given an EHCP prior to their exclusion from school. It is common for a child to be observed within school lessons as part of the EHCP assessment, so once a child is removed from mainstream school it becomes considerably more difficult to complete. For the families in this situation, further time and resource had to be given to arrange for a child to attend school at specific times each week for the assessment to be completed.

Amongst all the frustrations and the negative experiences parents referred to, there was also an understanding and appreciation of the budget and resourcing constraints of local services in supporting children with SEND.

“The mental health system in this country is shoddy and particularly for the most vulnerable people, it’s appalling. Absolutely appalling. So, it needs more funding basically so that they can do their jobs more, because the people in the system really want to help but they can’t magic up extra funding, they can’t magic up extra people, so they go with the lowest common denominator and they go to the most extreme situations. And how we’re not now part of that, I’ve got no idea because the situation’s terrible. But because I cope, because I’m a functional adult I, we’re left alone largely”. - Parent of 8 year old boy

Sophie's Story

Sophie is 12 years old and has experienced a number of school moves, some instigated by her parents and others by the schools themselves.

Sophie attended a small and nurturing pre-school. During her time there, the school raised possible issues with motor skills and referred the family to an occupational therapist, who suggested she had processing difficulties. Sophie was assessed, aged 3, and sensory problems and stimuli processing issues were highlighted.

As she moved into reception Sophie was placed in a social skills group, because she often had a lot to say but didn't always give others a chance to speak. Sophie's mum remembered a few issues at the time but nothing they saw as particularly worrying.

In year 3, due to her behaviour, Sophie was often sat alone on a table in the corner of the classroom. It was at this stage of Sophie's schooling that an Individual Education Plan (IEP) was mentioned.

"Basically my teacher Miss [teacher's name], she sort of set up this special table that was like all by myself in the corner of the classroom and she wouldn't let me sit with other people, she just wanted me to sit by myself, because she said it would help me work better... It was basically like being in internal isolation all the time."

Sophie's parents initially took her to see a Paediatrician who said they would need to go through CAMHS for a local diagnosis and access to services. A referral was made, and after a while Sophie was diagnosed with autism.

Even with Sophie's diagnosis, the SENCO said Sophie would not be able to get an EHCP because she was academically strong. As a result, the SENCO wrote an assessment which didn't support Sophie being given an EHCP. Her parents asked for the assessment to be rewritten to reflect Sophie's day-to-day life at school, namely that she was having to sit separately in class due to her behaviour, or being sent to the headteacher's office or in a room by herself. Despite this, the SENCO's assessment meant Sophie was not entitled to an EHCP.

Sophie and her parents felt that the school's response was 'we are doing everything we can, it's your child that's the problem'.

Sophie remained in primary school before transferring to a private secondary school, with the view that a private school would offer a more supportive environment and smaller class sizes. However, after just two months Sophie was asked to attend on a reduced timetable, and then encouraged to leave to avoid a permanent exclusion. This made Sophie feel confused and sad.

Sophie transferred to a large secondary state school. The SENCO has been very helpful; however, Sophie's mum acknowledges the limitations of secondary school – namely

having so many different teachers it is difficult to ensure consistency across them all in understanding Sophie's autism and what triggers her behaviour. She is currently not allowed to eat lunch with the other students because of her behaviour, and instead eats alone in a room.

"Usually I just eat lunch in a room by myself, because I'm not allowed to eat in the big room with everyone else, I have to eat in a room by myself."

Sophie currently attends the school on a part-time, flexible timetable. This enables her to attend therapy sessions and she is also trying forest school and does ice skating classes on a Friday afternoon. Sophie's mum has welcomed the feedback from both activities on how polite and well behaved she is. This has caused Sophie some confusion and has led her to ask whether she has a split personality because she is calm in some situations and so different in others. Sophie's mum explains that environmental effects are a common autistic trait.

Sophie's attendance at school is required in order to be given an EHCP. Sophie is currently being assessed which requires her to be observed during lessons and to meet with the autism team. Alongside the current EHCP assessment, Sophie's parents are considering whether the current school is the best option for their daughter or if they should explore other options such as special schools. However, Sophie has said she doesn't want to go to a special school as she is keen to remain in mainstream education and not be in a school with other autistic children. Her parents are of the same view, considering it better for her to remain in a mainstream setting as they consider this will better equip Sophie with the skills and ability to interact with others, particularly once she leaves school. This is a view shared and supported by Sophie's educational psychologist.

Sophie's diagnosis and educational journey have had a huge impact on the family, Sophie's mum has had to give up her a career in medicine in order to support Sophie not least because Sophie is now in school part-time. Sophie's mum also feels that Sophie's view of education has been affected by her informal exclusion from school. When she was asked to leave her first secondary school, it had a big impact on her self-esteem and led to periods of depression. There has now been a slight improvement, with Sophie's approach to school being more positive due to her ability to attend with reduced hours.

Views of the support received in school

Experiences of how well schools were equipped to deal with SEND children varied hugely. There were examples of schools responding well to pupils' needs and others where families felt that schools were out of their depth or unable to support SEND pupils adequately.

This section explores some of the types of support that parents and children felt were important and the extent to which they felt this support had been provided. These examples relate to families' experiences with mainstream schools.

Support from teachers

Underlying all children's stories about their experiences of school and the support they received was their interactions with teachers and other staff and how important these were in influencing not only their experiences but their behaviour.

Needing one-to-one support: the importance of feeling listened to and having one-to-one time with a teacher was a clear theme throughout the interviews. Children spoke about needing to have at least one teacher or staff member who they felt they could trust and would both listen to them and really take the time to understand their perspective. Having these trusted adults would enable them to open up about their concerns about school and home and improve their overall experience at school.

In contrast, when children felt as though no one was listening this really stood out for them as a negative experience that influenced their whole perception of school, even if they enjoyed other aspects of school life. In some cases, not being listened to was identified as a clear trigger for misbehaviour;

"Even if I did try and go to speak to someone they wouldn't listen. So, that started to get me mad and then I'd get unsettled in my lessons, then people would try and take me out of my lessons to speak to me after me wanting to speak to them and them refusing so then they'd want to come to speak to me but it would be a different person that I didn't want to speak to. So, I'd be like, no and they'd pull me out of my class, embarrass me in front of all my mates and I just got unsettled so that's when I just started thinking, no fuck you because I don't care anymore." – 15 year old girl

When children and parents were asked about what they thought should change around SEND provision in the future, increasing one-to-one provision was a common response. However, this did not necessarily have to be a formal arrangement for children to see the benefits. In some cases, the one-to-one support that children received was quite ad hoc, for example it might come from a teacher who the child trusted and had formed a strong relationship with and this was still considered to be valuable. In one example of this a child spoke about how the only teacher they really liked in their mainstream school had been the one who had made time to sit with them and explain things.

The benefits of more formal dedicated support through learning mentors or teaching assistants were also raised. Where schools had identified the value of one-to-one support for a child and invested in delivering it, this was acknowledged by those we spoke with as being particularly helpful;

“I feel like they did go above and beyond for him. Didn’t just pop anyone that was free there, they really thought about what his interests were and matched them up with someone who specialised in maths and who was extremely calm. So that was above and beyond what I expected from mainstream school, especially when he’s not eligible for pupil premium and he hasn’t got an EHCP. I was amazed what they did.” - Parent of 8 year old boy

While there were examples of good one-to-one support, these were by no means universal. When asked what might have prevented them from being excluded from mainstream school, some children singled out one-to-one support as an intervention that would have been helpful. There was a powerful narrative around trust and building a relationship with one person over time and where this was lacking, it was seen as a significant gap.

“the support I would have liked to have had.... a regular person because when you have someone that you recognise and you talk to regularly it’s easier to open up to them about the issue you’re having and being honest about it. If I was given a regular person I could talk to then there would have been more honesty and I would have been able to express myself better.” – 19 year old male

Needing teachers who know how to support them: being well understood was similarly important. Children identified cases of teachers either not knowing how to support SEND children or not taking the time get to know pupils’ individual needs. In both cases this was seen as detrimental to the child and their overall experience at school as well as their behaviour. Some children acknowledged that it was challenging for teachers to get to know the individual needs and behaviours of at least 30 children, but felt that it was especially important for children with SEND to be understood. In cases where teachers did not take the time to know them, children felt as though they were being labelled or judged unfairly and this could make them feel less inclined to engage with school.

The importance of teachers getting to know children as individuals was underlined by the various ways in which children said they wanted to receive support from their teachers. This ranged from wanting greater flexibility to allow them to manage their behaviour better, to needing firmer guidance from teachers, to wanting low key, subtle support from teachers that did not single them out from the rest of the class.

“There were occasions where in normal situations I should have been punished more but the Head actually let me off of it because they understood if I was asked at that time who my favourite person was in the school, I would definitely have said the Head, they were just the person I needed.” – 19 year old male

Needing teachers to respect them: closely linked to the need to be listened to and supported was the need for children to feel respected by their teachers. There was a clear

narrative throughout the interviews of children feeling that if they were respected by their teachers, they in turn would be more likely to show them respect. Examples of respect being demonstrated included teachers acknowledging children's aspirations and treating children as equals. In one example, a child spoke about how they felt more at ease with a group of younger teachers who were able to relate to the children better and treated them more as equals;

"Because they were down to earth, they felt equal, they didn't think they were better than anyone else and ... they knew what it were like to be in school and most of them were quite young, like they know how school is and that it can sometimes be bad and I love that sort of teacher. They were better for the kids." – 15 year old boy

When children did not feel respected by their teachers, this could have a direct impact on their attitude to school and their behaviour.

"..the only reason I had an attitude against them is because my mums always told me you respect people who respect you, if they don't respect you don't respect them back, they don't deserve it and they never respected me from day one, ever." – 15 year old girl

When children were asked about their recommendations for schools in supporting SEND children it was suggested that more should be done to treat children as equals. As an example of how this could be done better it was suggested that meetings with parents should include the child too, to give them a voice, to try and understand what the cause of any issues might be and to involve them in coming up with a solution.

It became clear from children's descriptions that their behaviour was directly linked to the relationship they had with teachers. Where teachers were unable to support, listen to or respect the child, this could often act as a trigger for misbehaviour. The child would then feel that they had been labelled as 'bad' and so act out more and this could lead to a pattern of circular behaviour. Some children spoke about not being given a fresh start after returning to school after a fixed-term exclusion or long period of isolation, all they wanted was to be given another a chance and for their behaviour to be understood;

"because a different day is a different day". – 8 year old boy

"They kicked me out, yeah, they basically only gave me one chance. I was kicked out after one chance, now look... [give] like two or three chances, let's work out everything. They didn't try to speak to me... all the schools have got the same choice, same teachers, if you work hard for me I'll work with you." – 15 year old boy

Flexible support responsive to children's needs

Where children spoke about mainstreams schools not being able to support them, this was often down to them feeling as though either the school did not really understand their needs or were unable to provide the support to meet those needs.

Many examples of schools misunderstanding children's needs related to **anger management**. Children across the sample spoke about how they wished their teachers in mainstream school had given them opportunities to let off steam and been more flexible about letting them leave the classroom when they needed to. In some cases, the challenge related to the school not appreciating the behavioural triggers that could lead to a child feeling angry in the first place. In one example a child spoke about their teachers not understanding that they were not comfortable with people being in their personal space and how this contrasted with their experience in another setting.

"...sometimes in a mainstream school if a teacher's speaking to you sometimes they can get right close and in front of me and that's one thing that winds me up. So things, at (other school) when they knew I had ADHD they put things in place, so on my student profile it will say don't do this.... and so they know what ticks me off and gets us angry." – 15 year old boy

Where schools recognised that children needed individual approaches to help them manage their feelings, this was praised by children and parents. In one example the school would allow the child to leave the classroom whenever they needed to calm down and this gave the child what they needed to get their feelings under control before returning to the classroom again.

Children also called for teachers to be more flexible in giving them chances to change their behaviour. Children wished that they had been given more opportunities by schools as some felt that they had been written off too quickly. There was a sense that if schools were more accommodating of SEND children then those children would likely be more accommodating in return.

"They could have gave me another chance and listened to what I had to say and then learn that I couldn't take the stress of that day." – Secondary school age boy

Children also thought that this flexibility should extend to the way that teachers speak to SEND children and especially those with autism. It was suggested that teachers should ask and consult with the child more rather than telling them what to do. Children also wanted more clarity and consistency around punishment, for example taking the time to make it clear why a child was being sent into isolation rather than just sending them there.

There was also a view that mainstream schools were not flexible enough to **accommodate the learning styles of SEND children**. In one example a child spoke about how the work they received from school caused them to be stressed to the point of illness which meant that they missed school and got even more behind. The way that the school required the child to catch up on work left the child feeling even more stressed and they were stuck in a vicious circle until finally the child's mother was taken to court for the child's low attendance. The family eventually made the decision to move to another school where the pressures were different and more suited to that child's needs. In another example the child wasn't being challenged enough and so became bored in lessons and their behaviour deteriorated;

"He needs to be challenged otherwise his behaviour deteriorates and that was so black and white, so cut and dried that it was very frustrating to try and express that to the school,

because his behaviour was getting worse because they weren't challenging him. And it was very easily remedied, if they would give him a sheet of maths, you'd get half an hour of good behaviour out of him and it just didn't seem that difficult to me." – Parent of 8 year old boy

There was also a call for teachers to take the time to get to know children and the way they worked rather than making ill-informed assumptions. Children felt that this would help them to feel heard and understood.

"...just pay close attention to their work....so for example say it's maths, pay attention to the way they're writing down the questions or answering the questions. If it seems consistent and it's not actually the right way, or if there is a correct way and they've found their own ways of doing it, ask them why, instead of just passing it off as oh, it's just their own innovative way of doing this. Ask them why they do it that way". – 15 year old boy

It was clear that in some cases, schools were not just misunderstanding children's needs but were not even willing to try to understand them. Children spoke about how they wished they had been given more opportunities to explain themselves and their behaviour when at mainstream school so that the schools understood their needs and made more allowances for them.

"...because sometimes teachers never used to listen to me and then I used to get angry with them, because mainstream and offsite schools are different, say if I were at a mainstream and I told a teacher to fuck off or something and get straight up excluded. But at (alternative provision) if I have an altercation with a teacher and I'm arguing with them I won't get excluded because they know what our boundaries are and how do we work and that." – 15 year old boy

"They don't really give you chances in mainstream. If you're doing something wrong, they'll just send you out straightaway, and I don't think it should be the case." – 16 year old girl

This frustration was echoed by the parents that we spoke to, some of whom spoke about the attempts they had made to explain their child's challenges and learning style to the school and who felt that the school either did not listen or were unwilling to accommodate their child's specific needs. In some cases, it was felt that the school's unwillingness to engage with the child's needs had affected the child's chances of remaining in a mainstream school.

"And obviously in mainstream, that's very difficult when you've got 30, 34, 35 children, they can't be that way for him which I do understand, and I think we try to be really understanding of school, that they were a small school, that funds are limited but what we're really asking more than anything was, just be a bit more understanding to try and take that little bit of time with him. Like the A, B, C chart, they didn't want to do those, and we thought, that's the most simple thing that if they'd just taken that bit of time to do that, we might have found what it was that was bothering him". – Parent of 8 year old boy

Having the skills and experience to deal with children's needs

There was a clear distinction in the interviews between children feeling as though their needs were not understood and feeling as though schools simply didn't have the skills or experience to support those needs.

In some cases, it was clear that families felt that schools lacked the right SEND skills, awareness or training. Criticism was made of teachers adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting children with autism, and failing to understand the individual and differing needs of children.

"she said that all autistic children this works for, which my immediate reaction was, well then that's a lie because autistic children are all completely different and what works for one does not work for another, and if she has got a qualification then there's no way on God's green earth she has said that every child that had autism this has worked with." – Parent of 8 year old boy

For one young person, it was less about teachers acknowledging the individual autistic traits of children but actually just taking the time to understand the child as an individual, without focusing on their diagnosis.

"Say you've got a piece of paper in front of you and you've got a child with autism, people automatically think that they're going to be here. But the spectrum is massive. So, instead of going for autism go for the child. Because.... if you get the child right autism doesn't matter. Because you've learnt how to work with that child in particular..... you've learnt the child. Because that's the most important part of everything'. – 17 year old boy

Schools' lack of training was also apparent in examples of parents being asked to suggest suitable interventions themselves and staff being unaware of the range of issues that might be present for a child with autism.

"Ear defenders, emotion keyring, fluffy blankets, all that we all had to come up with and provide ourselves because it just didn't exist". – Parent of 8 year old boy

Where SENCOs were involved this did not always help the issue as their level of involvement was sometimes considered insufficient. Children also encountered difficulties with individual class teachers who did not have the skills to support their needs. In one case, a child spoke about how in their mainstream school, teachers did not know why the child was unable to understand something having only been told once and would give them detention or periods in isolation for not doing what they were told. When they moved to a new school where staff had the appropriate skills to support them, things were explained multiple times and in different ways.

The lack of specialist support available in mainstream school was seen as a real issue among children and parents, some of whom felt that not having had enough support had contributed to children's behavioural issues. It was suggested that having more skills in

schools might help with early intervention and support children in staying at mainstream school;

"I would have liked to know about it earlier, I could still be at school because I didn't know about it at this point I were mad and I were just too mad and upset and stuff. But if I knew about it earlier I could have had the support from school if they had have given it." – 15 year old boy

Tom's story

Tom is autistic and has dyspraxia. He spent the majority of his life at school without a diagnosis. Tom spoke about how difficult it was to get the support he needed at school because he did not have an official diagnosis. He thinks that the lack of appropriate support was a significant factor that led him to misbehave at school.

Primary school was easier for Tom than secondary school. He liked having just one teacher each year and thinks that teachers in primary school learnt how to work with him more effectively. He also preferred the more regimented structure of primary school and not having to navigate his way around a large building to attend all of his different classes.

Tom attended five different secondary schools. During this time, he experienced isolations, temporary exclusions, fixed exclusions and managed moves. He felt that mainstream schools did not provide him with the support that he needed, either in the classroom or for things going on at home. He spoke about often being placed in the worst set for certain subjects which were always full of the children that misbehaved the most, and consequently he would not learn very much. He also said he never got the one-to-one support that he needed.

Tom found it hard to trust teachers, but he did find one teacher in a mainstream secondary school he felt he could speak to, someone who was down to earth, listened, who didn't judge and showed Tom respect. Tom said it was so important to him to have someone to speak with and to have someone that he felt understood him.

Tom talked about how in his first secondary school he would purposely misbehave to try and change schools because he found that particular school so hard to deal with. Tom remembers being asked to leave the class a lot due to his behaviour and, at certain points, coming into school but not being allowed to attend any of his lessons. He would often be put on a reduced timetable and remembers spending a lot of time in isolation - which for Tom involved staring at a wall all day.

"I was put in what's called isolation. I feel I spent most of my school life [in isolation], I spent one of my birthdays in isolation... I obviously didn't want to sit and stare at a wall all day. Because no one wants to sit and stare at a wall all day."

Tom was temporarily excluded several times, often for five days at a time. On one particular occasion, the temporary exclusion ended with Tom and his parents being given

two options: either be permanently excluded, which he was warned would go on his permanent record, or have a managed move into a PRU. His parents chose the managed move. He remembers feeling mixed emotions; feeling relieved and happy to be leaving his school, but also crying a lot and feeling anxious because he did not know what would happen next.

Tom's experiences of alternative provision were often more positive than his experiences of mainstream schools. He felt that the PRU was very good at supporting him with the emotional side of things, but not so good at preparing him for GCSEs. He thinks it was what he needed at the time – the PRU made him feel safe at a time when he was feeling very vulnerable. He spoke about the teachers being very good at their job.

“PRU - for learning to go forward for GCSEs, worst thing in the world, yeah. Because they focus on the emotional side of you. It's great for that time that they get you, they help you. They help with emotional things... I think it was good for me - emotionally. Because I felt safe. Looking at PRU, yeah, they just focus on the emotional side more. You do lose a lot of learning.”

Tom then returned to a mainstream school for four months which he felt offered much better learning support than the other mainstream school he had attended. They had a specific learning support centre with an educational psychologist and learning mentors, with a dedicated area where you could even go to relax. However, in the end, he could not cope with a full five-day week and he still misbehaved quite a lot and soon had to return to the PRU. Whilst Tom acknowledged that he was unable to cope with the more rigid mainstream school timetable and rules, he still found it incredibly difficult to have to leave that school. He had really wanted to make it work at the mainstream school and was absolutely crushed when he had to leave. But returning to the PRU felt familiar and safe for Tom. At this point, it was made clear to Tom that he would not be returning to a mainstream school.

Tom went on to attend an Extended Learning Centre [ME-CC1] - and talked about really appreciating the support he received. The classes were much smaller, never more than ten children, and there would always be a teacher's assistant as well as the teacher in each class. He received a lot more one to one support at the ELC than he ever did in a mainstream school. His attendance improved and he spoke about wanting to go to school every day, even if sometimes he went home a bit early. However, he wishes he had received this support much earlier in his school life and feels that if he had it may have prevented him from developing mental health issues.

The impact this has all had on Tom of has been significant. He has suffered from anxiety and has anger issues. It has also affected his ability to trust and open up to people because he has felt so let down by the many professionals throughout his educational experiences.

Schools' approaches to managing behaviour

This section looks at the steps that schools take to manage behaviour and explores children's and parents' experiences of these.

Each school has its own behaviour policy and these vary in approach. Details about specific behaviour policies were not discussed in the interviews but the point was raised that schools did not always follow their own policy, specifically in relation to ensuring that they escalated their response appropriately.

Isolation

Isolation is used by both primary and secondary schools (though not by all) as a form of punishment for children who have been disruptive. It can involve a child being asked to sit at a separate table in the classroom or being sent to another room away from the classroom and often away from all other children for a designated period of time before being allowed to re-join the main class. The way that this is managed and the amount of time that children are sent out for varies depending on the school but an isolation period could typically be anything from a few hours to a whole week and may follow a return to school after a fixed-term exclusion.

Isolation came up frequently during the interviews with children, often unprompted. In general, children were very negative about their experiences of been sent into isolation and some found being away from other children and how it restricted them in what they could do very hard;

"Isolation's horrible. I went to sit in this tiny little booth about that big where your chair would only fit and you've got you little table, all you'd get for lunch is a sandwich, bottle of water and a little shit cookie and you got two toilet breaks, that weren't nowhere near enough." – 15 year old girl

In some cases, children were even restricted about when they could use the toilet so that they did not encounter other children. While some children were given work to do while in isolation, others spoke about having nothing to do or being bored. In one example, a child was often put into isolation with nothing to do so they would put their head on the desk and have a sleep. One child did suggest that isolation could be useful for reflecting on behaviour but it was unclear in the interview whether this was the child's actual view or the view they thought they were supposed to have about isolation.

Some children felt that being in isolation could interfere with their learning either because they were not given work to do or because they had work but did not have the motivation to do it outside of the classroom.

Being separated from peers and friends was challenging for some of the children we spoke to. In one case the child said that their favourite thing was playing with other children but that they had been prevented from doing that at one of their schools.

“...they stopped him, they wouldn’t let him go out at playtime, they wouldn’t let him go out at dinner time, he wasn’t allowed on the school trip. He, slowly stopped him going to swimming lessons, anything like that.” – Parent of 8 year old boy

While isolation in itself was challenging for some children, others identified challenges with the way that their school had administered it. Some spoke about how they were frequently put into isolation without really understanding why or being given a reason by their teachers. Isolation could also happen quickly without any warning or before other measures were put in place first. Some children also felt as though isolation was being used inappropriately;

“...he tried giving me this red card it’s where you have to go and sit in a room all day and do your work by yourself and not, don’t get your break. And he tried giving me that just for forgetting my spelling book.” – 15 year old boy

Reduced timetable

According to national guidance, reduced timetables - that is attending school on a part-time basis, either daily or weekly – is only to be used in exceptional circumstances.

Some of the families we spoke to had experienced the child being put on a reduced timetable either in an attempt to prevent a formal exclusion or following a fixed-term exclusion to help reintegrate the child back into school. This had an impact not only on the child but on the whole family;

“He was frequently kept in and there was often informal exclusions where I’d be rung halfway through the day to come and collect him to prevent a formal exclusion taking place, which I now realise is illegal. I didn’t know any better at the time and I was very concerned with how his academic record was looking. So, I used to go along with it, so ended up not being able to work because I was taking so much time off.” – Parent of 8 year old boy

In another example, the child spoke about being sent home frequently as a punishment; with one incident after returning to school resulting in them being sent home again a couple of days later. This child spoke about how they disliked school so much by that point that they didn’t mind being sent home.

“Honestly it didn’t really bother me at that point, it was a case of I knew that if I stayed there longer...the situation would have got worse so getting sent home was fine by me, I didn’t even mind getting punished at that point basically because of how much I didn’t like being there.” – 19 year old male

Other children were allowed into school most days but were not allowed into specific lessons or to join in with certain activities. Children and parents spoke about being asked to miss school trips or events at school, such as Christmas performances or school discos. In one instance this included a child being asked to stay at home when the school had an open morning with people coming to view the school.

“I had to leave the school play in Year 6 because she didn’t want me to be in their way, she wouldn’t let me be in the school play room. I swear, once that they had like people coming to see the school [an open day] and they asked me to stay at home” – 12 year old girl

Experiences of exclusion

Reason for exclusions

Children were asked to talk through their instances of exclusion and what the reasons for exclusion were. Their answers to these questions shed light not only on what their perceptions of the process were but, in some cases, why they felt they had got to the point of being excluded.

It’s worth noting that there were instances of children not being completely clear about why they had been excluded. In some cases, this was because they had been very young when the exclusion happened. However, in other cases the children simply did not regard being excluded as something to be concerned about and so had not remembered what their various instances of exclusion had related to. For some of the children we spoke with, it was as if exclusion had become so normalised that they saw it as part of their educational path rather than as something exceptional.

Among those children and parents who did speak about reasons for exclusion, these fell into four separate categories. In some cases, exclusions were not necessarily linked to one specific issue but were the result of a **build-up of behaviour over time**. There was a final trigger which led to the exclusion, however this was not necessarily worthy of an exclusion on its own. In one example, that final trigger was the child wearing trainers when they should not have, in another it was linked to more violent behaviour and the child shouting and throwing chairs.

When children were asked why their behaviour had become more challenging over time, a range of reasons were cited. The cycle outlined above whereby the child feels as though the teachers don’t respect them or support them in the way that they need and so they behave badly and the teacher reacts to that behaviour with sanctions, was often cited. Other reasons included being bullied and not having that dealt with sufficiently so taking matters into their own hands. In one instance a child attributed their change in behaviour and ultimate exclusion to a change in the way the school was run including new rules which they had not had a chance to adjust to and so had broken.

“So, they got bought by another school and they got, they just switched. They just, everything, you have to do this, you have to do that and people like me it just couldn’t happen straight away.” – 15 year old boy

In other cases, the child’s exclusion was more clearly linked to **one specific incident** though the child may have been in trouble for some bad behaviour in the past. These instances tended to be more serious and involved either threatening another pupil or being found to have carried a weapon in school.

As identified above, for some of the children we spoke to it seemed as if they had become almost indifferent to the process of exclusion and were therefore willing to go through it multiple times. There were some who spoke about behaving badly or trying to get excluded **to impress their peers** or because it would help to make them popular. One older child who spoke about this was frustrated with themselves for having behaved this way in the past and looking back did not understand their motivations or why they hadn't simply got on with their work.

In some cases, families spoke about feeling that the **reasons for exclusions were unfair**. In one example, the child was excluded for a day for reacting badly after they felt intimidated by a teacher. They felt this was unfair because the teacher had effectively been bullying them. When the child's family disputed the exclusion and spoke about taking it up with the local authority, the school agreed to remove the exclusion from the child's record.

Experiences of different types of exclusion

Children and parents were asked about their experiences of different types of exclusion. More detail was given on some than others, so comparison between different types is not possible. However, the stories we heard give a useful overview of children's experiences of being excluded.

One group of children we spoke to had experienced **fixed-term exclusions** for varying lengths of time. A fixed-term exclusion is where a child is temporarily removed from school for a specific period of time. In some cases, it was a few hours or a day in others it was a week or more.

One young person understood the need for their behaviour to be addressed, but struggled to understand why this equated to them having to spend days out of school. They did not understand how they were supposed to learn how to behave while at school if they spent such little time at school.

Some of the children saw benefits to this type of exclusion. One spoke about how being sent home helped to diffuse their behaviour which may have got worse if they had stayed at school. Another child spoke about how they saw a short exclusion as a licence to stay up late and play video games since they did not have to get up for school the next day.

Some of the families in the sample had experienced at least one **managed move**. This is where a voluntary agreement has been made between schools, parents/carers and a pupil, for that pupil to move schools. Some of the families we spoke to felt that they had been pressured into a managed move because the school had told them that the alternative – a permanent exclusion- would go on the child's permanent record.

In some cases, there was also a lack of information about the managed move. One child spoke about knowing that they would be moving to another school but not knowing when that was going to happen. Another child spoke about being pleased to be moving because

they were not happy at their current school but scared about going into a new, unknown environment.

There was also some limited discussion of families' experiences of **permanent exclusion**. Again, children spoke about the lack of information on what next steps would be. One child spoke about how when they were excluded, they were initially given no information about what would happen next. They also thought that the school had not communicated about their exclusion internally because teachers had been contacting them to ask why they were not in school.

Experiences of Alternative Provision

Alternative provision is education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour.

When children spoke about their experiences of alternative provision schools, a number of positive themes came out. There was a sense that the approach and flexibility of alternative provision settings was a welcome change to mainstream school. Children spoke about the varied approach to the timetable and how alongside academic lessons they would have access to other activities such as therapy, forest school or excursions to other places. The pressure of the day was also reduced in alternative provision settings and included regular breaks which were welcomed.

Children also spoke about how they received more focused and tailored support within alternative provision. They talked about feeling listened to more, having teachers who tried to understand them, and who demonstrated trust and respect to the children.

“And they just treat you like a human, like you’re not just an ongoing issue and it’s a lot better... Getting treated like you are a human and not a robot and you’re not going to follow every rule... just you get just respect. When you’re talking they listen to you.” – 15 year old boy

This approach by staff in alternative provision settings had the effect of making some children feel more as though they were cared about and more understood than they had been in mainstream school. One child spoke about how they felt more able to open up about issues that had been bothering them at home while in an alternative provision setting.

Children also valued the support they were given, sometimes by specialist counsellors, to help them understand and manage their own behaviour better. The more focused and sometimes one-to-one attention that children received in alternative provision settings was appreciated, but some children acknowledged that replicating that attention and focus would not be possible in a mainstream school.

“I feel like because there’s so many people the teachers... can’t really get to know kids in mainstream.....they know your name, they know your surname, they know what you’re like, but they don’t know what’s actually going on in your life. Mainstream is more, like, you go in, you get on with the work, and that’s the only thing you can do. Here, you come in, you can get on with the work, but at the same time, you can have a chat with the teacher and tell them what’s going on, and, like, you can really open up to them and you can make jokes with them, you can laugh.” – 16 year old girl

There was also a sense that children were given more chances in alternative provision settings and one child described how at a school they went to, every day was treated as a clean slate and they had the chance to start again. This approach was seen to contrast sharply with mainstream schools where children felt that there had been a lack of sufficient opportunity to address their behaviour.

While the focus on social and emotional learning in alternative provision was welcomed by some families we spoke to, others felt that this was to the detriment of academic attainment. This view is explored further in the section looking at impact on education, below.

Impact of exclusions

Children and parents spoke about the impact of exclusions on them personally, their education, and their families. These impacts are explored below.

Social and Emotional impacts

Being excluded had identifiable social and emotional impacts for some of the children we spoke to, both positive and negative. Some of the more positive impacts identified included feeling a sense of relief on being excluded from mainstream school. For children who had struggled with school and not felt happy there, moving to something else was a welcome alternative and the benefits to their mental health were immediately identifiable;

“The depression went. Because waking up every day early and then going to have arguments with teachers it’s not good and doing that for three years it actually depressed me and I told the school that.” – 15 year old girl

“Once the decision was made, a lot of stress did leave my back.”- 18 year old male

There were also cases of children feeling more confident once they had been excluded from mainstream school and moved to alternative provision. One child spoke about how they felt they were doing better now they were at alternative provision because they were receiving more support and so were able to focus more and get on with their work.

However, there were also a number of more negative social and emotional impacts identified. Children spoke about feeling that their trust in school, teachers and even adults generally had been eroded by the process. One child described how they felt that they had

tried really hard to stay at school and change their behaviour but it hadn't worked and their ultimate exclusion left them feeling abandoned by the school;

"I tried to get my head down and change but I just felt like they just abandoned me and just left me and I still do now and when I tried to go back to school and I've asked to go back to school and they've said no". – 15 year old boy

Another spoke about how their experiences at school had shaped their wider view of the world and how their early experiences at school had influenced their view of adults in general;

"I think it made me not trust adults, I don't trust anyone besides the people I've known for a long time and that's because with the adults there they would always say trust me I'll be there for you but then I find out that they don't and that effect left me with the idea that adults are useless to children." – 19 year old male

Being excluded also had the effect of creating anxiety for some children. Some of this anxiety was triggered by having to move schools following an exclusion and being nervous or uncomfortable about meeting new people or being in new environments.

"If I just get chucked straight in the deep end, I don't like it I feel self-conscious and I feel like I have anxiety, but I don't have anxiety, but it feels like everything just I don't know." – 15 year old girl

In some cases, being away from school was just very difficult for children. The age and profile of the children we spoke to meant that there was limited reflection on why this was difficult or how this manifested. Children spoke about being upset, or feeling tired or generally finding things hard. It was also clear that being away from friends and the social element of school was part of the challenge in some cases. In one instance the child spoke about how when they were excluded, they were no longer allowed to make contact with friends at their old school. There were also references in the interviews to missing friends and the fact that friendships had suffered as a result of them being excluded;

"I'm just so upset all the time, and it's impacted on all my relationships with my friends, because I don't see any of them. I don't talk to them because I'm no longer at that school. I don't really have any friends to be honest, because I have about three people who I like here, no close friends, my close friends are at (old school). And I haven't been able to talk to them since I left, so I don't meet up with them, I don't see them". – 15 year old girl

Children who moved schools regularly not only experienced negative impacts on their friendships but spoke about how moving itself could feel very tiring and how they wished they could stay in one place for longer.

Impact on education

The impact that being excluded from mainstream school had on a child's education was raised consistently throughout the interviews. Children spoke about feeling as though their

exclusions had hindered their education in a number of ways. Some were worried about their general attainment levels or the impact that not being at a mainstream school would have on their exam results, while others were concerned that missing school might hinder their aspirations for the future.

Part of the impact to education was attributed to moving around a lot and either missing school in general or missing key stages. In one example, a child spoke about having moved schools at the beginning of year 9, and because options for GCSEs had been made in year 8, they felt that they had missed the opportunity to choose the subjects that they wanted to do and that would allow them to pursue the specific career that they had in mind. In another example the child spoke about moving school and finding that the new school did not offer all the subjects that they had wanted to pursue. There were also examples of children waiting to hear the outcome of an appeal process and missing school or even exams in the meantime.

There were also impacts for those children who were forced to do school work at home or be home-schooled instead. Some felt that the work they did at home would never equal what they could have achieved if they had been at school.

“I felt that I was doing quite of bit homework and that on my own, because my parents would make me. But obviously I wasn’t doing what mainstream people were doing, and I knew that I wasn’t ever going to be able to catch up to what they were doing.” – 15 year old girl

Other felt very demotivated by doing school work at home because what they did would never be marked. Being away from school was also considered very boring by some of the children we spoke to, they found it harder to do the work they had been set and missed socialising with their peers.

There was also a sense that alternative provision schools offered fewer academic opportunities than mainstream schools. In one case a parent discussed how because none of the alternative provision settings could offer the level of academic support that their child needed, they were having to look into ways to make up the shortfall themselves so that ultimately, the child’s education did not suffer. Children also spoke about how alternative provision settings were more focused on social and emotional learning and how lessons were regularly disrupted so the chances of learning were fewer. In some cases, the narrower focus on academic achievement in alternative provision led to children feeling concerned about their future job prospects.

“Yeah, I always wanted to be (a child psychologist), but it’s not like I can be one now can I? We can only get two GCSEs and that’s not going to be enough to be a child psychologist. Is two GCSEs even enough to get any job?” – 16 year old girl

However, the view that alternative provision was academically inferior was not universal. In one case the child spoke about feeling happy with the education that they were receiving in their new setting and how in fact they felt they were benefiting from more one-to-one time,

so in this case it was not felt that being excluded from mainstream school had impacted on education.

Impact on family

Exclusions clearly also had impacts on the child's homelife and family. Parents spoke about the impact of exclusions on their ability to work. They described how they had to be flexible and respond to schools' requests to collect their child at unusual times or have them at home for long stretches of time.

"I had to take time off work, I don't work anymore, I'm his full time carer but it had a huge impact on my career." – Parent of 8 year old boy

There was also discussion about the ways in which exclusions can impact on other family members and the excluded child's relationship with them. If a child is staying at home, this can cause problems with siblings who might not understand why their brother or sister gets to stay at home when they can't. The stress that exclusions can cause parents was also identified as being an issue for children who can be affected by parental stress.

Family relationships are also affected by a child not getting the support they need or being in the wrong setting. Some families spoke about the child acting out at home when their school setting was not right and how this behaviour reduced noticeably once the child had moved to another school.

"Yeah, so I don't get angry any more, as much. I only get angry at my brother but then it only takes a few minutes for me to settle down." (14 year old boy)

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the many difficulties faced by children with SEND and their families in accessing early support for any behavioural difficulties, appropriate assessment and diagnosis and in their experiences of school exclusion. The Children's Commissioner's Office will continue to push for better support for children with SEND and to make the case that exclusion should be a last resort.



Children's Commissioner for England

Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Tel: 020 7783 8330

Email: info.request@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

Visit: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

Twitter: [@ChildrensComm](https://twitter.com/ChildrensComm)